The Hearts and Minds project: towards a theatre of cultural diversity - script and archival production videotape

Peter Arthur Copeman
University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
THE HEARTS AND MINDS PROJECT:
TOWARDS A THEATRE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Script and Archival Production Videotape

Volume 1
of
a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

from the

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

PETER ARTHUR JOHN COPEMAN
BRTP Qld, Dip Directing NIDA, MA Calgary

SCHOOL OF CREATIVE ARTS
1992

Copyright © Peter Copeman 1992
Abstract

Volume One of this thesis comprises the script and archival videotape of an original theatre project, *Hearts and Minds*, written and directed by the author and produced by Theatre South at the Bridge Theatre, Wollongong, from 8th to 24th May 1992. The project, which dealt with relations between Anglo- and Vietnamese-Australians in the context of the continuing legacy of the Vietnam War, was a response to a perceived failure of mainstream theatre to address the reality of cultural diversity in Australia – especially with respect to cultures of Asian origin. *Hearts and Minds* aimed to repudiate racial stereotypes and promote intercultural exchange both thematically, in terms of its characters and story, and theatrically, by mixing traditional Vietnamese water puppetry with actor-based realism.

Volume Two charts the origins, theoretical underpinning, development and execution of the project. Factors leading to the author’s interest in multiculturalism and Asia are documented, together with background research including literature review, oral research with Vietnam War veterans and Vietnamese immigrants, and the author’s visit to Vietnam to study water puppetry and Vietnamese social customs. The process of script development – from outline to treatment to first, second and third drafts then to final production script – is described, as is the preparation of the production including puppet-making, set, costume, lighting and sound design, technical preparation, publicity, casting and rehearsals. The season at Theatre South is assessed in terms both of box office (where it was the most popular play of the company’s 1992 subscription season), and of responses from audiences, reviewers, performers and other companies and theatre professionals regarding possible future productions. Finally, the script and production are evaluated in terms their success in achieving the author’s objective of contributing towards an Australian theatre of cultural diversity.

I hereby certify that this work has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

Signed..................................Date 8/12/92
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many people for help in the preparation, execution and documentation of the *Hearts and Minds* project. The School of Creative Arts provided a framework of supervision and technical support; Ron Pretty, my principal supervisor, gave insightful, constructive comments throughout, especially in the script development and preparation of the thesis. Others in the School who were especially helpful include Barry Conyngham, Andrew Schultz, Sheila Hall, Dick Taylor, Ian Gentle, John Senczuk and Clem Gorman.

Heartfelt thanks are also due to Theatre South. The Artistic Director, Des Davis, committed the company to producing the play and, as co-supervisor of my DCA, offered timely advice on matters dramaturgical and directorial. I pay tribute to the talented and dedicated theatre staff, production crew, cast, and student puppeteers for their creative contributions to the project (the names of all these people are listed in Appendix 8).

Many people helped with the project research: the Vietnam Veterans' Association (especially Frank Hunt and Fred Spalding); the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service (especially Zsuzsa Barta); members of the Vietnamese community in Marrickville (especially Tran Tri Trong and Do Hanh Thong); the Cultural Relations Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (especially Neil Mantón and Gillian Walker); the Australian Embassy in Hanoi (especially Ambassador Graham Alliband); the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre (especially Artistic Director Nguyen Trong Bang); and my guides in Hanoi (Tran Vu Phuong Lan), Da Nang/Hue (Tran Tra) and Saigon (Nguyen Manh Hung).

I am obliged to my parents-in-law, Marg and Ron Cooper, for helping on the home front in my absence from the family during the rehearsals, and to Wendy Richardson for putting me up and putting up with me in the same period. I am also grateful to my parents, Herb and Peggy Copeman, for their encouragement and understanding.

Very special thanks are due to my partner, Maxine Cooper, for honouring my dream with unstinting moral and financial support, and for her sense of judgment as a critic of the work and her diligence as proof-reader. My older daughter, Jessie, has tolerated my chronically short fuse with great forbearance, while the arrival of my second daughter, Milly, in the middle of the program gave the whole thing a joyous new perspective. Our children's generation will, I trust, reap the rewards of Australia's greater multiculturalism and changing outlook towards Asia, so it is to Jessie and Milly that these volumes are dedicated.

Without the help of all the people listed here the project and its documentation would have been impossible. They are, however, in no way responsible for any inadequacies.
## Contents: Volume One

Abstract
Acknowledgements
Contents
Script Title Page
Synopsis
Cast Requirements and Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene One</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene Two</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene Three</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene Four</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene Five</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene Six</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act One Scene Seven</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene One</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene Two</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene Three</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene Four</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene Five</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene Six</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two Scene Seven</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival Production Videotape</td>
<td>back pocket</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SYNOPSIS

Donny Ordman, a twenty-year-old university student, falls in love with fellow student Nguyen Tri Mai, the attractive, intelligent only child of a refugee woman, Nguyen au Phuong, who escaped from Vietnam at the cost of her husband’s life. Donny’s father, Skip, is a Vietnam veteran who has always prided himself on the way he coped with his war experiences - that is, until Donny brings Mai home to meet the family. The presence of Mai releases long-suppressed trauma in Skip, leading to mental instability. Ignoring the desperate attempts of his wife, Norma, to persuade him to have counselling, Skip slides further into a madness which culminates some time later in his attacking Donny during a violent flashback. As his son lies in hospital with his life in the balance, Skip finds unexpected common ground with Phuong, starting with their shared sense of loss, guilt and alienation, and moving towards a fragile and uneasy mutual acceptance. Donny and Mai may still have many cultural obstacles to hurdle, but at least parental opposition will no longer be one of them.
Cast Requirements

5 Actors (3 Female, 2 Male)
2-3 Puppeteers, depending on their level of skill

Characters

Skip Ordman, an Anglo-Australian veteran of the Vietnam war
Norma Ordman, his wife
Donny Ordman, their son
Nguyen Tri Mai, Donny Ordman's new girlfriend
Nguyen Au Phuong, Mai's mother
Donny Smith, an Australian soldier and Skip's best mate (doubled with Donny Ordman)
Various puppet characters

Notes

1. The roi nuoc water puppets are a thousand-year-old popular art form unique to Vietnam, derivative of its water-rice culture. Traditionally they are performed in the open air, using a pond as a stage, and depicting either comic scenes from village life or moral tales from Vietnamese history and mythology.

2. Readers are urged not to be discouraged by the sometimes lengthy stage directions, but to read them with care, as they describe important narrative passages involving the puppets.

3. The puppet voices are performed by the actors through microphones, in synchronisation with the puppet action.

4. In production, those lines which are written in Vietnamese must be spoken thus. The English translations given in parentheses are for the benefit of readers who do not understand Vietnamese. Although Act One Scene Three is spoken almost entirely in Vietnamese, its meaning is quite clear to non-Vietnamese speakers from the action and gestures of Mai and Phuong. Similarly with the various other occasional lines in the text which are also spoken in Vietnamese. I am grateful to Viet Do for the translations.

5. The running time of the original production was approximately two hours ten minutes.

HEARTS AND MINDS was given its first production by Theatre South at The Bridge Theatre, Wollongong, from 8th to 24th May 1992, with the following company:

Nguyen Tri Mai..............................Huong Le
Donny Ordman..............................Paul Kelman
Skip Ordman..................................Terry Brady
Norma Ordman..............................Lainie Grugan
Nguyen Au Phuong..........................Chin Yu
Donny Smith..............................Paul Kelman

Puppeteers
(courtesy of School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong)
Team 1..........................Kathy Bleakley, Fernando Segura, Louise Manner
Team 2..........................Samantha Johnston, Julianne Sandison, Charlene Fein

Directed by Peter Copeman
Designed by Michael Coe
Hearts and Minds

PROLOGUE

A jungle clearing, enveloped by dark, vaguely menacing foliage. At the back of the clearing, a dimly lit pool of water. A single bamboo flute plays forlornly in the distance. A drum begins to beat. The pool suddenly erupts in a rapid tattoo of firework explosions, shrouding the jungle in smoke. The peasant puppet figure of CHU TEU emerges through the smoke, using the surface of the pool of water as his stage.

CHU TEU Xin kinh chào quý vị! Quí vị thật là may mắn. Tôi là câu Chu đấy!

(Greetings! Greetings! Yes, you lucky people, it's me, Uncle Chu!)

Pause. He surveys the audience.

Oh, I get it. Some of you don't understand Vietnamese. Oh, well, just this once. Now where was I? Ah yes... Greetings, greetings! Oh, come on, cheer up - it's me, you lucky people - Uncle Chu! And you know what that means - story time! So relax, and let my friends take you away from your troubles for a while. We'll even make it easy by warming up with an old, familiar favourite - the legend of Le Loi, the Turtle and the Sword.

Drum roll.

Once upon a time, about five hundred years ago, our country was divided against itself. A foreign country took advantage of our weakness. They raised a great army to invade our country. Only a miracle could save us...

CHU TEU withdrats. He is replaced by a puppet PEASANT WOMAN, who proceeds to transplant rice from a basket she carries.

WOMAN Singing.

The young bamboo blooms only briefly -
Enjoy the springtime blossoms while you may,
Before the winter withers the sweet shoots,
Or summer flooding washes them away.

An evil-looking puppet CHINESE OFFICER appears.

OFFICER Excellent advice!

WOMAN A little scream. Ah!

OFFICER And the first blossom I'll pluck is... you!

WOMAN No!

OFFICER Ha ha ha!

WOMAN Running away. Help! Men of the village, help me!

OFFICER Following her. Ha ha ha!
They exit, the WOMAN's screams drowned by the OFFICER's laughter. Pause. LE LOI appears in a small boat, rowed by an ATTENDANT.

LE LOI Ah me! Our beloved country is done for. But what use is a general without an army? I might as well drown myself now, in this lake.

As he speaks the last sentence, the water near his boat begins to swirl and bubble. A strange, hollow-sounding voice calls.

VOICE Le Loi, Le Loi! Do not despair!

LE LOI Who's that? What's happening?

A large TURTLE surfaces from the water, a sword in its mouth.

TURTLE Hear me. Le Loi. The peasants will rally to this sword. Gather your army, and defeat the northern barbarians.

LE LOI But... where will I find such an army?

TURTLE In the jungles. In the remote villages. In the mountains. When they hear of the Sword of the Lake, they will unite against the enemy.

LE LOI All because of... that sword?

TURTLE I promise it. Take it. No time to waste!

Putting the sword in LE LOI's hand, the TURTLE disappears.

LE LOI Quickly! Send word to all parts of the land. Le Loi wields the Sword of the Lake, and will stand against the invaders at Lamson!

The boat withdraws. The CHINESE OFFICER enters.

OFFICER The swamps of Lamson. Where is this army of fierce fighters the rumours speak of? Not a sign. Too bad. The troops are restless in the camp.

Off stage, the sound of battle.

There they go. Brawling among themselves.

LE LOI enters, carrying the sword.

LE LOI No brawl, invader, but the sound of battle. Even now, my peasant army is within your camp. For you is reserved the greatest pleasure - death by the indestructable Turtle Sword!

With a scream, he attacks and kills the OFFICER.

At last we will be free of this northern scourge. Victory!

He exits. The water swirls, and the TURTLE's voice calls.

VOICE Le Loi! Le Loi!

LE LOI enters, being rowed in the boat. The TURTLE surfaces.
LE LOI      Row faster! The Great Turtle calls my name.
TURTLE     Le Loi! Did the people unite and drive the barbarians from the land?
LE LOI      They did. As you predicted, they rallied to the Sword.
TURTLE     Then it is time to return the Sword to me.
LE LOI      But if we are threatened again...
TURTLE     Fear not. The Sword will always triumph!
LE LOI      A thousand blessings follow you, Great Turtle - saviour of our country!

_The TURTLE takes the sword and submerges._

LE LOI      People of Vietnam, hear my decree. I name this lake the Lake of the Restored Sword. On its shores will I build my citadel. Let it stand forever as warning of the fate that awaits any who seek to invade our beloved Vietnam!

_LE LOI exits. CHU TEU enters._

CHU TEU     Well, there you go. But have people stopped trying to invade us? No chance. Every time, we chuck 'em out. But they still keep trying. They never learn, no matter what it costs 'em. Or us... I got heaps of stories about all that. Here's one right now.

_He exits. Blackout._
ACT ONE SCENE ONE

A quiet, serene outdoor spot in the grounds of the university - a seat next to a duck pond, overhung by shady trees. MAI enters. She takes out a paper bag, then she claps her hands several times.

MAI
Vịt di vịt! Vịt di! (Ducks! Duckies!)

Several (puppet) ducks appear, quacking and swimming towards her.

Lái đây lên. Ta có mang bánh mì lại cho tụi mì nè.

(Come on. Come over here. I've brought some bread for you.)

She takes some from the paper bag and throws pieces to the ducks.

Chú vịt đực này hòa quả. Chứ lại một ít cho cò vịt cái với chú.

(Mr Duck, you naughty bird! Leave some for Mrs Duck!)

DONNY Offstage. Mai!

MAI Looking off. Donny?

DONNY Entering. Thought you'd be here. Guess what?

MAI Please, not so loud. You'll scare the ducks.

DONNY Bugger the ducks. I got a "D".

MAI Sorry?

DONNY Oh, no! Don't be. Without you I'd've been hard put to score a Pass.

MAI You mean...?

DONNY Yep. Economics - a Distinction. Me, who's never got above a Credit since starting uni.

MAI That's great! I said you could do it. You should be very pleased.

DONNY Not half as pleased as my old man'll be. Not that he'll show it, but.

Mum'll be thrilled, of course.

MAI So am I.

DONNY So you should be. It was all your doing.

MAI No.

DONNY Yeah! If it hadn't been for you spoon-feeding me here all those afternoons, I reckon I'd've flunked it.

MAI All I did was point you in the right direction. Really.

DONNY I knew you'd say that. Modest Mai, as always. Still, I know better.
What about your assignment on environmental economics? You got a "D" for that without my help.

Yeah but that was only worth twenty percent. Besides, it was interesting. You helped me with the boring stuff. Made it almost interesting, and with me, that's a miracle. So here's a... well, a small token of my appreciation, as they say.

He hands her a small giftwrapped package.

Oh Donny, no. I -

Go on. Don't be embarrassed.

You shouldn't.

You might as well get something out of it. I'm sorry it's not more.

But I already did get something.

Like what?

I enjoyed it.

Yeah?

And I had to know the answers to your questions. That helped me.

Oh hell! I haven't asked you how you went! Sorry.

It's OK.

No, please, I meant to. Forgot in the excitement.

It's fine. I understand.

So come on - tell me.

A High Distinction.

An "H D"? Fantastic! Good on you!

Thanks.

I must admit, it's a relief.

Hnh?

Thought I might've beaten you. Dragged you down to my level.

Silly!

Yeah. Fancy thinking I could do better than you.

That's not what I meant.

But it's true. So aren't you going to open your prezzie?
Oh. Yes. Of course.

She unwraps the package, revealing a cassette tape.

It's Midnight Oil. Remember how I said they're my favourite? You know Peter Garret - the lanky bugger with the baldy head? He's a heavy in the green movement, too. Top bloke.

U huh.

Well? D'you like it?

Yes... yes. You're very kind.

You don't sound all that sure. It's not much, I know, but -

No. really... it's just, I'm not really familiar with them.

Time you were, then.

Thank you. I'll look forward to hearing it when my exams and assignments are all finished.

When's that?

Another week.

Gawd, the discipline! Glad mine are all over. I couldn't hold out on a new tape that long. What happens after that?

Sorry?

What're you doing over the vacation?

I'm coming back for summer school. You?

I start at the swimming pool next week. That's my holiday job.

What do you do?

Just an attendant. Three years, now. Safety stuff mostly, like lifeguards. Some teaching - that's fun. But cruddy work, too - cleaning and that.

You must be a good swimmer.

Oh, I'm OK. How about you? S'pose you got to the beach.

I -

Not that I blame you - I like the beach as well. All the same, why don't you pay a visit to the pool some day while I'm working there?

I... can't.

Why not? It'd be fun.
MAI  I can’t. OK? That’s all.

DONNY  OK! OK! None of my business. It’s just, I hoped, well... we could see each other during the hols a bit.

MAI  What to do?


MAI  Oh, Donny, no. I can’t.

DONNY  Why not? I really enjoyed the time we spent here studying together. You said you did too. Be a pity if we just ended it today.

*Pause.*

No? OK. Looks like I got it wrong.

MAI  No, please! Maybe next year, back here at uni...

DONNY  Why wait till then?

MAI  I have to.

DONNY  Have to? Oh, I get it. You’ve got a boyfriend I don’t know about.

MAI  No!

DONNY  You don’t like me - is that the problem?

MAI  No!

DONNY  Then what?

MAI  I don’t... I mean I can’t... look, I have to go. I’m meeting my tutor...

DONNY  We can’t just leave this here!

MAI  I’m late already. See you next year. Have a good break.

*She exits. DONNY calls after her.*

DONNY  Hang on! Mai, wait! Is it too much to ask...

*But she’s gone. Pause. DONNY addresses a duck.*

What was that all about?

*The duck quacks.*

DONNY  Oh, shut up!

*Blackout.*
ACT ONE SCENE TWO

The backyard of the Ordman family. A small swimming pool and patio with a table and chairs. Early evening. DONNY's skimming leaves from the pool. SKIP's tinkering with a portable electric fan.

SKIP To DONNY: It helps if you move. The leaves won't come to you.

DONNY Eh? What?

SKIP You've skimmed that patch so many times, no leaf'll ever dare fall there again. What about the rest?

DONNY moves along. NORMA enters with a pot of coffee.

SKIP Wouldn't mind it done by Christmas, Donny? To NORMA: No one home.

NORMA Coffee's up, Donny. Donny?

DONNY Eh? Oh. Righto, Mum.

NORMA He's been like this for days.

SKIP A daze - exactly. If this is what one good result does to him, I think I preferred it when he just scraped through.

NORMA Skip, go easy, please.

DONNY comes to get his coffee. SKIP slips and barks a knuckle.

DONNY Damn! Bloody thing!

NORMA You all right?

SKIP Yeah. Circuitry's all crammed up close. Not designed to be mended.

DONNY Throw away society!

NORMA Fifteen years, we've had it.

DONNY You won't need it tonight.

SKIP You heard the forecast? Scorcher tomorrow.

NORMA I'll take it to work in the morning. See if the technicians can fix it.

SKIP If I can't, neither can a bloody telephone repairman.

NORMA They're used to fiddly wiring.

DONNY No, Mum. He's right. How could he face himself if he can't fix a loose connection in the switchbox of a fan? The shame!

SKIP What? Shit! Jesus, Donny, d'you have to natter while I'm working?

DONNY Sorry! Can I breath?
DONNY and NORMA drink their coffee. SKIP continues to struggle.

SKIP Bugger!

NORMA Look, Skip, this is crazy, working yourself into a state to satisfy some cock-eyed engineer's sense of pride. Let's get a new one.

SKIP Can't do that, can we Donny? Think of the environment!

DONNY Would be better to fix it.

SKIP Don't want to be responsible for the end of civilisation, do we?

Pause. DONNY puts down his coffee and goes back to skimming.

NORMA Give him a break. Your sarcasm just gets his back up.

SKIP Mine! What about his?

NORMA You've had more practice.

SKIP Yeah. Putting upstart managers in their place. Or branch secretaries.

NORMA Then save it for the meeting tonight.

SKIP Well he bugs me. If he's not being sarky, it's like I don't exist.

NORMA More coffee?

SKIP No thanks. Shit, is that the time? I better skedaddle, or they'll start the meeting without me and my sarcasm.

NORMA And all your practise on Donny wasted!

SKIP Who's being sarky now?

NORMA Must be catching. Go on, get going.

SKIP Don't wait up. And leave the fan. I'll fix it tomorrow. Calling. See you, Donny. To NORMA. See? To DONNY. Ground control to Donny Ordman!

DONNY Eh? What?

SKIP See you in the morning.

DONNY Yeah. OK.

SKIP To NORMA. 'Night, love.

He exits. Pause.

NORMA Donny?

DONNY Mm?

NORMA Come finish your coffee.
DONNY  No thanks.
NORMA  Come on, while it's still hot. I want to talk to you.
DONNY  *Joining her at the table* What about?
NORMA  You. You've... well, changed, lately.
DONNY  Mum -
NORMA  You have.
DONNY  How?
NORMA  You don't laugh much any more. Always squabbling with your Dad.
DONNY  Whose fault is that?
NORMA  It takes two.
DONNY  He starts it. He's never satisfied with anything I do.
NORMA  That's not true.
DONNY  Yeah? What about this uni result?
NORMA  He was thrilled.
DONNY  Sure.
NORMA  He was! He never shows much, but deep down...
DONNY  Hmph!
NORMA  All I'm asking for is a bit of give and take. Try and keep your sense of perspective. And humour.
DONNY  Tell him that.
NORMA.  I have, believe me.
DONNY  Yeah, OK.
NORMA  And now uni's finished for the year, you should have some fun. Not right, working so hard at your age. You should be going surfing with your mates, and taking girls out, and things. You used to, all the time.
DONNY  And you used to hound me for not working.
NORMA  I know, but still. Something unhealthy about it - no time for girls.
DONNY  Who says I don't?
NORMA  Does that mean you do?
DONNY  I might.
Do I know her?

No. But I've talked about her. The one I study with?

That helped you get that result? Is she the one? I like her already. What was her name again? Something old-fashioned. Mabel? Maisie? Hang on, don't tell me... May. Like May Gibbs?

Not quite. Her name's Mai. Em may eye. Pronounced Mai.

Unusual.

Vietnamese.

Pause.

Her full name's Nguyen Tri Mai. They put the surname first.

And here's me thinking it was poor pronunciation. Are you sure?

What of?

She's... she's one of them?

It's not the sort of thing you easily mistake.

I mean, does she look...?

She's short and slim. with straight jet black hair and... almond eyes.

Pretty. I suppose.

More than that. she's really nice. You'll think so when you meet her.

Will I?

'Course you will. It's Dad I'm worried about.

What makes you think I'll like her? Am I as predictable as that?

You know what I mean.

No. Tell me.

You're so straight and easy-going. You take people as you find them. I sort of assumed it wouldn't bother you. Sorry. Does it?

I... I'm sure she's a very pleasant girl. But there'll be problems.

Such as?

Well, prejudice. On both sides. Where do the children fit in?

Mum, listen to yourself! Mai and I haven't been out together yet.

Sorry. But there's still all sorts of problems.
DONNY Like?
NORMA Like... like language, background, family expectations, religion -
DONNY No worries there - I'm pretty sure she's Catholic.
NORMA Pretty sure?
DONNY She wears a cross on a chain round her neck.
NORMA That's something, I s'pose.
DONNY Mum, I know it won't be easy. But I can handle it. I know I can!
NORMA How does she feel?
DONNY Well... I thought she was quite keen on me, till I asked her for a date.
NORMA What? You mean she...?
DONNY I don't know. She acted weird, like she was scared or something.
NORMA Maybe that's to her credit.
DONNY How come?
NORMA Maybe she's got more of an idea.
DONNY Yeah, well I'm not giving up yet.
NORMA Live to fight another day, huh?
DONNY Why not?
NORMA Be careful, Donny. Please.
DONNY No worries, Mum.
NORMA I'm always here. You know that.
DONNY And Dad?
NORMA Why should he feel any different than me?
DONNY You know.
NORMA Yes. I suppose so.
DONNY So what should I do?
NORMA Maybe I should broach it with him first.
DONNY I hoped you'd say that.

Blackout.
ACT ONE SCENE THREE

A leafy courtyard at the rear of the town-house home of MAI and her mother PHUONG. The space has been transformed into a little piece of rural Vietnamese village - bamboo, a fish pond, and a shrine. The latter houses a prominent photograph of a Vietnamese man in his thirties. It's afternoon. PHUONG enters, carrying a bowl of fruit, and long, narrow box, and a plastic bucket on a tray. She puts the tray down, takes the plastic bucket, goes to the edge of the pond, and claps her hands.

PHUONG Cá di cá! Cá di! Lên đây di tôi gòi ăn rồi nè. (Fish! Come get your food!)

She claps her hands again, and peers closely into the water.

À! Tui bay đây rồi, lúc nào cũng háo dội, háo ăn hết.

(Ah, there you are. Always hungry, always greedy.)

She dips her hand into the bucket and throws some fish food onto the pond. The water suddenly erupts in swirling, splashing chaos, alive with (puppet) fish writhing and thrashing in rivalry for the food.

Đò ăn nhiều lắm nè. Lại giành gidt nữa rồi, tái sao vậy.

(Plenty for all. No need to fight.)

But she laughs, and empties the remaining contents of the bucket into the water. The thrashing of the fish intensifies, and PHUONG is splashed with water. She laughs again in delight.

Bao nhiêu đó đủ rồi, có nghe chưa?

(That's all. No more, you hear me?)

She stamps her foot.

Di! Di di! Hết rồi!

(Go away. Go away! It's finished!)

The frenzy subsides and the water becomes calm again. She places the empty bucket on the tray, picks up the bowl of fruit, and places it on the shrine's little altar. She removes another bowl of fruit that's been there all along, and puts it on the tray. Then she takes the long box, opens it, and removes several sticks of incense. Lighting them, she places them in the appropriate receptacles dotted round the shrine. Stepping back, she kneels and bows her head. She begins to pray - a whispered invocation that is audible but not intelligible to the audience.

Her devotions are suddenly shattered by loud music from offstage - the harsh, angry tones of Midnight Oil. MAI enters, carrying a portable boom-box and listening intently to the music. She comes face to face with her astonished mother.

MAI ưa! Má hả! Con không biết má đang ở ngoài này.
(Oh! Mother! I didn't realise you were here.)

*She hastily turns off the music.*

PHUONG Như vậy nghĩa là sao? (What's the meaning of this?)

MAI Con xin lỗi мама, con tưởng mẹ vẫn đang còn ở sở làm.

(I'm sorry. I thought you were still at work.)

PHUONG Con có còn tồn trọng và tưởng nhỏ đến ba con hay không vậy?

(Have you no respect for the memory of your father?)

MAI Đã có chủ. Mẹ biết mà. (Of course I do! You know that.)

PHUONG Má đâu kêu bao nhiêu dây chưa đủ hay sao mà con con làm phiền mà thêm nữa chư?

(Haven't I had enough bad luck, without you bringing more?)

MAI What bad luck? (*Note: Mai says this line in English.*)

PHUONG Má đâu kêu vì có một đứa con bất hiếu, một đứa con mà nó có tính quên di nguồn gốc của mình để học đòi theo đòi man rõ.

(The bad luck of having a disrespectful daughter, for one - a daughter who's trying her hardest to forget her origins and become a barbarian!)

MAI Con đâu có, tài sao mà nói như vậy? (I'm not! How can you say that?)

PHUONG Tại sao con chối? Vậy chủ hội này con đang nghe cái gì đó?

(How can you deny it? What's that you were listening to?)

MAI Chỉ là cuốn băng nhạc thời mà. (Just a tape. Some music.)

PHUONG Ó đâu mà con có? (Where did you get it from?)

MAI Của người bạn tặng thời mà. (It was a gift from a friend.)

*PHUONG grabs the player from MAI and ejects the tape.*

PHUONG Không có người bạn tốt nào mà tặng cho một món quà thấy ghê như vậy.

(No-one who was really a friend could give something so repulsive.)

MAI Đâu có thấy ghê đâu, đây là một băng nhạc Úc quan trọng.

(It's not repulsive. It's important Australian music.)
PHUONG  *Reading the label on the tape.* Midnight Oil? Huh!

She spits on it.

MÁI  Đừng mà! (Mother, don’t!)

*MÁI lunges to snap it away from PHUONG. In the ensuing struggle, it gets flicked into the fish pond. Pause. MÁI watches in horrified disbelief as the tape sinks out of sight.*

MÁI  Bây giờ đó, mà thấy mà đã làm gì chửa. (Now look what you’ve done.)

PHUONG  Mai...

MÁI  Tất cả con muốn chi là... chi là sự thoải mái trong chốc lát khi con thi cừ mà thôi. Con muốn hướng một chút ít không khí tự do, nhưng trong căn nhà này có nơi nào mà có được không khí đó không?

(All I wanted to do was... was relax for a few moments between exams! Enjoy some freedom! But there’s nowhere in this house I can do that, is there?)

*She bursts into tears and runs off.*

PHUONG  Mai!

*But there’s no response. Pause. PHUONG goes to the shrine and picks up the photo of her husband.*

Anh Lat ơi. Em xin lỗi anh. Nếu như anh ở đây, anh biết sẽ phải làm như thế nào.

(Oh. Lat. I’m sorry. If only you were here. You’d know what to do.)

Blackout.
ACT ONE SCENE FOUR

Hearts and Minds

ACT ONE SCENE FOUR

The back yard at the Ordman home. Night-time. SKIP and NORMA are sitting on the pool terrace. NORMA’s drinking a cup of tea while reading the evening paper. SKIP’s still struggling with the fan.

SKIP Shit!
NORMA Oh, for heaven’s sake, leave the thing!
SKIP You want to sleep tonight?
NORMA Of course I do.
SKIP The bedroom’ll be stifling. We need the fan.
NORMA We need a fan - it doesn’t have to be this one.
SKIP We haven’t got another.
NORMA Yes we have.
SKIP Eh? Oh no. No way!
NORMA Just for one night, till we get that one fixed.
SKIP I’m not prepared to risk it.
NORMA We’re not even sure it was the ceiling fan.
SKIP I am. It’s a cliché in Hollywood, for Christ’s sake. The way it slaps the air.
NORMA We use the one in the lounge.
SKIP Sleeping’s different. God, you ought to know!
NORMA Yes, I s’pose so. Sorry. Just a passing thought. You seem so sorted out these days -
SKIP What makes you think I’m not, or ever wasn’t?
NORMA That wasn’t what I meant.
SKIP A few bad dreams - that’s all I had.
NORMA Skip, let’s not start.
SKIP No drinking bouts, no rashes, no beating up my wife, no deformed children, same job for twenty years, steady promotion. I even work alongside them at the foundry. We get along just fine. Look, all I want is to avoid more of those bloody nightmares by not sleeping under a ceiling fan! Understand? Got that “sorted out”?
NORMA All right, Skip. You made your point. I’m sorry, OK? Fix the stupid thing.
He goes back to grappling with the fan. NORMA distractedly flips through the paper. Pause.

NORMA Skip?

SKIP What now?

NORMA Nothing.

SKIP What?!

NORMA Nothing!

SKIP For Christ's sake. quit sulking. Well?

NORMA I just wondered - since when have there been Vietnamese at work?

SKIP Ages now.

NORMA You never mentioned it.

SKIP Why should I?

NORMA And you, well, get along with them, you say?

SKIP Except for one young upstart in Management. But that's 'cause he's a bastard, not 'cause he's Vietnamese. The rest are fine. Bit clubbish, but that's understandable, I s'pose.

NORMA It doesn't bother you, them being there?

SKIP Norma, they're fine. We get along. You got that? Would you rather it upset me?

NORMA 'Course not!

SKIP I'm sorted out these days, remember? Your words!

NORMA Let's not start that again.

SKIP Yeah. OK. Sorry.

Pause.

NORMA Lots of Vietnamese at Donny's Uni.

SKIP I'm not surprised. They sure know how to work.

NORMA Yes, I believe they're very conscientious.

SKIP Let's hope a bit of it rubs off on him.

NORMA It has already.

SKIP What d'you mean?
NORMA It seems his good grade he got this term was partly from working with a Vietnamese student.

SKIP Well there you go. I hope he has the nous to do it again next term.

NORMA If she's willing.

SKIP She?

NORMA That's right. A Vietnamese girl.

SKIP I see.

NORMA Not all of it, you don't. He's taken a shine to her.

SKIP He's what?

NORMA It seems Donny may be... getting involved with this Vietnamese girl.

The light change, isolating SKIP in a green pool.

SKIP Bullshit!

NORMA What? Skip -

SKIP Not the old Donny! Christ, he's the one who wrote the rule book, the survival manual.

NORMA Skip...

SKIP It was him drummed it into me. Rule number one - never get involved with noggie sheilas. Buy them Saigon tea, whip out the back, bit of suckie fuckie, fork out the scrip, then forget the bitch. Fuck, fork, forget - remember the three F's and you'll survive your R & R!

NORMA What are you saying? Skip, this isn't like you!

SKIP It's not like Donny-boy to play the fool. There must be some mistake.

NORMA Mistake... Oh dear. Skip, listen, it's me - Norma. I'm talking about our son. Not Donny Smith. Our Donny.

The lights revert to the previous state, minus the green.

SKIP Donny... Oh God. Did I just say...?

NORMA Yes.

SKIP What?

NORMA Horrid things.

SKIP Oh... Jesus...

NORMA You... you seemed to get confused.
Hearts and Minds

Don't know what came over me.

The thought of Donny with a girl.

Yeah, I s'pose so.

Pause.

I'm sorry.

It's OK.

No it's not. I was no angel in the Nam. I've never tried to hide it. All the same, you don't need that.

No, really, it's all right.

Pause.

You. Are you OK?

Fine.

Sure?

I said I'm fine! Christ, d'you want it in writing? We named Donny after after him. Is it so surprising I got a bit mixed up between them? A trick of memory, that's all. So let's forget about it, eh? Norma?

All right!

Won't happen again.

Pause.

So. Donny's smitten, eh? And by a girl from Vietnam, of all the bloody places. Trust Donny! You reckon he can cope?

What with?

You know, all the crap. Mixed relationships.

We talked a bit about it. He knows there's pitfalls.

One thing to know it in your head...

Yes. Only one way to find out, I suppose.

Pause.

Can you cope?

That was just an aberration.

It's not just that. And not just you. I'm not sure I'm ready for this. I mean, what if they get serious?
Well, I suppose as long as she's legit - not using him for immigration points or stuff like that - what can we do? Why should we want to do anything?

I suppose...

And if it's her - by the way, what's her name?

Mai. Something Mai. Sorry, I can't pronounce it.

If this Mai's the one who's got the lad fired up about his studies, she has to be a friend of ours.

You're sure? You think we'll manage?

Got to give it our best shot. We owe him that.

Yes. I'm glad you feel like that.

So when do we get to meet this paragon?

Why don't we invite her here this weekend? A barbecue.

Fine.

Pause. He looks at the fan, discouraged.

Think I'll have a night-cap.

Let me get it. You fix that fan. I want to go to bed. Usual tipple?

Thanks, love. Go easy on the water.

I'll bring them both. You can mix it yourself.

She exits. SKIP tackles the fan again.

Righto. To the fan. Come on, you mongrel bastard!

Off. Ice?

What's that?

Still off. Do you want ice?

No, boil the bloody stuff.

Still off. Beg yours?

Yes! For crying out flaming loud...

Entering with a tray. Right. There you go.

Ta.

Going to be much longer?
Hearts and Minds

SKIP     A little while. Tell you what - you go to bed and use the ceiling fan. When I come to bed I'll turn it off and plug this in.

NORMA    Well, if you're sure. Must admit I'm tired.

SKIP     Go on, then.

NORMA    Okey-doke.

They kiss.

See you in the morning.

SKIP     Feel you through the night.

NORMA exits. SKIP continues to struggle for a bit, then downs tools.

Ah, Jesus! Useless damn thing!

He pours himself his night-cap.

She's right, of course. It has been a long time. Why not give it a go? I can handle it. Same as I can handle Donny's noggie sheila!

The lights go green and night-time jungly. From the shadows, a voice whispers an urgent admonition.

SKIP     Shut up, will you?

The masked figure of an Australian soldier clad in jungle combat kit and carrying a rifle - DONNY SMITH, as remembered by SKIP - emerges from the foliage.

Get over here, get your head down, and watch your front.

SKIP does as he's told, joining DONNY SMITH, picking up the pool skimmer as his "rifle".

We're supposed to be an ambush, not a homing beacon for Charlie!

SKIP     Sorry, Donny. Bit nervous.

DONNY S   Bloody new-chums. Why do I always get landed with the nasho's?

SKIP     You're a survivor, the skipper said. Because -

DONNY S   Because I don't talk on night ambushes. Shut the fuck up and watch the bloody rice paddy!

Silence. They scan across the pool. Nothing. SKIP starts to get itchy in his pants. His attention wanders from the pool as he tries to scratch. DONNY S looks irritatedly at him, then suddenly stiffens and nudges SKIP, gesturing to the far side of the pool. SKIP looks.

At the far side of the pool, a (puppet) figure clad in black pyjamas and carrying a rifle, creeps stealthily out of the shadows. SKIP looks.
questioningly at DONNY S, who nods confirmation.

Range eighty-five.

SKIP adjusts his gunsight and raises his weapon, but DONNY S restrains him, gesturing to wait. The VC figure moves forward. As SKIP begins to lose patience, another VC puppet emerges from the shadows, joining the other one. They move forward, but no more join them. DONNY S sights his rifle. SKIP takes his cue and does the same.

Shots ring out. The distant VC jerk and dance before collapsing into the water and disappearing. The shooting stops. Silence.

SKIP You bloody beauty! Got them, Donny!

DONNY Ordman -

SKIP Did you see? I zapped one of the slant-eyed bastards!

DONNY For Chrissakes, will you pipe down!

SKIP But -

DONNY OK, maybe we brassed up a couple of nogs. Plenty more out there.

SKIP What'd you mean, maybe?

A disembodied voice, filtered as for a radio.

VOICE Smith, report please.

DONNY S Two visual, skipper. Vanished into the paddy. Ordman and self OK.

VOICE Goodo. Take Ordman and get confirmation.

DONNY S Will do.

SKIP What's that mean?

DONNY S We find the bodies. Collect ID, confirm the kills. Got to keep the ratio up.

SKIP You mean, we got to wade across that -

DONNY S Don't be stupid! We'd be sitting ducks. The night belongs to Charlie, mate. Don't ever forget that. We're going round by the bund. Stick to the shadows at the edge of the J. Not too hasty, now. If we got them, they'll wait for us.

They set off cautiously round the pool to the other side. DONNY S stops suddenly, pointing at the ground.

SKIP Footprints?

DONNY S Where they waded in.

SKIP Then where the hell -?
DONNY S  Jeez, mate, use your brains. In the bloody water!

  *SKIP looks at the pool.*

  Don't just stand there - go find them.

SKIP  In there?

DONNY S  I'll cover you. Get on with it, will you? They might send reinforcements.

  *SKIP wades into the water, searching.*

SKIP  You sure this is the place?

DONNY S  Positive.

SKIP  But I saw them go down. How could they have...

  *He stops.*

  Hang on. Something under my -

  *He bends. Suddenly, a VC soldier (full-sized puppet) bursts out of the water. Hands grasping for SKIP's neck. SKIP screams. He struggles with the VC - locked together, they thrash about. DONNY S aims, but hesitates. Eventually, he fires. The VC lurches back, falls, and disappears again under the water. SKIP remains in the water.*

SKIP  Jesuuuuus! Faa.... wu... wu... dididididid... thuuththththth...

  *NORMA enters in night attire.*

NORMA  Skip!

  *The lights change back to normal. DONNY S vanishes.*

  What's happening? Are you all right?

SKIP  N... nnnn... weh... weh...

NORMA  Did you slip? Referring to the skimmer. What are you doing with that? Donny did the pool.

SKIP  Donny... what happened to Donny...?

NORMA  He's out tonight, remember? With his mates.

SKIP  No! He was here! He shot the nog... but now he's...

NORMA  Shot?

SKIP  He saved my life! What've you done to him, bugger you?

  *Pause.*
Where is he?!

**NORMA** Oh, Skip. Listen to me. Listen! It's Norma.

**SKIP** Norma?

**NORMA** Your wife.

**SKIP** Wife?

**NORMA** That's right. Your wife Norma. You're at home - your own back yard and swimming pool. I think you've had a nasty dream.

**SKIP** Dream? No bloody way! The Cong was here! A Nigel! He grabbed...

*He looks around, takes it in. A long pause as present reality sinks in.*

Jesus, what's happening to me?

**NORMA** Come out. Let's get you dry.

**SKIP** Yes, right...

*He climbs out of the pool.*

He was here, Norma. Donny Smith was here! Clear as you are now!

**NORMA** Donny Smith died in Vietnam, Skip. It must have been a dream.

**SKIP** How could it be? I was awake.

*NORMA wraps SKIP in her own dressing gown.*

**NORMA** A... a kind of... waking dream?

**SKIP** No, it was real! My first patrol in-country. I swear it! Jesus...

*Pause.*

What brought that on?

**NORMA** Me, probably.

**SKIP** What d'you mean?

**NORMA** Bringing up that stuff about Donny being keen on this girl.

*Pause.*

**SKIP** Nah!

**NORMA** What else...?

**SKIP** Anything - the heat; something I ate. That stuff about the fan. Who knows? But even if - I'm not admitting it, don't get me wrong - but even if it did bring on... bring on this... business, what can we do? Pretend Donny has no interest in this girl?
NORMA  We can't pretend it makes no difference if it does.

SKIP  So what're you saying?

NORMA  Well, maybe we should forget this barbecue.

SKIP  No!

NORMA  Just till we know exactly what the score is.

SKIP  No! If I've got a problem - which I don't, but just supposing - I've got no right to dump it onto Donny. I'm the one has to sort the thing out.

NORMA  Sotto voce. Sort it out...

SKIP  Maybe I did already. Yeah! That's it! That'd explain what happened.

NORMA  I don't follow.

SKIP  Look, say it's true, something's been... like... festering inside me, this has probably brought it to a head. Burst the boil, like, and taken off the pressure. Now it'll heal.

Pause.

Bet you.

NORMA  I pray you're right.

SKIP  I am. I must be.

NORMA  Oh. Skip, I hope so. When I came out and saw you there tonight...

SKIP  Hey, come on. None of that. Where's my tough lady?

NORMA  I couldn't bear it if you...

SKIP  Garn!

*He gives her a hug.*

But listen. Not a word to Donny about this, eh. He'd probably think I'm bunging it on to cruel his pitch with his girl, eh?

Pause.

Promise?

*NORMA shrugs her compliance. Blackout.*
ACT ONE SCENE FIVE

The University duck-pond. Daytime. MAI enters and sits on the bench, rather despondent. Some ducks paddle over expectantly.

MAI 
Sorry, I forgot. No bread today. Vì 沏. Sẽ xin loi. (No use. Sorry.)
She takes out a book, and doesn’t see DONNY enter. The ducks retreat.

DONNY 
Ahem.

MAI 
Oh! Donny.

DONNY 
Hi. How’re you going?

MAI 
OK. And you?

DONNY 
Not too bad, considering.

BOTH 
I -

DONNY 
Go on.

MAI 
No, please.

DONNY 
Sure?

Mai nods.

DONNY 
I just wanted to say... well, I’m sorry for being a jerk the other day.

MAI 
But Donny, it -

DONNY 
Please. I got excited. That result... Anyway, I shouldn’t’ve been so pushy about us going out and that. I... er... I hope it won’t affect our friendship. There, I’m finished.

MAI 
I’m the one who should apologise.

DONNY 
You? What for?

MAI 
My rudeness.

DONNY 
What?

MAI 
I had no right to treat you that way. I thought you might’ve been hurt or angry. It made me realise how much your friendship means to me. Sorry.

DONNY 
Well.

Pause

How about we call it quits and start again?

MAI 
Why not?
DONNY So, how your exams been going?

MAI Oh, you know. Not too bad, I guess.

DONNY Uhuh.

Pause.

I'd still like to go out with you.

MAI Donny. I thought I made it clear - I can't.

DONNY So you keep saying, but you don't say why.

MAI I... I don't think you'd understand.

DONNY What are friends for, then? How d'you know? Try me.

MAI It's awkward to explain. It's... it's the way we do things. Our... traditions, specially here in Australia, where there's so few of us. It's how we survive. Specially my mother - she's used to extended families, but here she has no-one. My father... died before we came. No other relatives. So she clings to me, and hates it if I behave the way Australians do. A date, to her, means I'm being courted, and if I'm being courted, I have to follow strict procedures like formal introductions and chaperones. And even then my suitors should only be Vietnamese.

DONNY I don't know how you stand it.

MAI I knew you wouldn't understand.

DONNY I'm trying. But you have to get by here. Why not stand up to her?

MAI We're very strict about respect due to elders. Specially parents.

DONNY Don't you deserve respect? Don't you have rights? What about the customs of this country - don't they deserve respect? You ought to stick up for yourself!

MAI I know! I want to. But all my education says it's wrong!

Pause.

DONNY Look, I understand. I really do. You're not so different from us.

MAI What d'you mean?

DONNY I told my Mum about you. Her reaction wasn't exactly warm.

MAI She doesn't know me!

DONNY Yeah, but you're Asian. She tries, but it goes against the grain with her, too. And even more with Dad.

MAI Why?
Pause.

DONNY I haven't told you this before, but Dad's a... well, a veteran of the war. Your war. The war in Vietnam, I mean.

MAI But... why?

DONNY Good question. Why does anyone fight? He doesn't talk about it much.

MAI I mean, why have you never told me this?

DONNY I s'pose it worried me. Thought it might put up some kind of barrier.

Pause.

Has it?

MAI Why should it? I wasn't born till the foreign soldiers had already begun to leave. I was only three in nineteen seventy-five when Saigon fell. In my memory, all the soldiers are Communists.

DONNY What about your mother? Would it make any difference to her?

MAI I don't know. But your idea of going on a date - I'd like to, really - please believe me - but it's sounding more impossible every minute. Maybe we should forget it - keep our friendship on campus.

DONNY Or we could join forces. Tackle it together.

MAI What do you mean?

DONNY Well, we both have the same problem. Let's help each other.

MAI How?

DONNY To start with, we could meet each other's parents. Why don't you come to our place this weekend? Mum and Dad have said they'll do a barbecue.

MAI But you said -

DONNY I know. But they're willing give it a go. How about it?

MAI I... I can't. Your parents might try, but my mother would forbid it.

DONNY Why? It's not as if you'll need a chaperone - my folks will be there.

MAI She doesn't know you.

DONNY Then ask me to your place and introduce me!

MAI It doesn't work like that! Oh, this is futile. Forget about it, please!

DONNY OK, I'm sorry.

Pause.
Looks like it stays a campus friendship.

MAI Yes. I'm sorry, but I think that's how it is.

Pause. DONNY sighs.

MAI What's up?

DONNY Oh nothing.

MAI Please.

DONNY I was just thinking - nearly three months, till uni starts again.

MAI Three months...

Pause.

DONNY How did you like the Oils?

MAI Hnh?

DONNY Midnight Oil - that tape I gave you - what did you think of it?

MAI I... it was very...

Pause.

DONNY Yeah - go on.

Pause.

MAI Look, Donny - I changed my mind. I want you to come home and meet my mother.

DONNY Yeah?

MAI If you still want to.

DONNY 'Course I do. But why the sudden back-flip?

MAI Nothing to lose, I think.

DONNY My thoughts exactly! When?

MAI What are you doing now?

DONNY You mean - right now?

MAI Why not?

DONNY It's just so quick!

MAI Come on, let's go. We'll give her a surprise.

They exit Blackout.
ACT ONE SCENE SIX

The courtyard at the Nguyen home. PHUONG is tending the garden. She has gardening tools and her fish-feed bucket with her.

MAI Off. Mother? Má!

PHUONG Mả ngoài vườn đấy nè. (Out here. In the garden.)

MAI enters with DONNY, but PHUONG is busy and doesn't notice him.

MAI Mother -

PHUONG Mả rất vui khi thấy con về sớm. Mả muốn nói chuyện với con về những việc đã xảy ra...

(I'm glad you're home early. I wanted to talk about what happened...)

She notices DONNY.

MAI Mother, I'd like to introduce a friend - another student from the university. His name's Donald Ordman.

DONNY Call me Donny, everyone else does.

Pause.

MAI He's interested in Vietnamese traditions.

PHUONG Oh.

MAI I thought you'd like to show him round your garden. I'll get the tea.

DONNY Please, not on my account. I'm not really that fond of tea.

MAI Oh, but you must! To share a cup of tea with an honoured guest is one of our most hallowed customs.

DONNY Sorry. Love a cup.

MAI exits. Pause.


Pause.

Are all gardens like this in Vietnam?

PHUONG My country is all a garden. Very beautiful. I try to make a small piece of this beauty here. Is hard.

Pause. DONNY indicates the shrine.

DONNY And this? I saw another one like it as I came through the house.

Pause.
PHUONG Is... shrine.

DONNY A shrine? What kind of shrine? What does it do?

PHUONG For honour departed ancestors and... and loved ones.

DONNY Ah. Like... like a memorial.

PHUONG I think.

*Pause. He indicates the photo on the shrine.*

DONNY Mai's father?

PHUONG *Glancing at the pond.* Picture of him, yes.

DONNY What's the fruit for?

PHUONG We cannot let my husband believe we are ungrateful, no more love him. To make his spirit angry, not wise. Bring bad luck.

*Pause.*

DONNY Excuse me seeming nosy, but I thought... aren't you Catholic?

PHUONG Yes.

DONNY But... well, departed spirits... it's not... I'm sorry - I don't understand.

PHUONG Yes.

*Pause. MAI returns with a teapot and three small cups on a tray.*

MAI How d'you like it?

DONNY White, thanks. Two sugars.

MAI Not the tea. The garden.

DONNY Oh! It's great. Tranquil, I'd call it. Full of... peace and quiet.

PHUONG This is my wish in making it.

*She has been pouring the tea, and now offers the tray to DONNY. He looks at the tiny cup.*

DONNY I thought I asked for milk...

*MAI signals furiously for him to shut up. He does so. PHUONG gives MAI tea and takes one herself. Pause.*

Well. Cheers.

*He drinks. So do the women. Pause.*

PHUONG Is nice, Vietnam tea?
DONNY It's... different.

PHUONG replenishes his cup.

Er. no. it's fine, thank you. Well. OK, ta.

Pause He looks around. Focuses on the pool.

Goldfish! Never noticed them before.

MAI They're mother's pride and joy.

DONNY I can see why. They're huge!

PHUONG Many house in Vietnam village have pond of fish.

MAI Not like these ones, Mother. Don't be modest.

DONNY You're right - they're beauties.

PHUONG Yourself, you have goldfish?

DONNY I did when I was young, for a few years - little ones in a tank - but then they died. Mum flushed them down -

MAI These ones are trained to dance.

DONNY You're kidding.

MAI To PHUONG. Show him. Go on! You haven't fed them yet, have you?

DONNY Dancing fish! Never heard of that before.

PHUONG Ogh! Talk too much, my daughter.

DONNY Oh, come on. Mrs Nguyen. Be a sport.

PHUONG To MAI. Sport? What is this sport...?

MAI merely hands her the feed bucket.

MAI To DONNY. We must be very still and quiet.

DONNY Right.

PHUONG claps her hands and the fish puppets come.

To MAI. So this is where you learned that trick!

MAI Please, quiet!

PHUONG feeds the fish and they dance their dance. DONNY watches in delight, laughing as he's splashed by their vigorous swirling.

PHUONG No more. All gone, the food.
DONNY That's really something else. What happens now?

PHUONG Back lazy, they go. Swim round bottom of pond. Round and round...

DONNY How often...?

Pause.

Hang on. What's that? See there. Piece of paper, is it?

MAI Don't worry about it.

DONNY No problem to fetch it out. Might hurt the goldies.

_He bends and reaches into the pool._

I just... there, see? Got it.

_He pulls the cassette from the pool and recognizes it. Pause. He looks questioningly at MAI. She, in turn, looks at her mother._

PHUONG More tea, Mister Donny?

DONNY How did that get in there?

MAI _To PHUONG._ Donny's the friend who gave me that cassette. _To DONNY._ Mother thought it... inappropriate.

_DONNY looks at PHUONG. She smiles. Pause._

DONNY I better get along. Catch up with you next year at uni, maybe.

MAI Donny, wait!

DONNY What for? More of this? That why you asked me here?

MAI You know that's not why. I thought if I could introduce you, Mother might let us go out together like you wanted.

PHUONG Go out? What is go out? You want court my daughter, Mr Donny?

DONNY All I want's a chance for Mai and me to see each other a bit before next year. Go on a date - you know. My parents have invited her to our place this weekend for a barbecue. They'd like to meet her. If that's courting, then yes, I want to court your daughter.

PHUONG _To MAI._ Có phải con muốn như vậy không? Con có thích nó không?

(You feel the same way? You wish this boy to court you?)

MAI Mother, it's rude to speak Vietnamese in front of guests. But yes, I do wish to go out with him.

PHUONG But... so young, you are. Ignorant of courtship... Australian custom...

MAI I know them more than you do!
DONNY Look, maybe I should just go.

MAI No. please. Stay. I don't think I can do this on my own. To PHUONG. You're the one who's ignorant. If you'd just stop walking round in blinkers, and watch what's going on. Anyway, if you were so in love with Vietnam, why leave it in the first place? Why come to Australia? Sure, it takes a bit of getting used to, but have you even tried? All you've done is build a wall around you to shut Australia out. But the wall keeps nothing out - it shuts you in, trapped in... in some fantasy you have, some non-existent wonderland called Vietnam.

PHUONG Now you show me Australian custom, yes? A daughter owes her mother no respect? To DONNY. You teach her this? Give her these thought?

DONNY Look -

PHUONG turns away from them to the shrine, covering her ears.

That's it. Crawl back inside your cell. Pretend you can't hear what I say. I know you can. I want to be a part of this new country that you chose! You chose - not me. I wasn't asked. But now I'm here I'm going to make the most of what it offers. Why shouldn't I? I'm an Australian adult. I can vote, help choose governments. Why can't I choose my friends, and what I do with them? That's freedom, and freedom's what we came for, isn't it?

Pause. PHUONG remains turned away with her ears blocked.

DONNY Mai, I think you've said enough. Too much, maybe.

Pause. Unnoticed by MAI or DONNY, PHUONG unblocks her ears and picks up the photo of her husband and the cassette, staring intently at them.

MAI I had to say it. You said so yourself.

DONNY I know. But so soon? And, well, so heavy? I just hope it doesn't backfire on me.

MAI I didn't mean it too.

DONNY Can't be helped. Too late now.

MAI Sorry.

DONNY I guess this means no barbecue.

MAI Probably not.

DONNY I better go. You and your mum need to talk without me here.
MAI: Yes.
DONNY: Good luck. Let me know how you go. And don't give in.
MAI: I won't. Too far to back off now.
DONNY: See you.
PHUONG: Wait!

*Pause.*

This barbecue. Who is there, please?

DONNY: There won't be one unless Mai's there. That's the point.

*MAI signals him to answer differently.*

Just her, me and my parents.

PHUONG: To MAI. You like to go? You really wish?
MAI: Yes. Yes!
PHUONG: Then...

*Pause.*

Then who is Phuong to stop you?

MAI: You mean that?
DONNY: You are a sport! I knew it all along.
PHUONG: But...

*Pause. DONNY and MAI look the question.*

Two thing, I ask.

DONNY: Anything.
PHUONG: Your parents I also wish to meet. I come with Mai, yes?
DONNY: You come? Oh. I'm not sure... MAI signals. Why not? Good idea!
MAI: And the other one?

*Blackout.*
ACT ONE SCENE SEVEN

The back yard at the Ordmans' Night. The table's littered with empty beer cans. SKIP's in the process of demolishing another. A burst of laughter comes from the direction of the house. SKIP looks expectantly in that direction, but is disappointed.

SKIP All right, don't share the bloody joke.

*He drains the can, gets up, goes over and opens the kettle barbecue.*

Shit!

Another burst of laughter offstage. SKIP looks.

Ha ha bloody ha! Right regular comedy show. Invitation only.

*He slams down the lid of the barbecue, drains his can and tosses it angrily aside. He opens another.*

Could do with a bit of competition.

Singing at the top of his voice.

Almost cut my hair, it happened just the other day
It's getting kinda long, I could have said it was in my way
But I didn't and I wonder why
I feel like letting my freak flag fly
Yes I feel I owe it to someone...

NORMA enters, followed by MAI, DONNY and PHUONG. NORMA carries a bowl of salad. PHUONG has some potatoes in foil.

NORMA To SKIP. You all right?

SKIP Sure! Sure...

DONNY What you been up to, out here?

SKIP Letting my freak flag fly.

DONNY What?

SKIP Don't tell me you're ready to eat!

NORMA Don't know about you, but I'm famished.

DONNY To MAI. We don't always eat this late.

SKIP Telling me!

NORMA To MAI. Your Mum's to blame - such a fund of stories!

PHUONG Your story, I also like.

SKIP You like a story? Here's another - a Cinderella yarn, about a bloke who throws a barbecue for his son's friend and her mother, then
gets left, all on his Pat Malone, to wield his magic with the fork and
tongs while his son and wife and guests hang around in the kitchen
telling stories!

NORMA  Skip, I'm sorry. The time just got away.

SKIP    Tell me about it.

DONNY   We're all here now.

SKIP    Whoopee.

DONNY   So let's eat.

SKIP    Why not? Take a seat, folks.

_He takes a plate and piles it with the contents of the barbecue._

MAI     It's nice out here. Cooler.

SKIP    Except near the barbie.

_He brings the plate of meat and plonks it on the table._

Bon appetite! Who's first?

_Pause. The others regard the black, dry lumps of charcoal._

NORMA   What... what happened?

SKIP    To what?

NORMA   The meat.

SKIP    Got cooked.

DONNY   Cremated!

SKIP    Whose fault is that? _To PHUONG_ Piece for you, Mrs?

PHUONG  Please, no.

SKIP    That mean yes or no d'you reckon, Donny?

DONNY   It obviously means no.

SKIP    What about you?

MAI     Er, no thank you.

NORMA   Some salad then? Baked potato?

PHUONG  Please.

MAI     Thanks.

SKIP    You're on a fast, is that it? _To DONNY_ Didn't tell me your friends were
Buddhists.

**NORMA** Skip - that's enough.

**PHUONG** Catholic, we are.

**DONNY** I told you that.

**NORMA** So are we.

**SKIP** Speak for yourself. She's Catholic. Me - I'm lapsed. Oh! But of course! It's Friday. That's your beef with beef! Ha! Get it?

*Pause.*

Sense of humour dried up, has it?

**DONNY** Give it a rest, Dad.

**SKIP** You was laughing fit to bust inside! Here, have a steak.

**DONNY** No.

**SKIP** Best scotch fillet. Mustn't waste it.

*He puts a piece on his own plate.*

Never let it be said *I* don't think of the environment. *To PHUONG and MIA.* Perhaps you'd like a glass of wine? A beer? No Ba-mi-ba, I'm sorry. Just the local.

**NORMA** Skip!

**SKIP** Just trying to make our guests feel comfortable. Well?

**MAI** No thanks.

*PHUONG declines with a smile.*

**SKIP** Thought so. Mind if I indulge?

**DONNY** Yes!

**SKIP** Didn't ask you.

**DONNY** *Whispered, to NORMA.* For pity's sake, do something, Mum!

**NORMA** Yes, all right! Skip, please...

*But he's gone into the house.*

I'm sorry about this. I shouldn't have kept you in the kitchen. But this drinking, it's not like him, is it, Donny? I'm sorry.

**MAI** It's OK, Mrs Ordman.

**DONNY** No it's not!
Norma?!

Yes?

Still off. Where's the cold beer gone?

To MAI and PHUONG. Excuse me. Exiting. Maybe you've drunk it all?

You don't have to put up with this. Why don't you just leave?

That would be rude.

What's he being? Polite?

I think we offend.

No! It's me he's after, as usual. He wants to come between me and Mai.

Maybe he right.

To MAI. If we call the evening quits right now, we still might salvage something.

NORMA returns with a bowl. SKIP follows, carrying a bottle of Scotch.

Sorry about that. Now, who's ready for dessert? There's fruit salad.

Yeah, go right ahead. Don't mind me - I can eat my steak alone.

I think -

Thank goodness no-one wanted beer. We're out of cold ones - can you imagine it? But good old Johnnie Walker to the rescue! Anyone care to join me? No, of course not. We eat and drink and live and die alone.

What's that supposed to mean?

To DONNY. Don't take the bait.

To MAI. sotto voce. I warned you, didn't I? Go now.

Speak up, boy. You're being rude to Mrs Thong here.

I'm sorry, Mrs Ordman, but we'll pass on the dessert, if you don't mind. We'd best be going home.

Oh.

Why? The night's still young! I haven't got to know you yet - wasn't asked to join the kitchen minstrel show. Stay and enjoy yourselves!

No, please. It's been a long week, and now this heat. An early night -

The heat, bother a Nigel?

Skip!
PHUONG: Who is Nigel, please?

SKIP: It's always hot in old Nigeria, isn't it? So hot, it's hard to breath, sometimes. Like this tonight. But who am I to argue? If you're hot, salvation's at hand - the swimming pool! You did bring your bathers.

MAI: We didn't know...

DONNY: I didn't even tell them we have a pool.

SKIP: You wouldn't! Still, no worries. Norma can lend you some.

NORMA: They wouldn't fit.

SKIP: Come in in your undies. In the buff, if you like - won't bother me.

MAI: No thanks. But don't let us stop you, please. We're going anyway.

SKIP: Isn't our little pool good enough?

MAI: I'm sure it's very nice.

SKIP: You're as bad as Donny. He says he likes it - and so he should, he learned to swim in it - but does he ever use it?

DONNY: Dad -

SKIP: He'll run a mile before he'll swim in here - won't even clean the thing unless you hound him - belly-aches he can't swim laps in it. Too small! Well it's big enough for Skip Ordman!

SKIP begins taking off his clothes.

NORMA: To MAI and PHUONG. You're right. It's better that you go. I'm sorry it's turned out like this. I wanted so much for us to like each other.

SKIP: Won't change your mind? Can't be tempted?

PHUONG: To DONNY. Please, you call taxi.

DONNY: No, I'll run you home. To NORMA. Where are your keys?

NORMA: In my purse, inside.

DONNY exits to get the keys. SKIP's still struggling out of his clothes.

SKIP: I know it's not the back beach at Vung Tau, but it's cool. Hygenic, too, long as Donny's been doing his job.

NORMA: We must arrange another get-together.

DONNY: Returning. Let's go.

PHUONG: Good-bye.

MAI: I'm glad we met you, Mrs Ordman.
They exit. NORMA sees them out.

SKIP 'Course, as I remember it, the best place in the Nam to have a swim was a new bomb crater, just after a storm - just the right depth, and full of fresh, cool rain. No leeches, either.

SKIP is now down to his shorts. He eases himself into the pool.

Jeez, it was good. Norma! Norma! Where's that bloody -

NORMA Returning. What?!

SKIP Pass us the grog.

NORMA Oh, sure! Why not? Total yourself and see how much more damage you can do!

SKIP Just give it to me, will you? Or do I have to get it?

He starts to get out of the pool.

NORMA Please, Skip. You've had enough. No more -

SKIP Get stuffed!

NORMA Yes, that's right! Get aggro! Take it out on me! Not enough behaving like a pig towards your guests?

SKIP grabs the bottle.

SKIP What?!

NORMA All those insults!

SKIP You stand there - you - accusing me of insults? What d'you call leaving a bloke out here to grapple with the barbie, while you get off on bloody fairy tales in the kitchen?

NORMA Don't give me that. You could've come and joined us.

SKIP Bullshit! I've organised enough boycotts in my time to know one when I see one.

NORMA Hoh! Paranoia!

SKIP Yeah? Then explain how come these guests, when finally you did consent to join me, refused to eat what I'd cooked for them?

NORMA It was overcooked and... horrible.

SKIP Nice try, Norma, but it doesn't wash. I ate it. The old cold shoulder, pure and simple. I know these noggie sheilas. Seen them close-up - behind the smiles, and all the bowing, scraping, and false politeness. I've seen the layers peeled back - I've know what's left: naked contempt and hate. They loathe us whites!
The green light slowly returns around SKIP.

I saw it in her eyes - that piece of Donny's - the animosity...

NORMA How can you say that?

SKIP That's what Donny said - I tried to warn him, but he wouldn't listen.

NORMA Donny? When did you speak to him?

SKIP Today, of course! When he first saw the woman near Hoa Long.

NORMA Sotto voce. Oh, no! Dear God, not again. Skip -

SKIP I tried to stop him, Sarge. He was my mate. But we'd been nine days forward of the wire, with contacts and fire-fights every day. No sleep. Living on cold C-rats. Then Roy-the-boy fell in a trap, got skewered on punji stakes, right through his guts. Poor bastard - screamed non-stop till the dust-off chopper came. That screaming must've really got to Donny, 'cause something kind of... stretched inside him. His eyes - maybe that was where I saw it first - in his eyes. Maybe it was only mirrored in the woman's.

Pause.

NORMA You going to tell me what happened?

SKIP She must've come out after we'd all passed - all except Donny. He was tail-end charlie. He signalled us to stop, but the other blokes mustn't've seen. The J was getting thick just there. They must've kept going...

During this speech, the green light has extended around the pool. A (puppet) peasant woman enters, transplanting rice. DONNY SMITH also enters behind SKIP, who doesn't join in the action directly this time, but speaks all his lines from the same position. NORMA keeps quiet and listens.

DONNY S Suspicious.

SKIP Just some old black-toothed mama-san working her patch. So?

DONNY S Should be in the hamlet with the others.

SKIP You know how much notice they take of that.

DONNY S Free-fire zone, mate. Orders. Assume she's VC.

He raise his rifle to take aim at the woman.

SKIP What if she's not? Can't just shoot her in cold blood.

DONNY S Says who?

SKIP We're supposed to win their hearts and minds, for Christ's sake!

DONNY S All right. Let's go check her out.
SKIP
Leave her alone. Catch the others while we can.

DONNY S
You catch them. I’m taking a closer look.

DONNY S heads into the “jungle”.

SKIP
But Donny! We’re supposed to stay with the section. Donny?

There’s no reply. He’s gone. The peasant women also disappears. The green light shrinks to just round SKIP.

Why did he do that? Why risk it - a short-timer? All he had left was fifteen and a wakey. But off he goes, and so do I. Sure it was wrong, but what else could I do? He saved my life, Sarge, on my first patrol, back when I was just eleven days in-country. He taught me all I know - I couldn’t leave him.

The green light again extends to the pool. The peasant woman again appears. His time as a human-sized puppet. SKIP remains where he has been all along. DONNY S approaches the WOMAN. She looks up.

DONNY S
Well, well! Not an old black-toothed mama-san at all.

The WOMAN stops work, watching DONNY S warily.

A sister-san! Not bad looking, neither...

WOMAN
Tôi không hiểu. (I don’t understand.)

DONNY S
See what I mean? Suspicious. Since when do young potato peelers work the paddies?

SKIP
What we going to do?

DONNY S
To the WOMAN. Where’s your ID? Papers? Shit, what is it in Nog?

SKIP
Tay can cook.

DONNY S
Good lad. To the WOMAN. Tay can cook!

WOMAN

(I don’t have them with me. I left it in the village. Ap Bac. Please, I’m only trying to feed my family.)

DONNY S
If you don’t hand them over, we got to search you.

WOMAN
Xin lỗi. Tôi không hiểu.

DONNY S
Which, in your case, will almost be a pleasure!

He lunges into the water, pulling at her clothes. She screams.

DONNY S
Shut up!
SKIP  Donny, what the hell...?

DONNY  Fuck and forget, mate! Don't even have to fork with this one!

SKIP  No! You can't!

DONNY  Why the hell not?

SKIP  It... it isn't right.

DONNY  Don't be a sook. Free-fire zone. No ID. She's fair game. Asking for it.

_The WOMAN breaks free and scrambles away to disappear upstage._

Jesus, Ordman! Don't just stand there - help me catch her.

_He wades after her and exits. The green light shrinks to just on SKIP._

SKIP  God... Donny! Stop! Leave her alone! Please, Donny...

_Pause._

The stupid bastard took no notice

_He's on the verge of tears._

I should've stopped him, Sarge. I should've grabbed him, or knocked him out, or threatened him, or something. I could've done it, if I'd had the nous, and then, maybe what happened wouldn't... and... and Donny... my mate Donny would be still...alive....

_He breaks down weeping._

NORMA  It's all right, Skip.

SKIP  It's not all right! I failed him, Sarge!

NORMA  Not Sarge. It's Norma, Skip. I'm here, OK?

_The green light fades._

SKIP  Who? Where's the Sarge. I was telling him....

_He looks around._

N... Norma? Oh God!

NORMA  Another one of those dreams, Skip.

SKIP  Oh, Jesus Christ!

NORMA  Why didn't you tell me?

SKIP  Tell you what?

NORMA  You didn't want them to come tonight. Couldn't handle it.
I did. At least... I didn't know. Didn't realise what it was.

You must've had an inkling, hitting the grog. How long were you at it?

I... I had a few while I was getting the barbie ready.

A few! Why didn't you come and talk to me?

I thought it'd make it easier. You know - the old social lubrication. I'm talking about it now, aren't I?

Bit late. The damage is done.

You want me to talk about it, or don't you?

You should talk to someone. But it's gone beyond my reach.

What? Jesus! Make up your mind!

You need help. Skip, proper help - the kind I'm not qualified to give. There's specialists trained to help you sort this out.

A shrink?

Not necessarily.

You think I'm nuts!

No! Counselling - there's a special service for Vietnam veterans.

No way! You're not going to tar me with the same brush as those bloody professional veterans who claim that every sneeze or fart's a stress disorder. I can handle it - specially with your help.

But I don't know how to help you. And even if I could, what's the cost? Not just to me, but Donny. Skip. It isn't fair to him. Get help!

I'll deal with it myself, I said! With or without you and Donny. I will not go and see a fucking shrink!

What about Father Monahan? I'm sure -

A priest? A priest?! They're worse than bloody shrinks - absolving everything but solving nothing! That mumbo-jumbo might comfort a woman, but some things should never be forgiven.

Skip!

Oh. shut up!

To put yourself above God's forgiveness...

Shut up!!

Priests are trained in counselling. They listen, give advice.
I said, shut up!

He strikes her hard in the face. She falls.

Aaagh!

D'you hear me now? I need to face this thing myself, alone! It's between me, Donny and the woman. No-one else. A free-fire zone, the man said. Understand? Anyone trying to interfere gets wasted!

NORMA bursts out weeping and exits, still clutching her face. The green light is back in full. NORMA's retreating sobs are echoed from upstage. The puppet WOMAN appears, trying to escape DONNY SMITH.

Keep fucking still, bugger it!

He lunges at her, grabs her from behind and turns her round.

Got you, you bitch!

He pushes her down on the edge of the pool. SKIP goes towards them.

Mẹ ốm làm ơn, tôi là người dân bà đã có gia đình.

(No, please. I am a married woman.)

DONNY covers her struggling body with his, fumbling with his pants

Donny...

To the WOMAN. I said keep still!

Jesus, mate!

To SKIP. Don't just bloody stand there! Give us a hand!

Eh?

Help me, will you? Hold her for me. Keep the yellow bitch still.

But...

Come on, for Chrissakes. Then you'll get your turn.

My turn?

You do want a bloody turn, don't you?

No. Donny...

Move it, will you?

SKIP hesitates, then moves towards them. Blackout. In the darkness, the WOMAN screams

Interval.
ACT TWO SCENE ONE

The Ordman backyard, next morning. NORMA, in dressing gown and dark glasses, is drinking coffee. SKIP enters, dressed for work. He goes to NORMA. She stands and moves away.

SKIP Norma...

NORMA I'll get your breakfast.

She exits to the house. SKIP goes to the pool and leans there for a moment. Pause. NORMA enters with a tray of muesli, coffee etc. She puts it in front of SKIP. He tries to take her hand.

SKIP Norma...

NORMA Don't touch me.

SKIP I'm sorry.

He lets her go. She goes and gets her own coffee.

I said I'm sorry.

Pause. No response.

I mean for last night. I wish it hadn't happened. I wish I could have it over, but I can't. We never can. All I can do is say... I'm sorry.

Pause.

What more do you want?

NORMA I told you last night.

SKIP I can't.

NORMA Why not?

SKIP I... it just isn't possible.

NORMA Then there's nothing more to be said.

SKIP Norma please. Try to understand. I have to fight this myself. But I don't think I can do it unless I know you're with me. I need you.

NORMA Funny way of showing it.

SKIP I didn't mean to...

DONNY enters and addresses SKIP.

DONNY Well? I hope you're sober, 'cause you've got some explaining to do. I've been driving round town half the night, trying to make sense of your... behavior last night. Haven't slept since I got home. Nearly came and woke you up, except you'd be still've been too pissed. So this morning, I hope you're so sober, so bloody hung over, it hurts!
Hearts and Minds

NORMA Donny, this is no way to -

SKIP Let him say his piece.

DONNY Oh, you'll let me speak, will you? That's big, really big of you. More than I could do last night. What the hell d'you think you were up to? What did they do to deserve that kind of treatment? D'you have any idea what it felt like driving them home? It might've been thirty degrees outside - it was below bloody zero in the car! Mrs Nguyen just sat there like an iceberg, and even Mai wouldn't say boo to a goose. And who can blame them, with you behaving like such an arsehole?

NORMA Donny!

DONNY An arsehole. Mum! You got a better word? All that was needed was a bit of civility, a bit of good old hospitality from one Aussie family to another. Oh, yes, they're Australians - second class ones in your book. What makes you think you're better than them? It's not as if I was asking you to move to Cabramatta!

SKIP You finished?

DONNY With Mai? Not if I can help it. With you? Yeah, after last night, I reckon I'm finished with you for good!

NORMA Donny, no!

SKIP Then, to use your mother's words, there's nothing more to be said. Time I was getting to work.

NORMA Skip, please! Donny didn't mean that, I'm sure.

DONNY Didn't I?

NORMA Stay and talk about it, please.

SKIP Saturday roster - my turn.

NORMA This is more important than the overtime.

SKIP Too late to get a substitute.

NORMA Take a sickie. I'll phone for you.

SKIP What sort of example would that be to the rank and file?

NORMA What sort of example is this to your son?

Pause. SKIP looks intently at DONNY, then turns and exits.

DONNY Calling after him. Gutless! Like all bigots!

NORMA Donny don't! Please, you'll only make it worse.

DONNY Worse? What could be worse than this?
NORMA  I can't bear it. The two of you... you're as bad as each other.

DONNY  What?

NORMA  *On the verge of tears.* Bicker, bicker, bicker All the time arguing, neither of you ever giving an inch. And now this. I can't stand it!

DONNY  I don't believe this. How can you side with that... that racist?

NORMA  I'm not!

DONNY  You're sure as hell not siding with me.

NORMA  What I'm doing is asking for a bit of give and take. He's not a racist!

DONNY  Hoh!

NORMA  *Tears come.* She lifts her dark glasses to wipe her eyes.

DONNY  What the...? What's wrong with your eye?

NORMA  *Replacing the glasses.* N... nothing. What're you talking about?

DONNY  Mum...

NORMA  Tears. Must've smudged my make-up.

DONNY  Make-up? You? At half-past eight on Saturday morning?

NORMA  I didn't take it off last night.

DONNY  Bullshit! Show me.

NORMA  *He reaches out and grabs the glasses.* Her black eye is revealed.

DONNY  Jesus! How did that happen?

NORMA  I... I, er...

DONNY  Don't give me any walked-into-a-door crap. It was him! Wasn't it!

NORMA  Donny, please...

DONNY  The bastard. I'll kill him!

NORMA  No! You mustn't say that. Please, try to understand.

DONNY  Oh I understand! It's why you're taking his side. You're scared of him!

NORMA  I'm not taking his side. I'm not scared of him. I'm scared *for* him.

DONNY  Eh?

NORMA  He... he's sick.

DONNY  Telling me! He's dangerous.
He needs help.

Yeah.

From us.

Oh, sure! And cop another one of his tongue-lashings for our trouble. Another shiner. Or worse. Why should we, when he's got it in for us?

He hasn't. That's what I'm trying to tell you. If he's got it in for anyone, it's himself.

Funny way of showing it.

Pause.

Oh God. That's what I said, when he tried to tell me he's sorry.

See? You agree.

No. I didn't want to listen. I wanted to get him back for hurting me.

Fair enough, too.

No! He is sorry for what happened last night. In his heart...

Hmph! What heart?

Donny, listen to me. You mustn't think that. Your father loves us both far more than he ever shows. He'd never do anything to hurt us... deliberately. It's not his heart that's the problem - it's his mind. Something's out of control. He's been having these kind of waking dreams - flashbacks, I suppose you'd call them. To do with something that happened in Vietnam. But it's not racist. It's tied up somehow with his mate Donny, that you're named after, and some woman. I think he's getting them confused with you and Mai. Please - let me finish. He's had nightmares before, but this... this is different. Scary, Donny. Like he's gone to another world. He started to tell me about it last night, but after what happened with Mai and Mrs Nguyen, I wasn't very... receptive. I was embarrassed and angry. He got angry too, and then... indicating her injured eye So this morning I was even angrier. When he... opened his heart and tried to cry for help, I turned away. Then you came, and said all the hurtful things I'd been wanting to say, and I saw him pull his heart back inside, and... and bury it. It made me go cold to see it happen. If he's rejected by us, who else can he turn to? He might... go off into that other world for good. I can't do that to some-one I love. Can you?

I don't believe this.

What?

Mum, he may have ruined my chances of getting anywhere with Mai. He's clobbered you in the eye. But to hear you speak, you'd think we were to blame. Like we asked for it, or something!

I'm not saying its our fault. But it might be if we don't help him.
DONNY  What do you want me to do?

NORMA  Just go easy with him. If you can't do that, steer clear. And maybe...

DONNY  Go on.

NORMA  No. It's OK.

Pause

Well, I did think... if I could sort of... work inside his... hallucination... tell him it was all over between Donny and his girl, it might...

DONNY  You want me to stop seeing Mai?

NORMA  Only for a while. Till uni goes back, maybe.

DONNY  Three months! Why not make it forever?

NORMA  You did say she mightn't want to see you anyway, after last night.

DONNY  So?

NORMA  So it's not much to ask, is it?

DONNY  Mum, do you realise what you're saying? It's good what Dad did last night, eh? Problem solved, is that it?

NORMA  Donny, we have to help him. We're all he's got. We owe it to him!


NORMA  You're his son, for God's sake!

DONNY  So? I didn't ask to be! And it wasn't me asked him to go off to some war and get fucked up in the head. I never asked him to pick on me all my life, and find fault with everything I do. I never asked for anything from him! Except once - to try and understand my feelings about Mai. Ha! Learnt my lesson, didn't I? From now on, I'm asking for nothing. Nothing! I don't need his permission to see Mai. Or yours!

NORMA  Donny...

DONNY  And as for steering clear of him, you tell him he better steer clear of me. And you. If he lays a finger on you again, he'll have a real fight on his hands. You tell him to go easy. See how he likes that!

He storms out.

NORMA  Donny, please...

Pause. He doesn't come back.

Oh, dear God...

Blackout.
ACT TWO SCENE TWO

The university duck pond. Ducks are swimming. DONNY enters hopefully but is disappointed to find the place unoccupied. The ducks swim over to investigate.

DONNY Sorry.

The ducks continue to cruise expectantly near him. One quacks.

Ah, quit belly-aching. At least you’ll see her when summer school starts.

Pause. He looks again at his watch. He sighs. Suddenly, the ducks begin quacking excitedly, moving away from DONNY. He watches them without much interest, until the object of their excitement enters. It’s MAI.

You did come!

MAI I can’t stay long. Mother would be very angry.

DONNY Know what you mean. Had a row with my dad.

MAI What do you want?

DONNY To talk. Find out if there’s still any chance of seeing you over the holidays.

Pause. MAI lowers her eyes.

I see.

Pause. The ducks are still waiting expectantly.

Bring any duck tucker?

MAI Hah?

DONNY Food. For them.

MAI No.

DONNY How’ll they get on without you?

Pause.

How will I?

MAI You’re being melodramatic.

DONNY No. I mean it.

Pause.

I... I love you, Mai.
Pause.

Mai?

Donny: You can't.

Mai: We... we hardly know each other.

Donny: How could there be... such feelings?

Donny: Chemistry. Fate. Call it what you like. Why question it?

Pause. Impetuously. Donny grabs Mai and kisses her on the mouth. She softens for a moment, but then pulls clear of him.

Mai: No. We mustn't.

Donny: You do feel it; don't you?

Mai: Look. I've got to go. My mother...

Donny: You can't run away from feelings like this.

Mai: Look. Donny. I like you. A lot. But...

Donny: But?

Mai: I'm not even sure I know what love is. This kind of love. Whether it means the same to you as it does to me.

Donny: Never find out unless we try.

Mai: We... you and I... we do things... approach things differently.

Donny: Like?

Mai: Well... you are so... confident, so sure of yourself. You see a problem, instantly you make a decision, you take action. The consequences are something to be sorted out later.

Donny: Just because I kissed you, doesn't mean...

Mai: Not just that. Other things. It's the way of your people.

Donny: Something wrong with it?

Mai: It's very appealing, sometimes. But it can also be threatening.

Donny: So which one was it?

Mai: Hnh?

Donny: The kiss - appealing or threatening?
MAI  Is that all you can think about - kissing? If that's all you're after...

DONNY  No. No. Of course not. Sorry.

Pause

MAI  I'm trying to explain the way of my people. We're used to subtlety. Doubt. We see a problem, we worry about it. We consult the omens. We negotiate. We pray. We consider even the most unlikely consequence. We review our decisions constantly.

DONNY  So? What are you getting at?

MAI  It's very difficult to find harmony in these ways. Maybe impossible.

DONNY  What about you? You live with both ways all the time.

MAI  Not at the same time. I live two separate lives - one with my mother; another here at university. If I try to bring them together... well, you've seen what happens.

DONNY  Do you like that?

MAI  I accept it. It's the way it is.

DONNY  So there's no room for change?

MAI  Of course there is. But... how can I put this so you'll understand?

Pause

You know the banyan tree?

DONNY  Kind of fig, isn't it? With... beardy roots?

MAI  Our way is like an old banyan tree. It grows sturdy and strong and beautiful. But if you chop a branch off and plant it in foreign soil, it'll sicken and decline. It'll look out of place - a weed. But if it survives, perhaps it'll throw new roots and begin to thrive again. After many years, it may not be thought of as a weed, or even exotic any more. It may even become important in the local landscape. But all this takes time, with wise, gentle gardening. It needs patience.

Pause.

DONNY  What can I say to that?

MAI  You understand?

DONNY  I don't understand how anyone could call you a weed.

MAI  Your father would. I think.

DONNY  To me, you're like a flower. A... delicate... flower.
MAI laughs

I know I can't put words together like you, but I mean it.

MAI

I'm not laughing at you. It's just, this is what my name means. Mai - a type of flower

DONNY

Yeah? Well there you go! I'll be your gardener, then. Will you let me?

MAI

I don't know. Can you find the patience?

DONNY

With you to teach me. How much do I need?

MAI

Enough to wait till we're back here next year?

Pause

It's only three months

DONNY

And after that?

MAI

Like this year. Study here together

DONNY

Nothing more?

MAI

We see what happens.

Pause

DONNY

Tough business this gardening. Do you realise how dreary those three months will be?

MAI

For me, too.

DONNY

Yeah? You mean that?

MAI

You'll have your job. I'll have the summer school. The time will pass.

DONNY

Yeah.

Pause

Almost enough to make me think about coming to summer school myself.

MAI

Yes? But your work. What would you do?

DONNY

That's the problem. I couldn't get through next year without the money. Specially if I move out of home.

MAI

You're going to do that?

DONNY

Do you blame me, after last night?

Pause

Pretty bloody hopeless, isn't it.
Could you come here some days? For lunch or something?

That's not a bad idea. Not for lunch - that's our busiest time. But maybe during the arvo when I'm on early roster.

There are lectures every afternoon.

Don't you get any free time?

A bit.

I could come then. Or sit with you in the lectures.

You want to see me that much?

Economics lectures, even.

They laugh.

On the other hand, you could come to the pool.

Hnh?

In the free time. Come have a swim. Clear away the academic cobwebs. The others'll cover for me if it's not too busy.

I can't.

Why not?

I just can't.

You mean you don't want to.

No.

You don't want to see me.

No! I mean, yes, I do want to.

Then why not come for a swim?

I can't!

Oh, Christ. Here we go again.

No. I mean I can't swim!

Pause.

You're kidding.

It's not something I'd ever joke about.

Didn't you learn?
MAI  It's not the custom in Vietnam. I wish it was. There was once a time, if I'd only learned, I might have been able to...

Pause

DONNY  Yeah?

MAI  Nothing

DONNY  You could learn now

MAI  Oh... now I'm too old

DONNY  Rubbish. We get them all ages. Come to the pool and join a class.

MAI  Oh no. I'd be too embarrassed. Plus, someone from my community might see me. Tell my mother.

DONNY  That's a point.

Pause.

Looks like I get to sit in on some lectures.

MAI  Could you?

DONNY  Unless...

MAI  What?

DONNY  Would you really like to learn to swim?

MAI  Well, yes, but...

DONNY  What would you say if I could arrange it in private, away from prying eyes and embarrassment, free of cost, compliments of the management?

MAI  How could you do that?

DONNY  Trust me.

MAI  Well...

DONNY  You teach me to garden. I'll teach you to swim. Deal?

*He holds out his hand. Hesitantly, MAI puts her hand in his.*

Blackout.
ACT TWO SCENE THREE

The Ordman backyard, empty. Dusk, the same day.

SKIP

Off. Norma?

SKIP enters in his work gear, carrying a bottle in a paper bag.

Norma!!

No response.

Donny?! Norma?!

Still no response.

Hmph!

He takes a bottle of Johnnie Walker out of the bag. It's half full.

No flaming dinner. Not even a note.

He addresses the picture on the bottle's label

Looks like it's just you and me. Bucks' night, eh?

He goes over and dips his head in the pool

Ah! That's better.

He comes back over to the table and takes a swig from the bottle.

Norma!!

Still no response.

Probably off with Father bloody Monahan. Asking God to sort out the mess. Priests and women! What could they know about war.

Another swig from the bottle, then addresses it

You know, though, don't you, Johnnie. Reckon you've started a stoush or two in your time. And Donny could. If he wanted to. Saw it in his eyes this morning, when he shaped up at me. He'd understand, if he'd let me...

He goes back inside the house. Pause. There's a loud banging noise.

Off. Donny?! You in there? Open up. I want to talk to you. Donny?

The rattling of a doorknob.

What's the door locked for, son? Got the sulks, have you?

Pause.

OK, have it your way. Change your mind, I'm out on the terrace.
He wants to show you.

Pause. Then he returns, carrying an old shoebox tied round with string. He's removed his jacket and shoes.

Talk to the lad without his mother round. Her soft wet ways. Donny!!!

Pause.

Must be out. Gone with her. maybe. Succumbed

He fumbles with the string, trying to undo it.

Got nothing to do with God, has it? Not war. That's when God leaves us on our own for a while. To play God ourselves. Life and death...

Pause. He takes a swig of booze.

The absence of God. That's what war is. Absent without leave. Off with the women. They need their God, the women. And He has to be a bloke, so they can measure the rest of us against Him, and be disappointed.

He gets the string untied. Taking the lid off. He rummages in the box.

Donny'd know what I'm talking about. wouldn't you, mate? Got a snap of him in here somewhere. Yeah. Here he is.

He pulls out the photo. Stares at it for a long moment. Reaches for the bottle.


Putting the photo down, he takes out his dogtags and puts them on.


He goes towards the pool. The green light returns. DONNY SMITH emerges, wading, dragging the whimpering WOMAN, her clothes torn and dishevelled. He pushes her roughly down on the edge of the pool. Next to her basket of rice seedlings. SKIP joins him.

DONNY S To the WOMAN. What the fuck you snivelling about, bitch? Better a beef bayonet than a punji stick like Roy. To SKIP. Your go.

SKIP We better get out of here.

DONNY S What's the matter? Can't get it up?

SKIP The others must be a couple of klicks away by now.

DONNY S Well if you don't. I'm going again. Never could do it twice in a row before. Not even with them pro's in Vungers. Thrill of the chase, eh?

SKIP Donny, have some sense! Be dark, soon.
DONNY S Yeah. Guess you're right.

*SKIP starts to head off. He looks back to see DONNY S pick up his rifle and aim it point blank at the WOMAN.*

WOMAN Xin dưng, làm ơn di. Xin dưng... (No! Please...)

SKIP What you doing?

DONNY S What's it look like?

SKIP You can't do that.

DONNY S Why the fuck not?

SKIP You... you just can't.

DONNY S OK. You do it then. Where's your gun?

SKIP I. I left it over there. Where we...

DONNY S Jesus wept. All right. Use mine.

*He tosses his rifle to SKIP*

SKIP No

DONNY S Any other suggestions?

SKIP Let her go.

DONNY S You kidding? She's a VC suspect - no ID!

SKIP Take her prisoner then.

DONNY S And have her blabbing to the base-bludgers about what we done?

SKIP You. Not me.

DONNY S Listen shit-brain. We got to zap her. Then we got evidence. We can explain about getting separated from the mob. One more to the body count. We'll be heroes, mate. And I'll be a double veteran.

*Pause*

For Roy, then. Got a score to settle there.

*Pause* SKIP slowly raise the rifle and aims at the WOMAN who raises her hand in a plea for mercy. He doesn't pull the trigger.

Go on!

SKIP I... can't.

DONNY S Oh, for Christ's sake. Give it here.

*He goes over to SKIP and tries to take the rifle.*
DONNY S What the fuck's the matter with you?

SKIP Don't do it, Donny.

The WOMAN pulls out a knife.

DONNY S One of us has to.

SKIP I won't let you. I shouldn't've let you -

The WOMAN stands and raises the knife. SKIP notices her.

Shit! Look out!

He sweeps the rifle round to aim at the WOMAN. DONNY SMITH spins round. At the same time the WOMAN lunges with a scream, stabbing DONNY SMITH in the guts. SKIP shoots, but in the melee, it's DONNY SMITH he hits, not the WOMAN.

DONNY S Aagh!

SKIP No!!!

DONNY SMITH and the WOMAN fall to the ground, half in, half out of the water. The WOMAN on top of DONNY. She struggles upright, still holding the knife. She looks at SKIP who has the rifle pointing straight at her.

WOMAN Do con heo! (Pigs!)

With a scream, in a single movement SKIP reverses his rifle and swings the butt with full force round in an arc, thudding into the side of the WOMAN's head. She falls. He straddles her, and smashes the rifle butt down on her several more times. Then, throwing the rifle to one side, he wrests the knife from her and raises it to stab her. DONNY SMITH lying in the shallows, groans. SKIP lowers the knife and goes to his mate.

SKIP Donny?

DONNY SMITH coughs and splutters.

Hang in there, mate. Get a dust-off here in no time.

DONNY S No... no point...

SKIP Don't be silly. You'll be right.

DONNY S Bullshit. I... I'm a gonner...

SKIP No you're not.
DONNY S Her blade... your bullet...

SKIP I'm sorry, Donny. I meant it for her.

DONNY S I know

SKIP I tried to save you, mate. Honest

DONNY S I know. Don't worry 'bout it... She got me... anyway...

*He has a fit of coughing. As it fades, Vietnamese voices can be heard.*

You better get... out of here

SKIP No way.

DONNY S Could be Charlie. Heard the... shot...

SKIP Got to get you a medevac.

DONNY S What... for?

SKIP But -

DONNY S Shut up and fucking listen, will you?

*More coughing.*

Save... save your own hide

SKIP I can't leave you.

DONNY S Just give me... my gun... some ammo...

*SKIP hesitates. The Vietnamese voices are getting closer*

DONNY S I got... seniority... That's an order!

*SKIP hesitates again. Then fetches the rifle and gives it to DONNY.*

Now piss off!

SKIP My gun...

DONNY S No time. Get going!

SKIP But -

DONNY S Jesus! Take this if it makes you happier.

*He gives SKIP the WOMAN's knife. The voices are getting louder still.*

Now get your bloody... skates on!

*SKIP starts, reluctantly, to go.* DONNY turns towards the voices.
Skip!

SKIP stops.

No need to tell the pogos what happened.

SKIP What difference'll it make?

DONNY S Get you off the hook. And... and I'll die a... a bit of a hero, eh?

The voices are heard again, now quite close.

Ooroo, mate.

SKIP See you Donny...

SKIP withdraws from the scene and moves back to the table, still holding the knife. The green light stays on the upstage tableau of DONNY SMITH aiming his rifle, next to the body of the Vietnamese WOMAN SKIP picks up the bottle of whiskey and takes a swig. He addresses the bottle.

The bastard had me, see? I helped the woman kill him, but he saved my life again.

He addresses the photo of Donny.

Get me off the hook? You set me up, you bastard! Who gave you the right? Why did you go to that woman? Why did you drag me into it? Why didn't I stop you?

He starts to stab the photo with the knife. With each thrust, a shot is rings out in the distance, and DONNY SMITH convulses upstage.

Who stabbed you the right to play God stabbing all-fucking stabbing might stabbing? Why didn't I stop stabbing you?

He stops stabbing, stares at the mutilated photo. Upstage, DONNY SMITH lies still.

SKIP Oh God. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Screaming. Donny!!!!!!

Blackout.
ACT TWO SCENE FOUR

The courtyard at the Nguyen home. The next morning. PHUONG enters carrying a tea tray.

PHUONG Please. Here is good. Not so hot.

NORMA enters. wearing sunglasses.

NORMA Oh, how lovely. Is this what gardens are like in Vietnam?

PHUONG Something like

She pours the tea. NORMA eyes the shrine.

NORMA I... er. you said... at Mass this morning - I saw you take Communion.

PHUONG Handing her a cup. Yes.

NORMA Thanks. But... she indicates the shrine.

PHUONG Yes?

NORMA Well, forgive me being inquisitive, but, well, that doesn’t look very Catholic to me.

PHUONG In Vietnam. Catholic is different, little bit. Big God, Holy Mother, Jesus, they live with other god. Little god from old way. Confucius way Tao way. Ancestor. nature spirit. these such thing

NORMA I... see.

PHUONG You come here to ask question about church?

NORMA No. Not exactly. Though I would like to know you better. Away from... others

PHUONG What you want, please?

NORMA Just a chat really.

PHUONG What for, this chat?

NORMA Well, because I like you. And on Friday night I thought maybe you liked me, until...

Pause.

Anyway, when I saw you in church this morning, it occurred to me that if you and I put our heads together, we might find a solution to our problem.

PHUONG Problem?

NORMA Your daughter and my son.

Pause.
And... my husband.

**PHUONG** Excuse me, is your problem, not mine.

**NORMA** Donny said that you and Mai had an argument -

**PHUONG** Between Mai and me is our business!

**NORMA** Not when it affects my son, it's not!

*Pause*

Look I'm sorry. I don't want to get hostile. I'd like us to be friends, really. All I want to know is how you feel about Mai and Donny... seeing each other

**PHUONG** How you feel?

**NORMA** I don't know I'd like to think they could make a go of it.

**PHUONG** This tell me how you think. Not how you feel in your heart.

**NORMA** Yes In my heart... I don't believe they'd ever find much happiness

*Pause*

And you?

**PHUONG** Same.

**NORMA** Really? Oh, good That's a relief.

**PHUONG** Hnh? How is relief our children be unhappy?

**NORMA** No, that's not what I meant. It's just it, well, makes my request easier if we both feel the same way.

**PHUONG** Request?

**NORMA** Er, more of a favour, really. I was hoping you might be able to stop it... their relationship... going further. Maybe even... peg it back a bit... somehow...

**PHUONG** You want me do this - ask this my daughter - for you?

**NORMA** For you, too.

**PHUONG** How, me?

**NORMA** Well you said you're not in favour of them seeing each other -

**PHUONG** Excuse me! I do not say this!

**NORMA** But -

**PHUONG** I say, like you, they not to find much happiness. Does not mean I can
Hearts and Minds

stop them!

NORMA  But if they'll never be happy, what's the point?

PHUONG  Is more than happiness I wish for Mai.

NORMA  More? What more could you wish her than happiness?


NORMA  Then... you're willing to let them go on-

PHUONG  Please. I did not say this, either.

NORMA  Oh, for God's sake. Just tell me where you stand!

PHUONG  Hnh?

NORMA  Do you think they should be discouraged? Yes or no?

PHUONG  Is not so simple. Not in Australia. In Vietnam, easy. I say it forbidden, she obey. But here? Ai! She get Australian thought in her Vietnamese mind. Result? Indigestion, like when we eat your food. She upset order of thing. Girl can have career, she say. Girl can go on date with any boy she like. I think, this because she is only child. Everything a boy should be, go into her Back-to-front thought. But if I tell her this, she tell me don't be old-fashion. She say I talk like Confucius. So? I say. What wrong with that? Then she say - what so good about Confucius? He just make everyone look down on other person. Except women - they the bottom, no-one left lower to look down on! You see my problem?

NORMA  Yes. Yes. I suppose so.

PHUONG  Problem for me, but not for you.

NORMA  What do you mean?

PHUONG  You Australian. Your son Australian. Same thinking. You tell him stop

NORMA  I've tried. Believe me. I've tried.

PHUONG  You too, not simple, hnh?

NORMA  It's his father. Something's happened to him since Mai came into the picture. From the war. You saw how he was the other night. He's not usually like that. It's like an old, ugly wound's opened up after years and years, and got infected. It's frightening, Mrs Nguyen! Isn't there something we can do to... to come between them? I'm going to lose my husband if we don't!

PHUONG  Problem for you, not for me.

NORMA  Please!

Pause.
After you left the other night, he... he got worse.

She removes her sunglasses

Please.

PHUONG I think you go now

NORMA How... how can you be so hard-hearted?

PHUONG You ask this? OK, I answer. Losing husband - what you know of this. hnh? Your husband still here. He hit you, OK, it pain. Least you feel him Real Live. He been here all through, while your son growing up. You got husband, son, country. All familiar, very comfortable. My husband, where is he, hnh? Indicating the shrine and pond. He here. Indicating her heart. And here. Nowhere else. Why? I tell you - because many people decide to fight war in our country. Foreign people, care nothing for my beautiful country. only the big idea they argue for. They pull and push my country till she beautiful no more. All use up. Then they... throw her - us, her people - on the dung-heap to rot. You talk 'bout wounds. My country has wounds. Scarred and bleeding, ugly. We are ashamed. So much shame, we wish not stay. Love our country so much, we not bear to look at her like this. So we think to leave, go new country. Place of foreign people who fight in our country. make her like this. Maybe we find out what are the big idea they fight about? But some think we should not do this. More shame to leave than stay. We must rebuild, make her beautiful again, they say. Vietnamese, they are, but they wear uniform different from foreigner, but same. Uniform is uniform. Make them speak like foreigner. I do not believe them. Wish leave anyway. They try to stop us. My husband...

She picks up the photo of him

I lose my husband then. Mrs Norman. Thirteen year I lose my husband, my country, my family, my friend, spirit of my ancestor. My language I am losing. All is left is my daughter. You ask me now please to... to take risk to maybe losing her, so you will maybe save your husband. You forgive me, please, if I have no softness in my heart for this!

Pause.

NORMA I'm sorry. I... I didn't think. I shouldn't have asked...

Pause.

Thank you for telling me. Putting me straight.

Pause.

I... I'll be getting along then.

She goes to exit

'Bye.
PHUONG Mrs Norman!

NORMA stops

My heart is not hard. It bleed for you... your husband. I like to help, but is not possible. Please, not to hate me.

NORMA Hate you?

PHUONG I got no strength left. Not for other people fight. Maybe not even for fight of myself.

NORMA Of course I don't hate you. I understand, really. I have to fight my own battles. It was stupid and... and insensitive of me to expect you to help.

PHUONG We... we still are friend?

NORMA Of course.

PHUONG Is... is maybe one thing... I do to help.

NORMA Yes?

PHUONG Only small

NORMA Anything

PHUONG I pray for your husband. You wish I do that?

Pause

NORMA Please. That would be... comforting.

PHUONG I pray to God, also to my husband. Maybe he understand your husband. Maybe he give guidance 'bout your son, my daughter, hnh?

NORMA Maybe. It's worth a try.

PHUONG You pray too.

NORMA To God, yes.

PHUONG Your husband name. How you say it?

NORMA Skip.

PHUONG Kip? Strange name for Australian.

NORMA It's a nickname. His father called him that when he was a little, and it stuck. It's short for skipper, see Skip. What was your husband's name?

PHUONG Lat Nguyen Chi Lat. I ask him please look out for Kip Norman.

She takes the photo back to the shrine.
Come. You help.

NORMA Er, look, it's time I was getting home.

PHUONG Please. Just you light some incense, then you go.

*She takes three sticks from a packet.*

Best quality.

NORMA What... what for?

PHUONG Smoke carry the prayer to heaven. Rise faster with good stick.

NORMA Oh Well all right

*She and PHUONG light the sticks. PHUONG places them in the shrine.*

PHUONG See how fast it rise? Lift your hope with it. hnh?

NORMA I... I'd like to think so.

PHUONG You go now, please. I talk to Lat in private.

NORMA Yes, yes of course. I'll see myself out.

PHUONG Good-bye.

NORMA See you next week in church.

NORMA exits. PHUONG goes to the shrine, picks up the photo of her husband, and goes over to the edge of the pond. She sits, staring at the photo in her lap. She begins again to pray. Her whispered words just audible, but not discernible. The lights change. PHUONG stares transfixed as out of the pond rise two (puppet) PEACOCKS. These birds do a brief and agile dance. PHUONG watches, then addresses the photo.

PHUONG *Bay có phải là ý muốn của anh không? Anh nghĩ việc đó sẽ như thế nào?

(Is this your sign? Is this how you think it should be?)

*She turns the photo to face the pond. The PEACOCKS dance with more vigour, then disappear. PHUONG addresses the photo again.*

Em hy vọng rằng anh biết anh đang làm gì.

(I hope you know what you're doing.)

Blackout
ACT TWO SCENE FIVE

The Ordman back yard, afternoon of the following day. Empty.

DONNY Off Mum? Mum! Dad?

He enters, wearing the pool uniform of tee-shirt and swimming trunks. He has a look round the yard, then calls back.

All clear!

MAI enters tentatively, carrying her bag.

MAI You sure?

DONNY See? I told you no-one'd be here. They're both at work.

MAI Your mother works as well?

DONNY Part-time. She's a supervisor with Telecom. Relax! We've got the place to ourselves.

MAI Well... OK.

DONNY Maybe you'd be happier at the uni pool.

MAI No... no.

DONNY Why so jumpy, then?

MAI Oh... I don't know. It feels, well, not quite right.

DONNY What does?

MAI This. Being here.

DONNY Don't you trust me?

Pause.

Look, if it's because of that kiss, I won't try anything like that again. Promise, OK? Cross my heart. But if you don't want to go through with it...

MAI It's not just that. It's... I don't know, the sneakiness of it. Not telling our parents.

DONNY What they don't know can't hurt them. Or us.

MAI Guess so. I've come this far.

Pause. She glances nervously at the pool.

DONNY Any other problems?

MAI How deep is the pool?
DONNY  Bit more than a metre. Just over my belly button.
MAI    I can stand up?
DONNY No worries. Scared?
MAI    No!
Pause

Well. yes. A bit.

DONNY Natural feeling, for a beginner.
MAI    Really?
DONNY You bet. Happens to everyone. Look, there's nothing to worry about. It's a good pool for this - not too deep, and you're never too far from the side. Learnt to swim in it myself. And I know the ropes. Done heaps of teaching I'll be gentle.

MAI    And patient?
DONNY And patient
MAI    OK
Pause

DONNY Want to get changed inside?
MAI    No. it's OK. I've got my costume underneath.
DONNY Me too.

He whips off his tee-shirt MAI looks away, but doesn't remove her own clothes.

What's the hold up?
MAI    Could you lend me a towel? I couldn't bring one, in case my mother noticed.
DONNY Good thinking. Back in a jiff.

He exits to the house. As soon as he's gone, MAI quickly removes her own clothes, down to a modest one-piece costume. DONNY returns.

As he comes. They're only bath towels, but we won't be sunbathing any -

DONNY stops in his tracks, staring at MAI. Pause.

MAI    What's wrong?
DONNY Nothing. Absolutely nothing.
MAI

Please. Don’t look at me like that!

She grabs her blouse and holds it in front of her.

DONNY

Sorry. Took me by surprise. That’s all. No harm meant.

Pause. MAI’s still not sure. DONNY plays up to her. With a phony accent.

I assure you. mamzelle. my intentions is honourable!

MAI giggles and relaxes.

MAI

I’m sorry. I’m not used to this. You’ll think I’m awfully straight-laced.

DONNY

Still bunging on side. On the contrary. m’dear. I find your modesty attractive in the extreme.

They both laugh.

Normal voice. But you have to trust me if I’m going to teach you to swim.

He reaches out for the blouse she’s still holding to her front. She makes no move to let it go.

Including letting me touch you. Can you handle that?

MAI

I’ll try.

She lets go the blouse. He puts it on the table.

DONNY

Now look. Up this end there’s a kind of shelf under the water. Like a wide step. The water’s shallow here. Not much over your knees. See?

MAI

Yes.

DONNY

All I want you to do is step down so you’re standing on the shelf. OK?

MAI

Yes. No. You go first.

DONNY

OK.

He does so.

See? Easy. Now your turn.

MAI

No. I can’t. I’ll fall.

DONNY

No you won’t. And anyway. I’m here to catch you. Here take my hand. Now. step.

With a small scream, she does so. landing neatly.

Good girl!
MAI Oh!
DONNY What's up? You did it.
MAI It's... cold.
DONNY Only when you first get in.
MAI What... what next?
DONNY We sit down
MAI In the water?
DONNY Together. OK?
MAI OK...

Slowly, with DONNY still holding her hand, they sit down together in the shallow part of the pool.

DONNY Nothing to it, is there.
MAI Shivering. It's very cold.
DONNY You're nervous, that's all. The trick is to keep moving.
MAI Where to?
DONNY Put your feet over to the edge of the shelf. Here. Feel it? Dangle your legs over.
MAI Ai!
DONNY That's it. Now we stand up.

He does so.

Come on. I've got you.

MAI stands in the water.

Attagirl!

MAI It... it's slippery.
DONNY Yeah. a bit.
MAI Please. I think this is enough today.
DONNY But you're doing so well. Just a bit more, then we call it quits, OK?
MAI Y... yes... OK.
DONNY I'm going to let go of you.
MAI No! Hold me!
DONNY Yes, and I'm going to walk over to the edge of the pool, and you're going to follow.

MAI I can't.

DONNY 'Course you can. See?

He releases her hand.

MAI Donny!

DONNY Relax. I'm just here. Relax. Now, I'm moving towards the edge. When you're ready, follow.

He moves away.

MAI No! Come back!

DONNY You come to me.

MAI I can't.

DONNY You can. Come on.

Very slowly, MAI takes a small step.

That's the way. And another.

She does so. DONNY backs a little away from her.

MAI Don't move!

DONNY I'm still here. Keep coming.

She takes another, bigger step. DONNY moves away again.

MAI Đừng hả! Đừng! (No, Daddy! No!)

She makes a desperate lunge for DONNY's hand. In doing so, she falls off balance and goes headlong into the water.

DONNY What? Mai!

He goes to grab her and help, but she's in a full flight of panic, thrashing and screaming.

MAI Ba đi! Con đây nè ba! (Daddy! I'm here! Daddy!!)

She goes under again. With great difficulty, DONNY manages to grab her hair and pull her up. She comes up coughing and spluttering.

DONNY It's OK, Mai. Here - over to the side...

He grabs her from behind, pinning her arms, and starts to heave her to the edge. She's still in a blind panic, kicking and struggling. Unseen by either of them, SKIP enters. He takes in the scene.
MAI: Buông tôi ra. Tôi phải cứu bố tôi. (Let me go. Got to get my Daddy...!) 

SKIP: Donny!

DONNY: Stop struggling, will you? Here!

He heaves her onto the edge of the pool. But she's still squirming, and he has to hold her there. She kicks.

It's OK. Cut it out. Ow! Jesus!

SKIP: Donny, no!

The lights go green

MAI: Tôi phải cứu bố tôi... (Got to get my father...)

SKIP: Stop!

DONNY: Noticing him. Oh, thank Christ. Come and help me hold her, will you?

SKIP: You can't do it, Donny! I won't let you!

DONNY: What are you talking about. All I want is to turn her over, see-

SKIP: Don't do it, Donny!

MAI has now ceased to struggle. She's weeping instead. SKIP moves closer to the pool.

DONNY: Oh, for Christ's sake. Do it myself.

SKIP: No! You can't. It's wrong. They're going to kill you!

DONNY: What?

SKIP leaps into the pool and shoves DONNY away from MAI

DONNY: Hey!

SKIP: You want the woman, you'll have to get past me.

DONNY: I've got to! Jeez, what is this?

He tries to push SKIP out of the way.

SKIP: No!!

He punches DONNY in the stomach.

DONNY: Aagh!

DONNY doubles up. SKIP grabs his hair and pushes his face under.

SKIP: You're not dragging me into this, Donny. Leave the woman alone!
He brings him up, gasping and spluttering

We got to get back to the mob. Charlie’s out there close.

DONNY F... for Cris...

SKIP pushes him under again. MAI is now aware of SKIP’s presence.

MAI Mr Ordman... no!

SKIP For your own good, mate. What use is a dead hero?

He brings him up again.

Don’t do it, Donny. Say you won’t! Don’t leave me with your dirty death to deal with!

DONNY Let... let me... go...

NORMA enters takes in the scene MAI is screaming

NORMA What the...

SKIP To DONNY. Not till you say you’ll leave the woman!

He shoves him back under

NORMA Skip!!!

She leaps onto SKIP’s back, wrenching at his arms. Thrown off balance, he staggers back and lets DONNY go. DONNY sinks.

Donny...?

She dives and pulls him to the surface. SKIP watches, bewildered.

SKIP Norma?

NORMA is frantically dragging the unconscious DONNY onto the shelf of the pool. MAI tries to help. The green light fades.

NORMA Mai! Call an ambulance! Quick!

MAI exits to the house. NORMA gets DONNY half out of the water and starts to tend to him.

SKIP Oh god, no! Donny...

Blackout
ACT TWO SCENE SIX

The Ordman back yard, the night of the same day. Empty. Offstage, in the house, the phone rings. It rings for some time.


The phone keeps ringing.

Still off. Not here. I said! Piss off!

The phone persists.

Still off. Leave... me... alone!!!!!

From offstage comes the sound of a phone being thrown heavily to the floor. The ringing stops. Silence. Then SKIP enters, carrying his shoebox. He goes to the table, which still holds the clothes of DONNY and MAI from earlier. He caresses DONNY's shirt. Then he places the shoebox on the table, removes the lid, and slowly, takes out the contents, examining each one intently in turn - photos, service medals, miniatures, letters from home, pay book, military manual, lanyard, a zippo lighter, a few old notes of currency - before arranging them on the table. The last item is the knife used by the peasant woman to stab Donny Smith. He lifts it out gently, examines it, feels its weight, the sharpness of its point, the keenness of its edge. He turns the point towards him. Unnoticed by him, PHUONG enters from the shadows of the garden.

PHUONG Mr Kip...

Startled, SKIP jumps up. The green light returns.

SKIP No. No more. Aren't you finished yet?

PHUONG Hnh?

SKIP Why can't you be satisfied with taking Donny from me? Why can't you leave me in peace?

PHUONG Please -

SKIP Haven't I paid enough?

PHUONG Please, you give knife to me.

Pause.

SKIP Why not? It's yours.

He throws it on the ground near her feet.

Take the putrid thing. Use it. Take my life, if that's what you've come for. But bring back my dead son. I'm the guilty one, not him!

PHUONG Your son... not dead.
No. How could he not be? I killed him! It's a trick. Another twist of your game. Get out of my head!


The green light fades.

Mrs...?

Mother of Mai who is friend of your son.

Donny...

No trick. Mr Kip. Your son not dead.

How... how do you -

I been to hospital. You call. They tell you.

I will! By Christ. I will!

He heads for the house, then stops.

I... busted the phone.

Go hospital. see yourself.

Yes. No... no. He... won't want to see me.

Believe me. Donny. he alive.

Alive... alive... thank God...

He breaks down weeping. PHUONG picks up the knife and puts it out of sight. Then goes to SKIP.

Doctor say he going to be OK. In hospital one, maybe two night, then free.

Pause.

Is good you cry.

Pause.

Mrs your wife. She with him at the hospital. Mai also. She call me, I go too. Then come here.

Pause. SKIP's weeping is subsiding.

Why?

Mai tell me story of what happen. Your wife tell me more.

I don't see -
PHUONG I think, is more story than she tell me, or what I see when I come here for barbecue. Maybe you have story you never tell anyone.

SKIP What if I do?

PHUONG Maybe you like tell Phuong.

SKIP A confession? I don't want forgiveness from you. Or anyone.

PHUONG Not even from yourself?

Pause.

SKIP How could you possibly care? After everything that's happened...

PHUONG Excuse me. I be honest. Maybe you help me, too.

SKIP What do you mean?

PHUONG I also have story I never tell. Not anyone. I think I tell you. I think maybe you understand. I think also I understand your story.

SKIP I don't understand it myself.

PHUONG Maybe because you never tell it.

Pause. PHUONG picks up a photo from SKIP's mementos.

Story start here. I think.

SKIP Put that back. It's none of your business.

PHUONG Is picture of my country.

SKIP It's a picture of a war.

PHUONG Same thing. All my life, Vietnam is war. Your war. French, Japanese, British, American, Russian, Chinese, many other. Australian. Every-one make war in Vietnam. This picture my country, for sure.

Pause. She indicates the array of relics.

I think maybe both our story here.

SKIP I, don't follow...

PHUONG War still not finish for you, I think. Still fight... indicating her head, in here.

SKIP Sort of.

PHUONG For me, same story, see? War not finish yet. Not when American leave, not 1975, not yet. After American go, is all chaos. Corruption, worse than even before. In my village, very bad. Government tax. VC tax, bribes - no pay, you killed. All time hungry, frighten. 1975, my husband and I, we look forward to Communist victory! We think, could not be worse. North is Vietnam too. All one country. Maybe
story got happy ending, hnh?

*Pause.*

Big mistake. Could be worse. Much worse. My husband Lat, he work as barber. Before the Communist, sometime he cut hair for Republic soldier. For this, they call him traitor, running dog! They take everything from us - house, land, furniture, even my husband tool of trade. They send us to New Economic Zone. Communist name for concentration camp. Make us slave. Re-education, they call. Try to make farm in barren land. No-one has knowledge of how. People sick. People starve. People... die. Mai, she get sick. War still going on... I start to think, maybe time we leave Vietnam.

*Pause.*

**SKIP**

You all right?

*She nods*

Look, you don't have to tell me, if it's...

**PHUONG**

Please. We speak the pain, some flow out with the telling, yes?

**SKIP**

Perhaps.

**PHUONG**

I tell you all. Then you tell me. Is deal?

**SKIP shrugs his assent.**

Every night at camp, my husband must go Communist class. I think, OK, he learn speak Communist word, still think free. But later, I find he start think Communist. We have big argument. Lat say we must not leave. Must stay, build worker paradise in Vietnam. People, they dying. Our daughter sick, how can he talk this way? I am despair. Voice in my head say, leave without Lat. Get boat, take Mai, go! I tell this voice go away, but it get louder. So I start look for boat.

*Pause.*

I hear 'bout man - small boss in Party, but corrupt - who has boat for people want escape. I meet him, he say he help if I got money. Who have money? Communist take everything. I only got little bit hidden jewel gold, from my mother. I show him, he say not enough. What else I offer?

*She begins to weep.*

What else woman *have* to offer? I want boat, I must... go to him. Be... be... whore for him. What choice? For sake of Mai, I go. Many time, he... use me this way. Each time I go, boat not ready yet, must... lie with him more time. I feel so shame, so dirty... cannot... be proper wife to Lat. He get angry. I think, maybe this boat man not have boat at all. Just use it for use me. Next time I tell him - no more. He tell me, no problem - boat now ready. Leave tonight - two hour time. Just like that!
Pause. She stops weeping.

I run to camp, get Mai and Lat, and jewel. We get to river, little wooden boat, sitting out from shore maybe one hundred metre. Many people! I think, how we all fit? Lat now realise bout escape plan. He get angry, say he not come, tell me not go either. This we do is crime, he report us. Then he run off. What I do? Mai, she cry for Lat. But this boat our freedom. Other people, already they wading into water, head for boat. What I do? Then I hear new sound.

Distant sounds of a whistle blowing, and shouting in Vietnamese. The lights go green.

Police come! Choice made. I wade into water with Mai, very frighten.

Through the mist appears a full-size puppet WOMAN (the younger PHUONG), struggling through the water, carrying a CHILD in her arms. The CHILD (the younger MAI) is also struggling.


More shouting, and shots, over the faint sound of a small boat engine. The puppet PHUONG waves frantically. The puppet MAI screams:

Lâm ơn chờ mốt chút đi! (Wait! Wait for us!)

She continues to wade. More shots.

Then I hear voice of Lat, calling, calling...

LAT

Phương ơi. Anh đi nữa. Chờ anh với! (Phuong! I will come. Wait for me!)

VOICE

PHUONG

Nearly at boat. Police still shooting, bullet hit water near me.

The puppet PHUONG waves again.

Lâm ơn chờ mốt chút đi. Chồng tôi cìng muốn đi nữa!

(Wait, please wait. My husband wants to come!)

The puppet has reached the downstage edge of the pool. Out of the upstage mist emerges a puppet MAN (the young Lat), wading frantically towards them. The MAI puppet struggles more.

MAI

Ba ơi ba! (Daddy!)

PHUONG

I get hold of boat, hang on, look back for Lat. He not too far behind, but boat move quicker now.

LAT

Chờ tôi với! (Wait!)

PHUONG

Lat nearly at boat. Water get deep. Then...

The puppet PHUONG stretches out her hand. The puppet MAN stretches out his. Shots ring out, and the puppet MAN jerks in the water.
Anh Lat đi đứng! (Lat, no!)

MAI

Ba đi ba! (Daddy!)

PHUONG

Mai, she fight in my arm. want to save Lat.

The MAI puppet struggles more. The puppet LAT thrashes in the water.

MAI

Ba dồi con đi. con đến cứu ba nè. (I’m coming Daddy. I’ll help you.)

LAT

Phương đi! Cứ anh với, cứ anh với! (Help! Phuong, help!)

PHUONG

Weeping. But Mai cannot swim. I cannot swim. No help to Lat, my husband. father of my daughter. Lat...

The puppet LAT disappears under the water.

Lat!!!

The puppet PHUONG disappears, and the green light goes. All that can be heard is the sound of PHUONG’s sobbing. Pause.

So you see, Mr Kip. This price I pay for survive. Survive... myself and my daughter. Fate... drive very hard bargain. I think. Must make choice - me and Mai live. Lat die. Big weight for my heart to carry.

Pause.

At first, I despair. But after while, I learn to live with this. Not despair, but not hope either. Not resist, but not accept. Just be... In time, I even begin make peace with spirit of Lat. Talk to him in my mind. But never tell anyone this story. Even Mai, not whole story. But now I tell you, Mr Kip. I think you understand. You also pay big price for survive. Have sympathy for my... choice. I tell you story, already my heart little bit not so heavy.

Pause.

Your wife tell me, your heart so heavy, it make your mind go wrong. I think you tell me story, take little bit weight from heart. Help make mind OK again. hnh?

SKIP

Maybe. I s’pose. I warn you, it’s pretty ugly.

PHUONG

My life, I see much ugly, Mr Kip. Little more not hurt me. Maybe help you. From small seed of sympathy, maybe we grow whole garden of hope.

Blackout.
ACT TWO SCENE SEVEN

The duck pond at the university, a day or two later. DONNY’s on the bench, alone, restless and fidgety. No ducks in sight. MAI enters.

MAI Sorry I’m late.

DONNY That’s all right.

MAI You OK now?

DONNY Yeah, fine. Why?

MAI You seem a bit... edgy.

DONNY Bit worried you weren’t going to show, that’s all.

MAI Why wouldn’t I?

DONNY Oh, you know. After everything.

MAI Not your fault

DONNY Come on - you nearly drowned because of me.

MAI It was you that nearly drowned.

DONNY Before that. The lesson. I shouldn’t’ve pushed you so hard.

MAI It wasn’t you.

DONNY You were scared. I blew it!

MAI Donny, listen! I’m the one who blew it. I should’ve told you about me and water.

DONNY What about it?

MAI My father drowned when we were leaving Vietnam. I watched it happen. Couldn’t do anything to help him. Ever since, I can’t... get into water - no more than a bath. It... it’s like my father’s spirit’s calling to me, waiting for me to join him. The pull’s very strong.

DONNY I... I’m sorry.

MAI My mother feels it, too. That’s why she built my father’s shrine overlooking the pond.

DONNY Right. Yeah.

MAI And all that fish-feeding. She’s never said so, but I think that’s part of it. I think she thinks some of it might get down to his spirit, swimming with the fishes.

DONNY Same with you and the ducks?

MAI Oh, no. That’s just for fun.
DONNY | Oh.
MAI | I'd still like to learn to swim.
DONNY | What about your father's spirit?
MAI | It seems it's... favourably disposed
DONNY | What?
MAI | My mother told me she had a kind of sign from my father. She was praying to his spirit in the pond, and saw two peacocks dancing.
DONNY | Excuse me?
MAI | An old Vietnamese symbol. It means fun and happiness for girls and boys.

*DONNY laughs*

It's not funny. My mother takes it very seriously. I believe it. If you want to learn our ways -

DONNY | Sorry. It's such a turn-around, that's all. So your mum...
MAI | If my father's spirit's happy, she won't argue.
DONNY | Then we're free to see each other?
MAI | On one condition.

*DONNY looks the question.*

You make peace with your father.

*DONNY groans*

You must!

DONNY | Who are you to tell me what I must or mustn't do?
MAI | I'm your friend.
DONNY | A conditional friend.
MAI | Please, Donny. Go home.
DONNY | It's not my home. How can it be, with him living there?
MAI | Your mother will be disappointed.
DONNY | Can't be helped.
MAI | Won't you even talk to him?
DONNY | Mai, he tried to kill me!
MAI No.

DONNY You saw it!

MAI There's more to it than that.

DONNY Like what?

MAI Donny, your father's sick. In his mind.

DONNY Now you're sounding like Mum.

MAI It's true.

DONNY I'm not saying it's not. Doesn't make me feel any safer when he's round.

MAI He's going to get help. He said so.

DONNY How come all of a sudden you're on his side?

MAI I'm just trying to understand.

DONNY That's big of you.

MAI Maybe you don't want to understand.

DONNY You're right, maybe I don't.

MAI What's happened to you, Donny? What's happened to my friend who makes me laugh and has... so much heart to give? You want to understand me and my people, but not your own father? You ask me to love you, but won't accept his love? OK! You want to... to wallow in self-righteousness, go ahead, but don't expect company from me! You want to learn gardening, start with your own weeds!

Pause. No response from DONNY.

OK.

She starts to go.

DONNY Mai! Don't go.

She stops.

Those weeds. I'd still like to learn about gardening. I... I'll talk to him. OK?

MAI OK.

DONNY Drive a hard bargain, don't you?

MAI It's an old Vietnamese custom.

DONNY also smiles. They freeze.
EPILOGUE

*CHU TEU enters on the pool.*

**CHU TEU** Well, there we go! Another story ends.

*Pause. He points to the young couple.*

'Course, it's not really the end for these two. Just a beginning for them really. Lots of paddies ahead for them to plough. I wonder how it'll turn out?

*He turns back to the audience.*

At least we can send them on their way with a blessing. A bountiful benediction from the two holy dragons. Peace, happiness, and prosperity! To them, and to all of you!

*He gestures, and the two dragons appear. They dance around each other, breathing fire, accompanied by drums and flute. DONNY and MAI watch as the dance and music build to a crescendo.*

Blackout. End of play.
THE HEARTS AND MINDS PROJECT:
TOWARDS A THEATRE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Project Documentation

Volume 2
of
a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

from the

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

PETER ARTHUR JOHN COPEMAN

BRTP Qld, Dip Directing NIDA, MA Calgary

SCHOOL OF CREATIVE ARTS
1992

Copyright © Peter Copeman 1992
Contents: Volume Two

Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1. Introduction 1
Chapter 3. Black Pyjamas and Yellow Satin: Vietnamese Stereotypes on Screen and Stage 23
Chapter 4. Personal and Impersonal: Origins of the Project 42
Chapter 5. Background Research 64
Chapter 6. Script Development 102
Chapter 7. Pre-production and Rehearsal 129
Chapter 8. Performance and Beyond 166
Chapter 9. Conclusions 183

References Cited 190

Appendix 1. Water Puppetry Notes from the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre 198
Appendix 2. Script Plotting Points as at June 1991 205
Appendix 3. Script Treatment 208
Appendix 4. Backstories of the Major Characters 244
Appendix 5. Sample Scene: Blank Verse Trial 260
Appendix 7. Sample Scenes: Second Draft of Script 283
Appendix 8. Program and Publicity Material 299
Appendix 9. Letters of Appraisal from Carrillo Gantner and May-Brit Akerholt 306
List of Figures

**Figure 5.1**
Nguyen Trong Bang, Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre Director, and my guide, Lan, in the VNPT Rehearsal Theatre, Hanoi

**Figure 5.2**
Members of the VNPT Company in the VNPT Meeting Room

**Figure 5.3**
Master of Ceremonies Chu Teu Introduces the Show, in the VNPT Rehearsal Theatre

**Figure 5.4**
Show Finale - Fire-breathing Dragon Dance, in the VNPT Rehearsal Theatre

**Figure 5.5**
Village near Nui Dat, Australian Task Force Area, former Phuoc Tuy Province

**Figure 5.5**
Former Australian Soldiers' Club and Harold Holt Memorial Pool, Vung Tau

**Figure 5.7**
Underground National Liberation Front Meeting Room, Cu Chi

**Figure 5.8**
National Liberation Front Cemetery, near Cu Chi

**Figure 7.1**
Chu Teu - VNPT version

**Figure 7.2**
Chu Teu - my version

**Figure 8.1**
Newspaper Reviews

**Figure 8.2**
"Le Loi! Le Loi! Do not despair!" (Prologue, p. 2)

**Figure 8.3**
"Dung ma!" (Act One Scene Three, p. 14)

**Figure 8.4**
"So this is where you learned that trick!" (Act One Scene Five, p. 32)

**Figure 8.5**
"You're on a fast, is that it?" (Act One Scene Seven, p. 38)

**Figure 8.6**
"But Donny! We're supposed to stay with the section." (Act One Scene Seven, p. 43)

**Figure 8.7**
"I should've stopped him, Sarge." (Act One Scene Seven, p. 44)
To be Australian is to be part of a society made up of people from many cultures. To be Australian is also, increasingly, to acknowledge geographical proximity to Asia. In terms at least of economics, old ties with the northern hemisphere are diminishing, and being replaced by closer relations with our regional neighbours.

Yet only two generations ago, being Australian still largely meant being part of a monocultural British satellite which "sided with history against geography" (Broinowski 198). A single generation ago, when anticolonial struggles for independence were being waged and won throughout Asia, geography could no longer be ignored. Australia was drawn into a regional conflict, the Vietnam War - a neocolonial war in which Australia sided with the American neocolonists and lost. It was a long, dirty, confused war which divided the nation and left a legacy of continuing casualties - returned soldiers still disoriented and traumatised; Indochina still in political turmoil after decades of dislocation, deprivation and attempted genocide. Millions have fled this chaos as refugees, some of them to Australia. Asian immigrants have become significant contributors to Australia's cultural diversity.

Australia is a nation in transition. Attitudes and self-images developed in earlier times no longer enable Australians either to understand fully who they are, or to explain their relationship with the rest of the world. Yet old attitudes - especially the myths and symbols that embody them - endure in mainstream Australian image-making institutions such as advertising, the media and major arts organizations. This is hardly surprising given that a colonial mentality of subservience to Britain and America was still pervasive in the formative years of the present heads of these image-making institutions. A generation or two is
a short time in which to attempt such a fundamental reappraisal of long-held and deeply ingrained attitudes, either in these institutions or in their audiences. Old habits do indeed seem to die hard, despite urging from intellectuals such as Donald Horne to "get rid of all those old kinds of bush-digger-ocker images to establish a simple definition of ourselves as Australian citizens which recognizes that we are a culturally diverse society" (20).

This thesis documents the origins, development and production of a playwriting and directing project, **Hearts and Minds**, dealing with intercultural relations between Anglo- and Vietnamese-Australians in the context of the social legacy of the war. This project was a response to a perceived failure of contemporary mainstream theatre to address the reality of cultural diversity in Australia, especially with regard to cultures of Asian origin.

So-called multicultural theatre remains a marginal activity, the province of community theatres and folkloric groups. It is generated within minority ethnic communities, to celebrate the culture of origin, and to dramatise the immigrant experience. It draws its audiences almost exclusively from the communities concerned. While such theatre is important, it can hardly be called *multi* cultural. It is also perceived by the mainstream theatre managements as irrelevant to their audiences, the majority of whom, by definition, are drawn from the dominant culture.

Yet the individuals who make up those mainstream audiences are surrounded in their daily lives by evidence of Australia's multicultural social mix. Aspects of their own culture - an obvious one being food - have already been changed by the presence and influence of other cultures. They have feelings, perceptions and fears about this presence and influence, but these are seldom acknowledged, let alone confronted, in the theatres they attend.

My primary objective in the **Hearts and Minds** project was therefore to explore attitudes of the dominant and the Vietnamese minority cultures towards
each other, using the intercultural dialectic as the basis of dramatic conflict, confronting mutual prejudices and stereotypes, and searching for points of contact and common ground to provide resolutions. My purpose was to create a play in which a marginal culture might be brought into the mainstream theatre; a play accessible and attractive both to mainstream audiences and to people from the Australian Vietnamese community; a play for a multicultural society.

This primary objective imposed certain constraints on the project which dictated other, concomitant objectives. If the play was to present a story of two cultures, this ought to be reflected not only in terms of themes and characters, but also in the theatrical, presentational aspects of the play, interfacing the Euro-American-dominated values of mainstream theatre with Vietnamese theatre traditions and practices. The play would also have to reflect the extent to which the Vietnamese language is spoken in the community; if this meant the play should be bilingual, a way would have to be found to make any passages in Vietnamese accessible to mainstream audiences, most members of which would be unlikely to understand the language.

A further objective of the project was to re-examine the Vietnam War, not merely as an historical phenomenon, but in terms of its continuing legacy of misfortune and its effect both on intercultural relationships within Australia and on Australia’s contemporary relationships with Asia. In this latter regard, the play would be something of a metaphor for the transitional nature of Australia’s outlook and attitudes towards Asia and Asians: from neo-colonialist racism towards aspiring partnership and alliance on equal terms.

Chapter 2 of this thesis reviews the historical development, particularly as expressed in dramatic literature, of the myths and symbols associated with the Australian quest for national identity, from the myths of the Australian Type, through the symbology of an Australian Way of Life, to government policy
initiatives in response to cultural diversity, attempting to characterise Australian-ness in terms of multiculturalism. It concludes that, while the old symbols may be outmoded, present interpretations of multiculturalist ideology are too narrow, static and contradictory to capture the imaginations of the majority of Australians - especially those of the dominant culture - as a formulation of national identity. A return to the fundamental ideals and principles of multiculturalism, based on curiosity, contact and creative conflict between cultures, is advocated. This presents a rich source of material for drama, and in turn allows drama once again to take a central place in recording and contributing to the development of an Australian national identity.

The other side of the intercultural coin is examined in Chapter 3, which is a case study of the portrayal of the Vietnamese in the dramatic literature both of Australia and of other nations having wide distribution and influence in Australia (especially American films). It finds that, with few exceptions, dramatic portrayals of the Vietnamese in the period since the 1960's have reinforced long-held derogatory Asian stereotypes, contrasting them with the affirmative - if outmoded - stereotypes of the mainstream Australian culture.

The *Hearts and Minds* project was a response to the problems discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Yet the experiences and influences that led to its conception encompass far more than reactions to existing policy and past practice. Some of the strands can be traced back some thirty years, to the impact of both the 1950's immigration boom and the Vietnam War on my outlook as a child growing up in Brisbane. Other subsequent choices and accidents also contributed to my interest both in intercultural issues and in Asia. Chapter 4 traces these origins, pulling together diverse strands of influence and documenting the personal milestones and signposts leading to the formal commencement of the project early in 1990.

With commencement came the necessity for extensive background
research, covering topics as wide-ranging as Vietnamese culture (language, social customs, national myths, history, and theatre traditions); the Vietnam War (historical factors, the way the war was waged and the nature of Australian involvement, the language and slang of the war, and the continuing legacy for those who fought there); and the Vietnamese immigrant experience (including the refugee experiences of the "boat people", the treatment of immigrants on arrival in Australia, their relationship to their homeland and their responses to their new environment). The scope of this research is described in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 documents the process of scripting the play - sifting and selecting from the research material, distilling the elements of story, character, and location, drafting and redrafting a script to achieve a result which would do justice to the intercultural themes and conflicts, and fulfil the objectives described earlier.

Chapter 7 describes the production process - design, technical preparation, publicity, casting, rehearsal and so on - preparing for the performance season of the play at Theatre South in May 1992. Chapter 8 evaluates the season itself - with particular attention to responses from critics, audiences, and other theatre professionals - and gives details of box office figures. Finally, Chapter 9 assesses the extent to which the Hearts and Minds project achieved its defined objectives and, in doing so, comprised an original and significant contribution to Australian theatre.
Australia is an immigrant society. Apart from the Aboriginal people, few families can trace their Australian lineage beyond four or five generations, none more than ten or a dozen. In the first century-and-a-half, most immigrants came from Britain and Ireland, although there were waves from other countries, especially during the mid-nineteenth-century gold rushes.

Since the end of the Second World War, however, Australia has received large numbers of permanent settlers from more than eighty countries - more immigrants, and more diverse, than any other nation except Israel (Collins 104). Nearly half the population are now either immigrants themselves or have immigrant parents, and one household in six speaks a language other than English at home (Vaughan 8). That Australia is a multicultural society is now taken for granted, with government policies formulated in an attempt to respond to the nation's cultural and ethnic diversity. By definition, however, government in an industrial democracy reflects the core, dominant or mainstream culture of its society. Multiculturalism, therefore, is both made possible and circumscribed by the mainstream culture in Australia.

Both these terms - "mainstream" and "multicultural" - are problematic. There is a strong tendency to define them in terms of ethnicity - the mainstream culture being "Anglo-Celtic", while the "multicultural" refers to other minority ethnic groupings. The Macquarie Dictionary, for example, defines "multicultural" as "pertaining to a society which embraces a number of minority cultures". The Adelaide Multicultural Artworkers Committee declares:
There are two problems with this view. The first is that it excludes Anglo-Celtic culture from the many cultures of multiculturalism, and implies by this exclusion that people from the mainstream culture are unlikely to be interested in the "common experiences and uniting factors binding people from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds". Far from demonstrating pluralism, it entrenches ethnic minorities on the margins of Australian society.

The second problem with equating culture with ethnicity is that it assumes that there is such a thing as clearly defined Anglo-Celtic ethnic grouping. Many people of Celtic descent object to being culturally linked with the English, but even assuming that a kind of hybrid Anglo-Celtic culture might have developed in early colonial times, such culture is only vestigial and therefore itself marginal in contemporary Australia.

In fact, the notion of mainstream in Australia can be linked directly with its historical quest for national identity. While this quest inevitably encompasses questions of ethnicity, they are only part of a wider canvass.

Nations, as Benedict Anderson has suggested, are "imagined communities" (15). The concept of nationhood is a construct of Western Industrialism, rising out of a need to suppress factional differences of race, religion, class and so on within a given geographic area, in the interests of economic gain. Nations are held together only by a perception of common interests, which usually coincide with the interests of the most powerful factions. As perceptions, they are very fragile in the face of change, as the balance of power among the factions and interests groups shifts over time.

Nonetheless, the quest for a national identity has been a major preoccupation in Australia for more than a century. Richard White describes it as an obsession (23). It has been defined and documented primarily in the fields of Arts and Letters (including journalism), with an important contribution from...
indigenous drama.

Louis Esson, who is usually seen as Australia's first significant playwright, was fond of saying that Captain Cook had only discovered the outline of the country; it was up to the artists and writers to discover the real Australia. (Williams *Popular Stage* vii)

In the present day it is necessary to add television producers and advertising executives to the list of influential makers and recorders of national images.

This "quest for Australia" has ranged widely, but has fallen generally into three major phases. The first of these, prevailing during the period from about the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, was the distillation of an "Australian Type". Under this construction, typical Australians were white men of British stock who could be sent anywhere to do anything, from shearing to soldiering - men who would give a good account of themselves in any company of the world ... fine-looking backblocks men with a certain freedom of bearing and suggestion of capability. (White 39)

Outback bushworkers, especially the gold-diggers and itinerant shearers, were romanticised by writers such as Henry Lawson, A. B. Paterson and others in the circle of *The Bulletin*, by the influential Heidelberg School of painters, and by such melodramatists as Marcus Clarke, Walter Cooper, George Darrell, Garnet Walch, Alfred Dampier, Edmund Duggan and Bert Bailey. The themes were taken up, albeit in a more critical and less celebratory fashion, by Louis Esson, Arthur Adams, Vance Palmer and others in the 1920's. They had the effect of establishing such Australians as a kind of British sub-culture, distinct but integral in the empire.

In fact, these "typical Australians" served the cause of empire as well as they served the cause of national identity.

Like the furhunter of Canada and the backwoodsman of the United States, they had been in the vanguard of white settlement of new frontiers: they had entered an alien landscape and made it profitable. (White 38)

Their mateship, self-confidence, generosity, restlessness and resourcefulness were qualities which provided Britain with "superior cannon fodder" (White 38)
in a series of empire wars. The colonial distinctness from the Mother culture was therefore kept within very narrow limits.

Of course, the failure to make the "Australian Type" truly distinct was not the only problem with this aspect of the quest for identity. It was highly exclusionist, as a way of keeping non-British immigrants - especially Asians - out, and had no direct relevance for women and Aborigines, or for the urban dwellers who even then made up the bulk of the population. It did, however, have important psychological meaning for the urban dwellers (particularly men), as a way of distinguishing industrial cities in Australia from those elsewhere - scratch an Australian city-dweller, it was implied, and find a bushman just beneath the surface. As such, it created a number of symbols, icons and myths which have proven highly adaptable, enduring into contemporary times. Today, for instance, Australian urban dwellers have the highest per capita ownership of four-wheel-drive vehicles in the world (Mackay). These vehicles are seldom driven out of the city, let alone off the made roads. Their significance is mostly symbolic - an affirmation to their owners that the bush is always accessible; a promise of escape.

The aftermath of World War 2 brought about a considerable reassessment of Australia's self-image. A narrow escape from invasion by the Japanese had made it clear that Britain would or could not rush to the defence of its colonial outposts to reciprocate the rush of Australians in defence of the Mother Country. In any case, Britain was pre-occupied with post-war reconstruction and the problems of Europe. If Australia was to remain safe from further territorial adventures from the north, it would need a new ally. There was one ready-made: America had saved Australia from the Japanese, and America led the world in economic development. Furthermore, it was America that now showed increasing strategic interest in the South Pacific region.

American popular culture - especially Hollywood movies - had already
exerted an increasing influence on the way Australians viewed themselves from the 1920's onward. The wide distribution of American films, against which a local fledgling film industry struggled and lost, was also a substantial contributing factor to the demise of a professional theatre. For the vast majority of Australians in this period, drama meant Hollywood, a fantasized world of sophisticated glamour. So although the post-war shift in national alliances required a new national image, the groundwork had already been done.

Such an image also needed to accommodate other new realities: rapid economic development and prosperity, consumerism, suburbanism, and a role for women. The catch-cry became "the Australian Way of Life". The old notions of national type could be both absorbed by and adapted to it, with the bush-worker giving way to the surf life-saver, and the open plains and campfires shrinking to faint shadows of themselves in suburban back yards and barbecues. This and the increasing emphasis on consumerism allowed a place - albeit still a subordinate one - for women.

The most successful Australian play of the post-war period, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is a remarkable documentation of the surrender of the Australian Type to the Australian Way of Life. The canecutters Barney and Roo epitomise the romanticised bush-worker - for Olive they are like kings or eagles. However her new friend Pearl, representing the new suburban respectability, is less impressed.

**PEARL:** Nobody could say it was a decent way of living. (13)

By the end of the play, conformity has triumphed, despite Olive's desperate attempts to deny it.

**ROO:** [lashing at her, hurting himself at the same time] Kill me then. But there's no more flying down out of the sun - no more eagles. [Going down on one knee and striking the floor with his hand] This is the dust we're in and we're gunna walk through it like everyone else for the rest of our lives! (93)

The Australian Way of Life became the dramatic milieu for many
playwrights to follow, including Peter Kenna, Alan Seymour, Hal Porter and Patrick White. They were mostly deeply critical of its strictures. Others such as Vance Palmer and Douglas Stewart still focussed on the myth of the Australian Type, attempting to revive it as preferable to what had replaced it. But they were unable to compete with the all-embracing mass of American cultural symbolism which nightly flooded Australian living rooms after the introduction of television in 1956. Nor could they compete with the Australian-made imitations that were soon to follow.

The Way of Life concept’s greatest strength was its adaptability. For instance when the Australian Government was unable to attract sufficient new British settlers in the drive to “populate or perish”, the Australian Way of Life was promoted to attract the large numbers of non-English-speaking (NES) immigrants needed to fill the large labour demand of post-war economic development (Lowenstein and Loh 8). The Way of Life was something to which these immigrants were expected to aspire, and which would be threatened if they did not. Assimilationist policies were adopted aggressively by the government, and reflected in literature such as John O’Grady’s popular novel of 1957, *They’re a Wierd Mob*.

There are far too many New Australians in this country who are still mentally living in their homelands, who mix with people of their own nationality, and try to retain their own language and customs ... Cut it out. There is no better way of life in the world than that of the Australian. (O’Grady 204)

The very concept that was used to attract NES immigrants could thus be used as a tool of discrimination against them. As a vague, undefined notion, it often was simply a formula for expressing a general prejudice against outsiders and a distaste for non-conformity, [by which] all migrants could be criticised for failing to adopt the "Australian way of life". It not only denied the possibility that the cultural traditions of migrants might enrich Australian life, but also denied the existence of different "ways of life" among Australians themselves. Cultural differences were an affront to a society which demanded social uniformity, if not equality. (White 45)

It was the theatre which was to provide a voice of partial dissent, in the form of
Richard Beynon’s play *The Shifting Heart*. First produced (with substantial commercial and critical success) in 1957 - the same year as the publication of *They’re a Wierd Mob* - Beynon’s play dealt sympathetically with a family of Italian immigrants facing racism and violence in an inner urban setting. At first acquaintance, it seems extraordinary that this “play compounded of hates and tragedy, arising out of an allegedly uncharitable Australian code of thinking and behaviour” (Rees 279) should have become so popular with Australian audiences. Yet closer reading reveals that, while confronting its audiences with their xenophobia, the bitter pill is sweetly coated with rough humour, much of it mildly racist. The Italian characters, for instance, speak a stereotyped “greengrocer” English, even when alone. Two of them,

‘Momma’ and ‘Poppa’ Bianchi are so-called after the soubriquets ‘Momma Macaroni’ and ‘Poppa Spagetti’ given them by a local shopkeeper. In referring to them by these names throughout the play Beynon is maintaining the racial stereotyping he is trying to expose. (Mitchell 35)

Furthermore, while the play is built around the issue of xenophobia, it avoids direct confrontation of the subject. The play’s major turning point, for instance, the offstage death of the Italian youth Gino, is caused by other Italians, not Anglo-Australians. The audience is thus excused from collective responsibility for the results of xenophobia, the blame for which is transferred to its victims. In the mouth of the major Anglo character, Clarry, it can even become an injunction for assimilation:

**CLARRY** 'Cos I’ll tell you who killed [Gino]. You did! Your mob! They can be bastards too. The bad in your own mob, that’s who killed him. Whadda you think you are, a race of angels? You’re the same as us; bad makes the mistakes, who pays? It’s the good, same as us. You hear? Just the same as us! (Beynon 59)

Of course, conformity and complaisance were not only demanded of the "new Australians”. Everyone was expected to knuckle under in return for the high material dividends of urban industrial consumerism and political stability. A person “who owns a house, a garden, a car and has a fair job is
rarely an extremist or a revolutionary" (Barcs 48).

As a concept, a "way of life" was more effective in defending the status quo than "the national character" or "the national type", which radicals had actually been associating with social change. (White 43)

There was also another price to pay. In closely mimicking the American Way of Life, the Australian Way of Life was presented as synonymous with Freedom. This had to be defended at all costs, particularly against the Threat of Communism (both internal and external). The internal communist bogey helped keep conservative federal governments in power in Australia for over twenty years. The external bogey, fueled by a long-held, colonial-inspired superiority complex with respect to Asia, embroiled Australia in America's greatest Cold War adventure, the Vietnam War.

Ironically, it was the Vietnam war and all it came to represent that would eventually lead to the erosion of the Australian Way of Life as a meaningful or even politically useful concept. Many Australians, especially the maturing post-war baby-boomers, looked to America but saw not a "way of life" but the growth of large and vocal sub-cultures such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Anti-War Movement. Applying this knowledge at home, they found the conformity of Australia untenable.

A new wave of Australian playwrights tackled these issues from the mid-1960's to the mid-1970's. They included John Romeril, Jack Hibberd, David Williamson, Dorothy Hewett, Alex Buzo, Ron Blair and many others. They railed against the straightjackets of conformity, and demolished or reworked the stereotype of the rugged, heroic male Australian Type. Their approach was largely negative, offering no new emblems of imagined community to replace the targets of their iconoclasm. Despite this, they were linked to what Gough Whitlam called the "new nationalism", a vague notion "related to a general pride in Australian achievement, particularly cultural achievement, and an increasing disquiet at the extent of foreign investment in Australia" (White 53).
Theatregoers, however, can take only so much negativity, especially when it concerns a matter as close to their hearts as their collective sense of national self. When the icons have been smashed, what next? The theatres that had led the new wave - La Mama and the Australian Performing Group in Melbourne, Jane Street and the Nimrod in Sydney - fragmented, disbanded, entered new phases of self-searching disquietude, or joined the mainstream. So, too did many of their artists. David Williamson became a celebrant - albeit a critical one - of the Australian Way of Life. Jack Hibberd left the theatre and retreated to poetry. So, to a large extent, did Dorothy Hewett. The dramatic output of Blair and Buzo slowed to a trickle. John Romeril joined the vanguard of a new movement in professional community theatre (of which there will be further discussion later in this chapter). A second wave of playwrights such as Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell and Ron Elisha searched for a kind of Australian internationalism. More women playwrights - among them Alma de Groen, Jennifer Compton and Mary Gage - gained attention, giving voice to the new wave of feminism.

The period of "new nationalism" also spawned the resurgence of an Australian film industry in the 1970's and 1980's. Like the new theatre, its early successful products - *My Brilliant Career* and *Breaker Morant*, for example - were iconoclastic, but it swiftly retreated to conservatism. So, too, it seems, did the audiences. The box-office hits of the 1980's - *Gallipoli*, *Phar Lap*, *The Man From Snowy River* and *Crocodile Dundee* - were all gleeful revivals of the white, ruggedly individualistic male iconography of earlier times. Not a suburb or an NES immigrant in sight, although foreigners - Egyptians and the British in *Gallipoli*, Americans in the others - were depicted as untrustworthy, incomprehensible, or both.

Drama on commercial television, in the meantime, was concentrating on the Australian Way of Life, which is hardly surprising given that its *raison d'être* is the advertizing of consumer products. The successful serials like
Neighbours and Home and Away depicted a closed world of all-Anglo suburbia, while A Country Practice managed to graft suburban conformity onto the erstwhile bastion of rugged individualism, the bush. But rugged individuals also invaded the cities, with a string of cops-and-robbers series combining two icons - rugged white males giving their all to protect the sacred Way of Life from criminal subversion. There were never any NES cops, though they occasionally appeared as criminals with negatively stereotyped characterisation.

This return to the old national symbols was not a reflection of the reality of the 1980's - a reality of increasing internationalization of economic activity in which the concept of nationhood was coming under increasing challenge all over the world. This was most obvious in the polarizing post-Communist ructions of eastern Europe, but there were symptoms even in nations having an outward semblance of stability, such as Australia. In these cases, the fragility was demonstrated not by polarization but by fragmentation, in which politics become increasingly meaningless, as the lack of real power of [national] parliaments can no longer be concealed. Since the real decisions are made in the stock exchanges of Tokyo, London and New York, and in the international corporate bureaucracies, why bother anyway? The result is hopelessness, hedonism and retreat into the private sphere. Protest takes the form of life-styles and sub-culture pressure groups, and can easily be co-opted by the leisure industries. Increasing drug and alcohol addiction, fundamentalist religion, mental illness and violence are products of the real powerlessness of the social being. (Castles et al. 139-140)

In this context, the popularity of the old myths seems to have manifested a desire for escapism; nostalgia for an earlier Australia perceived to be simpler, cleaner, less diverse and therefore more certain.

In fact, cultural diversity was increasing, not diminishing, as the aftermath of the Vietnam War brought Asians to Australia in large numbers for the first time, as well as the dispossessed from other trouble spots like the Middle East. Furthermore, while markets for Australian primary products in Europe and America were dwindling in the face of increasing economic internationalism, a number of Asian countries were becoming major economic
forces. They were looking to Australia for markets, but also offering new markets for Australia. Australians had to take stock of its "Anglo-gripped, Euro-centric, West-skewed view of the world" in which politics "sided with history and against geography, even to the detriment of economics" (Broinowski 205, 198).

So while many Australians took refuge in the iconography of the past, others cast about for a new identity, a new image, a new cloud on which to build the imaginary castle of nationhood. The chosen cloud was multiculturalism, which was first mooted in the early 1970's and gained vogue in the 1980's. Under its banner, Australian governments could offer immigrants not only full citizenship rights (including access to most areas of institutional support including the social security, health and education system), but also, as the proportion of immigrants from non-European backgrounds increased, ease the pressure for assimilation and devise programs of education in English as a second language, interpreter services in government departments, and other schemes to improve equity and participation and to encourage cultural maintenance by people from ethnic minorities.

Multiculturalism was officially enshrined as mainstream policy for the first time in 1989 in the Commonwealth Government's *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* which defined it as "a policy for managing the consequences of cultural diversity in the interests of the individual and of society as a whole" (69). This policy, which remains extant at the time of writing this thesis, is built on three principles:

- Cultural Identity: the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion;

- Social Justice: the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth; and,

- Economic Efficiency: the need to maintain, develop and use effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background. (69)
The "carefully defined limits" defined in the National Agenda insist that multicultural policies
- are based upon the premise that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests and future, first and foremost;
- require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society - the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equality, Parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and equality of the sexes; and
- impose obligations as well as conferring rights: the right to express one's own culture and beliefs involves a reciprocal responsibility to accept the right of others to express their views and values. (70)

The Commonwealth Government has also stated that it "supports the cultural rights of all Australians and recognises that cultural diversity enriches our nation" (DASETT 19). In thus acknowledging cultural diversity as a permanent and continuing feature of Australian society, multiculturalism seems to be a radical and progressive departure from the conformist stereotypes of Australian Type and Australian Way of Life.

Yet there remains a strong perception among members of the minority cultures that multiculturalism is a token acceptance of their exotic and colourful aspects - "something pretty that happens on Sunday afternoon" (Di Guglielmo 22) - or a "...tarted up version of the assimilation and integration schemes of the past" (Krausmann 33), concerned only with such cultural diversity as can be easily accommodated in a limited space allowed by a monocultural and monolithic Australian mainstream. It is seen to

neglect the wider structural context limiting that diversity, to trivialize the content of culture, to want to conserve tradition uncritically, to patronize other cultures by fostering for others practices one might not wish upon oneself, and overwhelmingly to assume that culture and traditionalism are equivalent and that cultural phenomena of this order are principally the preserve of minorities and recent immigrants. (Kalantzis et al. 193-194)

Certainly, multiculturalism has made little impact on Australian drama. Mainstream television has taken a few small steps, mostly in the ABC which in
1991 established a Multicultural Unit. Popular ABC drama series such as GP, Police Rescue and Phoenix now include major characters of NES background, and while at present their paucity and treatment suggests tokenism, it is at least a sign of change. The depiction of Asians in the ABC series Embassy; however, has prompted justifiably hostile responses from Asian governments, especially that of Malaysia, for its stereotyped images of Asian people and governments.

Commercial television has virtually ignored the issue of cultural diversity in Australia. The one major exception, Acropolis Now; is a blatantly racist projection of Greek Australians, in the same vein as the character of Con the Fruiterer in The Comedy Company.

SBS Television has kept ethnic minorities in touch with their homeland cultures, but has never had the budgets to create substantial original drama about the problems of maintaining or adapting those cultures in Australia. Reception of its broadcast on the UHF band is technically more difficult than on the VHF band used by the other television broadcasters - a factor both reflecting and contributing to its marginal status. A substantial proportion of regular SBS viewers is comprised not of NES-background immigrant households, but of well-educated upper-middle-class Anglos whose interest is more internationalist than multiculturalist (Sammers).

More has been achieved in film in recent times, with complex depictions of Asians in such films as Blood Oath and Turtle Beach (the latter again sparking hostile reactions from the Malaysian government, although in this case with less justification). Stereotyping of Greeks as gangsters and con-men nonetheless proved a box-office winner in Death in Brunswick.

The theatre has not fared much better, despite the efforts of the professional community theatre movement. The community theatres, many of which attempted to give a dramatic voice to ethnic minorities, experienced a minor boom in the early 1980's, encouraged by increasing subsidy levels from
arts bureaucracies. Indeed, as real levels of arts subvention diminished through the decade, the relative amount apportioned to community arts, and particularly to so-called multicultural arts (that is, arts for minority ethnic communities), increased. Community theatre companies occasionally became fleetingly fashionable with audiences wider than their originating communities, such as with Pat Cranney and Sonja Sedmak's *Nuovo Paese/New Country* which was performed in 1984 by the Sydney-based Federation of Italian Migrant Workers and Families. However the nature of community theatre work - widely inconsistent in content and quality, frequently nomadic, and seldom performed in recognized theatre buildings - made it impossible to sustain these audiences, let alone develop any standards by which to measure their work. Among mainstream audiences they have seldom gained a status above trendiness; among theatre workers they have mostly been seen as a sideshow, at best a stepping stone towards work in the "real" (mainstream) theatre.

Meanwhile, the mainstream theatre itself has become more conservative, in spirit with the times perhaps, but also in response to shrinking government subvention and the need to find the vast bulk of income from the box-office.

A good 50% of the repertoire of Australian mainstream theatres is still made up of imported British plays, often dressed up in indifferent local productions, while most of the remainder consist of American plays, European (including British) classics, and contemporary, mostly Anglo-Celtic, Australian plays. Productions of contemporary non-English-language plays translated into English tend to be an exception, and then more often than not the translation is a British one. (Mitchell 43)

It is increasingly difficult even for new "Anglo-Celtic" Australian plays to gain a foothold in the mainstream theatre, unless they are written by established writers. The Australian National Playwrights' Centre, the major organization devoted to developing new plays and playwrights, is under constant threat of funding cuts and appears to be growing more conservative both in the selection of plays for development and in the structure of its annual workshop conference. Sydney Theatre Company, the country's largest theatre producer,
currently exercises a policy of non-acceptance of unsolicited playscripts by writers not included on its list of 150 "recognized" playwrights.

Yet although mainstream audiences, as mentioned in Chapter 1, live constantly with evidence of cultural diversity in Australian society and can be assumed to have feelings, perceptions and fears about it, this is seldom reflected in the theatre they attend. It may be that they prefer that the theatre remains primarily an avenue of escape, or if they must be made to confront serious issues, to do so at one remove through the voice and experience of others. There can, however, be little "imagined community" in a second-hand culture.

Yet if our theatres and our arts in general have not grasped multiculturalism as the way forward, this is not necessarily or entirely their own fault. It may also reflect the problematic nature of multiculturalism as a national ideology: the difficulty in resolving the tension between ethnic pluralism and the cohesiveness of society as a whole.

How can a nation be defined, if not in terms of ... shared history, traditions, culture and language? How are core values and acceptable behavioural forms to be laid down? (Castles et al. 130)

Multiculturalism in much of its present application - as, for instance, in the government policy stated in the National Agenda - runs the risk of undermining the commonality of interest based on geography and/or concerns which override factional interests, thus diminishing the possibility of mature nationhood in Australia. Applied cynically, it can appear to be a patronizing gesture to appease minority interest groups while disguising structural inequalities (Castles et al. 183). Even the policies set out in the National Agenda carry an implicit assumption that conflict between minority cultures, or between the minorities and the dominant Anglo culture, is likely to be socially disruptive and so should be avoided by minimizing all but superficial contact.

This in turn can lead to the kind of madness which currently threatens arts communities in Canada (another multicultural society), and which is
incipient in similar circles in Australia. It concerns the issue of cultural appropriation. The flagship arts bureaucracy in Canada, the Canada Council, 

has seemed to align itself with those who seek to impose on Canadian creators restrictive rules regarding what is referred to as "cultural appropriation" ... [claiming] that groups hold copyright, as it were, on their lives, their languages, their customs, their beliefs, and that no others may "appropriate" these. (Jack Grey)

Such a doctrine, no matter how sincere, worthy and well-meaning the intentions of those who adopt it, is a severe restriction on freedom of speech and artistic expression. Applied retrospectively, it would 

have denied almost all cultural development, enrichment, and broadening of expression and understanding the world has known. It would ghettoize the full life of all peoples. It would deny to artists the active exercise of the very centre of their activity, their imagination ... [the] extraordinary capacity of human beings to explore what they do not "know" but can only imagine, to examine the unimaginable, to test in expression what might well in practice as easily destroy as enhance us ... (Jack Grey)

In short, there is a danger that ill-conceived multiculturalist practice could lead to a new form of apartheid: to cultural impoverishment rather than enrichment. This is because, while institutionalizing cultural differences, the present policies ignore the constructive potential of curiosity, contact and even conflict between the many cultures in a diverse modern society. Indeed, as stated above, the National Agenda seems worded in such a way as to discourage such intercultural synergy.

If multiculturalism is to become an enduring, widely supported national ideology in Australia, it must not only encompass the most progressive ideals of current policy - respect for difference, based on principles of cultural self-determination and cosmopolitan identity - but must also encourage contact, debate, and creative non-violent conflict both among the minority cultures and, more importantly, between minorities and the dominant culture. If this can be achieved, multiculturalism really might enrich our nation, bringing the margins and the mainstream together, engaging them directly in the conceptualization of Australian nationhood, a critique of old myths and symbols,
and perhaps the forging new ones more appropriate to a diverse society.

In the arts, and especially on stage and screen, this is rich territory. Conflict is the stuff of drama, and intercultural conflict provides an opportunity for the mainstream theatres to be revitalised by larding the escapism and the hand-me-downs from more powerful nations with material of more immediate relevance to the lives of their audiences. Those audiences, in turn, would be more likely to include the growing numbers of Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Furthermore, mainstream theatres could tap the wider sources of creative talent currently working in marginal areas such as community theatre.

There are some small but encouraging signs of change towards this more progressive application of multiculturalism in Australian mainstream drama. The Asia/Pacific focus of the 1992 National Playwrights' Conference is a case in point, as is the Australia Council's recent policy shift towards encouraging artistic contact with Asia. Progressive mainstream theatres such as Sydney's Belvoir Street have staged such intercultural productions as Mike Leigh's Greek Tragedy, Noel Janaczewski's History of Water was showcased by Sydney Theatre Company's "New Stages" developmental wing. Hearts and Minds was intended to contribute to this process of change.

However as this chapter has demonstrated, past and present mainstream drama, when dealing with cultural diversity at all, has tended on the whole to confirm the old stereotypes of both the minority and the dominant cultures. Repudiating such stereotypes is made more difficult by the quantity of imported cultural artefact - especially American film and television - to which Australians are exposed. The next chapter presents a detailed case study of such cultural stereotyping, examining the way in which the Vietnamese people and their culture have fared in twenty-five years of portrayal on the stages and screens of Australia.
"I used to see Vietnam as a war rather than as a country." So said expatriate Australian journalist John Pilger in 1978 (Cohen 14). He was not alone in this attitude: "most Westerners ... know Vietnam through the one-dimensional and unavoidably distorted lens of a televised war" (Cohen 14). Indeed, for the whole post-conflict generation now reaching mature adulthood, the lens has mostly not been journalistic but dramatic, with the vast majority of these refractions coming from Hollywood. The Australian and British film industries have contributed their own important perspectives, but in relatively small measure. Given the global dominance of American cinematic production and distribution, Hollywood has arguably been the most potent determinant of perceptions of Vietnam since the withdrawal of foreign troops in the early 1970's, not only by direct experience, but by the way in which they have influenced Australian film-makers who have tackled the subject. In this chapter I will therefore first examine the discourses of Hollywood and other wide-distribution mainstream film and television before canvassing Australian efforts on screen and stage. I will not attempt to canvass all dramatic depictions of the war, but will focus on depictions of Vietnam and the Vietnamese in the range of prejudicial stereotypes suggested by this chapter's title.

Hollywood has a long and proud history of making films about war. However, when it came to Vietnam,

American culture did not have any mythical narratives and visual symbols to explain why US forces had not achieved victory. There was no popular cultural archetype to account for successful Vietnamese resistance to foreign invaders... (Gibson 20)

Hollywood's portrayal of Vietnam and the Vietnamese has therefore been
dominated by neocolonialist interpretations which attempt to revise the history of the war to make the American involvement appear less incompetent, confused and traumatic, and more justifiable.

According to Frantz Fanon, the salient feature of colonialist and neocolonialist art is that the dominant culture marginalises the colonised people, showing them as inferiors or threats, or consigning them to the fringes of historiography where they either become invisible or are only acknowledged as aliens (17-25). This is how

Hollywood created the myth of the Wild West, which was harmless enough unless you happened to be an American Indian; and how the Second World War and the Korean War were absorbed into... folklore, which was harmless enough unless you happened to be a dumb Kraut or an unspeakable Nip or a commie chink. (Pilger, Heroes 268-269)

Might was right, and "each victory recharged the culture and justified expansion" (Gibson 14). Hollywood continued this tradition in its depictions of Vietnam, revising the conflict to align more happily with a deeply held American myth which Slotkin calls "regeneration through violence" (7).

It is significant that, in contrast with Hollywood's solid output of World War 2 and Korean War films made during those conflicts, only one major Vietnam War was made while the war was still being waged - John Wayne's The Green Berets (1968). This may have been partly due to the fact that the subject matter, already receiving saturation coverage on the world's television screens, was believed to lack dramatic appeal. Moreover, the McCarthy purge of Hollywood's liberal elements in the previous decade may have also meant that no-one was either inclined or courageous enough to tackle such a contentious issue except as propaganda. The Green Berets is an inane mixture of Cavalry Western and World War 2 pot-boiler set in "a fantasy place designated as 'Vietnam'" (Novelli 109). It was transparently propagandist even at the time, reviled by critics with such descriptions as "...a cliche-ridden throwback ... its artifice readily exposed by the nightly actuality of TV news" (Novelli 116).
Yet *The Green Berets* is one of very few Hollywood films to portray any Vietnamese people in a positive light, and the only one, as far as I can discern, which shows the South Vietnamese military as genuine allies. To achieve this, however, the film gives the patently false impression that the war was waged on conventional lines, with a discernible front across which the honourable, courageous, democratic and united South Vietnamese face the evil, savage, brutal Northerners. No distinction is made between the regular North Vietnamese Army and the indigenous southern guerillas of the National Liberation Front (NLF) - dubbed the Viet Cong (VC) by the Americans and their allies. In *The Green Berets* all the enemy are simply Communists, which is sufficient both to explain their brutality and savagery and to justify the presence of the clean-cut, decent, sober, Americans.

Following the withdrawal of allied troops from Vietnam, Hollywood focussed for a time on the problems of returning veterans, in such films as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Coming Home* (1978). Set entirely in America, these do not depict the Vietnamese at all. However, with the discrediting of Nixon, the abolition of conscription and the pardon of draft resisters, came a small crop of anti-involvement films such as *Go Tell The Spartans* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). America, reeling from international humiliation, was looking for scapegoats. In repudiating the war, these films abandoned all pretence of depicting the South Vietnamese as honourable allies.

In *Spartans* the first South Vietnamese soldier we see is a sergeant... torturing a suspected VC (in *Berets* only the VC and NVA do such things). There is also ... [a South Vietnamese] ... Colonel ... so lazy and so corrupt that he has to be bribed to provide artillery support ... (Novelli 120)

Hollywood also found that the Western-cum-war genre that had previously served it so well was no longer adequate. In *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Coppola made a quest film, borrowing from Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* not only the basic story but also the thematic concerns of the impact of imperialism...
on the culture of the colonising country. The adaptation is brilliantly achieved in its indictment of the American adventure in Vietnam as a grotesque debacle. Towards the end, however, the film moves "beyond a critique of imperialism to a realm of metaphysical abstraction" (Novelli 121). In its discourse on the morality of terror, its treatment of the Vietnamese is at best ambivalent.

While Francis Coppola knows the war well from the American side, he does not fully grasp it from the side of the Vietnamese and Indochinese peoples. Hence the feeling of something unreal exuding from the whole of the second part of the film: Frazer's Golden Bough, Kurtz's favourite book, may depict the life of certain tribes at some given epoch but not that of the men living in the mountains of Indochina at a time when the US special forces were trying to enrol them in the service of Washington. (Nguyen 214)

Typical of this misrepresentation is the film's claim that the NLF hacked arms off children whom Americans had inoculated against polio. This has no evidential basis: the Vietnamese are thus portrayed as ruthless monsters, while the even more monstrous behaviour of the renegade Colonel Kurtz is excused on the grounds of his insanity and the American military's efforts to stop him. Therefore despite its anti-imperialist stance, *Apocalypse Now* "is unable to penetrate sufficiently into the heart of the experience to rescue the Vietnamese from neocolonialist stereotypes ..." (Novelli 121).

The year of *Apocalypse Now* also saw the release of the first of the revisionist Hollywood Vietnam films. Micheal Cimino's *The Deerhunter* was to

...reincarnate the triumphant ... Caucasian warrior and present... [the Vietnamese]... as sub-human... barbarians and idiots. The American heroes managed to wipe out a houseful of barbarians, M-16s rotating from their lean hips...

The film's dramatic pitch was reached during recurring orgiastic scenes in which the American heroes were forced to play Russian roulette by their Vietnamese captors. (Pilger *Heroes* 268, 269)

As with the arm-hacking in *Apocalypse Now* there is no evidential basis for use by the NLF of Russian roulette as an instrument of torture. Indeed, there is strong evidence that it was invented by Cimino after a less dramatic script was rejected by backers (Pilger, *Heroes* 269). Yet the film was showered with Oscars
Hollywood revisionism gained momentum with the arrival of President Reagan in the White House, and his reinvigoration of the Cold War. A series of films about heroic rescues in Vietnam was released in the first half of the 1980's - *Missing in Action, Uncommon Valour*, and the most popular and profitable, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. In the latter, Silvester Stallone is Johnny Rambo, a musclebound psychopath who single-handedly rescues a handful of missing American servicemen from the brutal bamboo cages of their Vietnamese captors and their ruthless Russian masters. He has clear mythological links to the lone gunslinger of the Hollywood Western. Like his cowboy counterpart, Rambo moves outside the law to take on the enemy on his own terms, and win at any cost. Like the Western gunslinger, Rambo is betrayed by elements of the society that hired him. And also like the gunfighter, the very violence of the method by which he makes the world safe means there is no place for him in that world. The cowboy rides off into the sunset and another lawless frontier further west: Rambo goes, in *Rambo III*, to fight more Russians in Afghanistan.

*Rambo II* also represents a reclamation of the classic Hollywood war film, partly achieved through the depiction of the Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese guards wear uniforms and tropical helmets that give them a typical Japanese look, and their Russian commanders have blue eyes, blondish-grey hair, and talk with a distinctly German accent. Such iconography evokes the familiar ideological constellation of Second World War movies, and ... puts Rambo in the heroic tradition of John Wayne and Audie Murphy. Rambo's Vietnamese enemies even display certain typical Japanese vices (as they were 'portrayed' in war movies), such as lechery and unmanly subservience to their (Russian) Commanders. (Wimmer 187-188)

Despite being set more than a decade after American withdrawal from Vietnam, the film persistently implies that the war continues. The Vietnamese are referred to as "the enemy". The only Vietnamese in the foreground of the film is Rambo's in-country contact, Co, a beautiful female guerilla who is supposed to help him on his mission. But she is not really fighting for her country's
freedom - all she wants is to go to America. Later, after helping Rambo escape from capture, she extracts a promise from him to take her home with him. The implication is that non-Communist Vietnamese don't want to be Vietnamese at all - they'd rather be American. As it happens, she never gets there. She's ambushed and shot. This is made acceptable in the discourse of the film because she poses as a prostitute to rescue Rambo from his captors. Morally, therefore, she is not a suitable partner for the all-American hero. She is expendable "yellow satin", conforming to the traditional stereotypes of Orientalism - the "European vision of all Eastern peoples as exotic, remote, inferior, and subject to the political, military, economic, cultural and sexual dominance of the West" (Broinowski 2).

With the thawing of the Cold War in the late 1980's came a new crop of movies in a more soul-searching vein. Oliver Stone's multi-Oscared *Platoon* hinges on a My Lai-type atrocity carried out by American soldiers after two popular members of their platoon have been killed. Temporarily leaderless and stricken with grief and anger, they raid a nearby village, find some ambiguous evidence of Viet Cong influence, and go on a rampage. Two civilians are killed without any effort to determine their guilt or innocence, simply because they cannot understand the Americans' orders. Their incomprehension is translated as stupidity or wilful defiance. In fact, one of them dies because he has buck teeth which an American soldier chooses to believe shows that the Vietnamese man is laughing at him. A child is raped, and the whole village is burned to the ground. At this point the sergeant returns and prevents further destruction. The platoon then helps evacuate the Vietnamese from the ruins, closing this sequence with a wide shot of the soldiers carrying the grateful children away from the burning village.

The scene is elegiac and self-congratulatory, affirming the essential innocence and humanity of the occupying American military force... Ideology is reproduced as a unity without contradiction... However... a candy bar or a kind word are hardly adequate reparations for the... destruction of a village (or nation), its people and its
Platoon is unquestionably an anti-involvement film. But its intimately emotional, psychological approach proves an inadequate solution to the larger question of America’s guilt. It ignores the issue of political and military responsibility altogether. Above all, by dwelling, like many other veterans’ accounts, on America’s lost innocence, the film, like them, pays strikingly little attention to the far greater suffering of the Vietnamese, including those for whose freedom the United States ostensibly fought. (Porteous 158)

Platoon seems to suggest that the difference between Vietnam and other American wars was that it “created conditions for the darker, sadistic side of ... [the soldiers’] ... natures to emerge...” (Klein 13). For lack of any discourse to the contrary in the film, the blame for this is placed by implication on the country and its people.

Oliver Stone’s second Vietnam film, Born on the Fourth of July (1989), another war-is-hell treatment, breaks new ground for Hollywood by at least acknowledging the existence of a domestic protest movement, even if its depiction of that movement is limited to protesting veterans. However, not surprisingly its portrayal of the Vietnamese is similar to that in Platoon. They may be shown as victims, but they are directly associated with the cause of the confusion, distress and anger felt by the sympathetic American hero, so the viewer is made to feel they somehow deserve their suffering.

In the Robin Williams vehicle Good Morning Vietnam, the rebellious Armed Forces Radio disk jockey Adrian Kronauer becomes romantically obsessed with a beautiful young Vietnamese woman - the "yellow satin" syndrome again. Ignoring the warnings of a colleague that there are too many cultural barriers to such a relationship, Kronauer attempts to woo the woman by taking over the class in which she is learning English. He throw away the text book and insists on teaching the colloquial American. Although the students in the class range widely in age, they are all childishly grateful for their new teacher’s humorously packaged wisdom. When an older student expresses a Buddhist
response to a violent hypothetical posed by Kronauer, the rest of the class laugh. The implication is that their own culture is quaintly childish and inferior. When they grow up, they want to be Americans.

Later, Kronauer arranges to meet the woman at a market, only to find that she turns up with a posse of chaperones. Kronauer is at first curtly condescending about this arrangement, then relents and pays for all the group's purchases - the kind word and candy bar of Platoon in another guise. Then he befriends the woman's brother as a means of gaining access to her. This proves his undoing, because the brother turns out to be working secretly for the Viet Cong. Kronauer's superiors use the relationship to rid themselves of their troublesome disk jockey. Feeling betrayed, Kronauer confronts the brother, only to be told that he wouldn't understand. The film attempts no analysis of Kronauer's own complicity in the circumstances of the betrayal. Instead, he reasserts his sense of superiority by teaching baseball - that quintessential American sport - to his devoted English class.

The only Hollywood film so far to break the stereotype is Casualties of War (1989). Like Platoon, it shows American soldiers committing an atrocity - the abduction and gang rape and murder of an innocent Vietnamese woman - in response to the death of their buddies. Unlike Platoon, however, the main character in Casualties not only refuses to take part in the atrocity, but afterwards reports it to the authorities. Immense pressure is put on him to back down, but at great personal cost he maintains the courage of convictions. The film is also the only one so far to acknowledge the post-war presence of Vietnamese immigrants in America - it is framed as a flashback brought on when, while travelling on the subway, the central character sees a woman who reminds him of the victim in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, Casualties of War did poorly at the box office and received no Oscars.

Perhaps the most damning Vietnam movie yet made is not a Hollywood
product at all, but a British film. Among its many achievements, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* manages to overthrow the stereotypes, despite the fact that we only see the Vietnamese in close-up twice in the entire film. Both of these situations involve women. In the first, we see naive American Marines duped by a whore and her pimp. In the second, a group of Marines is pinned down by a sniper during the Tet battle for Hue. Four are killed, and fanatically disciplined squad - shown being brutally moulded in boot camp early in the film - rapidly disintegrates in panic and recrimination.

When the lone sniper is revealed to be a Vietnamese woman the ideological mould of the conventional combat film is shattered. The bravest and most skilful representative of the other side is... a woman. She thus appropriates the male warrior role of the Marines... (Klein 15)

In both encounters the "yellow satin" syndrome is inverted, while the myth of regeneration through violence is shown to be meaningless in the Vietnam context. *Full Metal Jacket* was panned by most American critics, and had nowhere near the box-office success of *Rambo* or even *Platoon*.

Along with Hollywood feature films, Australian audiences have been presented with two long-running American television series on the subject of the Vietnam War. One is *Tour of Duty* (1986-87) - a revisionist reformatting of old World War 2 formulae in a jungle setting. The Americans are rugged, individualistic heroes, and the Vietnamese are brutal, cunning, evil sub-humans. The confused complexity of the Vietnam conflict is completely ignored. Viewed in isolation, *Tour of Duty* would probably give audiences the impression that America had won the war.

By contrast, *China Beach* (1987-89) breaks a number of conventions. Superficially an attempt to reformat the successful Korean War series *M.A.S.H.* in a Vietnam setting, *China Beach* focusses primarily on women - a nurse, some Red Cross volunteers, a hooker, an entertainer and a journalist - associated with an American in-country hospital, convalescence and troop recreation facility.
With ironic use of period music and excursions away from realism into semi-expressionism, the series creates an authentic ambience and captures much of the confusion, bizarreness and futility of the conflict. Vietnamese are seldom shown, however, despite the fact that American bases made extensive use of Vietnamese labour. Even in their off-duty hours, the women interact almost exclusively with each other or with American soldiers. The broadest departure from this is an affair between the central nurse character McMurphy and a French plantation owner. Very occasionally, Vietnamese soldiers are shown as patients under McMurphy's care, but they are never developed as complex characters or allowed to express a Vietnamese view of the war.

Overwhelmingly, then, American screen interpretations of the Vietnam War follow the pattern of neocolonialist marginalization described earlier in this chapter. With few exceptions

the angst of the invader is celebrated ad nauseum while the Vietnamese flit across the screen as stick figures of no consequence, or as monsters, or as child-like objects of patronising sentiment. (Pilger, Age)

The influence in Australia of these American depictions of the Vietnamese can scarcely be underestimated, for they have been seen by large numbers of Australians who, by contrast, have had little opportunity to see equivalent productions interpreted though their own national experience.

The local film industry has produced only three major dramatic essays on the subject of the Vietnam War. These, like their American counterparts, have tried to mould their central soldier characters to the national Type - in this case, to the digger tradition of social iconoclasm, loyalty to mates, hostility to officers and allies, and cynicism about the motives of politicians.

In *The Odd Angry Shot* (1979), as the title implies, the soldiers do very little fighting, but spend most of their time gambling, drinking, whoring, playing practical jokes and squabbling among themselves. When they do go on patrol, the Vietnamese enemy are mere black-clad shadows in the jungle. The
only other Vietnamese to appear are two-dimensional villains - a Vung Tau whore and a street-kid who cons a couple of American soldiers out of their leave pay. In the stereotyping stakes, however, *The Odd Angry Shot* can hardly be beaten for its description of Vietnam itself as a "tossed-up, fucked-up never-come-down-land."

The other major Australian screen treatments of the war - Kennedy-Miller's *Vietnam* and Simpson-LeMesurier's *Sword of Honour* - are both mini-series which appeared in 1987. In many respects they cover similar ground - a "route of redemptive loss and reintegration via the varied experiences of the Vietnam War" (Doyle 132). Unlike their American counterparts, they acknowledge the existence of a protest movement at home, and *Vietnam* places the war in a larger political context. Both films also have Vietnamese character development of some complexity, including love affairs between the Australian heroes and Vietnamese women.

In *Sword of Honour*, the hero, Tony Lawrence, takes refuge in this love affair when unable to face changed attitudes in Australia (as represented by the political radicalisation of his Australian girlfriend). He flees to Thailand, and marries his Vietnamese refugee lover who bears his child. This Vietnamese wife dies, however, enabling a reconciliation with his estranged Australian girlfriend. The film thus manifests of what Alison Broinowski has called (after Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*) the Butterfly Phenomenon, in which an Eastern woman may be delightful [to a Western man], but she cannot become a Western wife, and her child is a half-breed. After her day in the sun with her lover, [she] ... will pay the price of pleasure: her wings will fade, and she will perish. She is a fragile art object, but also a cheap, replaceable commodity. (106)

(The Butterfly Phenomenon is a by-product of the Orientalist tradition referred to earlier in this chapter. Broinowski's implied criticism of the original is perhaps a little harsh - after all, Puccini's Cho-Cho-San is a sympathetic central character in a tragedy which is far more sympathetic to her than to her
American lover Pinkerton.) However *Sword of Honour* differs from the Puccini by allowing the mixed-race child to live, "confirming a hopeful reconciliation of the disputing factions within Australian society ... allegorically welded by the presence of the Asian son" (Doyle 134).

*Vietnam* departs far further from the stereotypes. The love affair between the hero, Phil, and a Vietnamese woman, Lien, develops out of genuine attraction rather than on the rebound from rejection by lovers of their own races, as happens in *Sword of Honour*. Furthermore, Phil is eventually spurned by Lien – an inversion of the Butterfly Phenomenon which has Phil signing on for a second tour of duty in an effort to understand her betrayal. His quest eventually brings him to face the brutal truth that she has joined the Viet Cong, suppressing her love for him to fight against what he represents. She later dies in battle, but this is no device to allow Phil to reconcile with an Australian girlfriend. Rather, it leaves Phil in an anguish which leads to stress disorders on return to Australia. This strand of the complex *Vietnam* storyline has no parallel in American cinema or in other Australian efforts.

However, in another intercultural relationship in *Vietnam* between Phil's mate Laurie and Lien's friend Le, the love is allowed to grow further. Le eventually immigrates to Australia to live with Laurie. Yet as with Phil and Lien their love remains unconsummated, though for different reasons – Laurie's war wounds have emasculated him, and Le, a rape atrocity victim, is sexually wounded as well. There will be no children. So while, at the symbolic level, both *Sword of Honour* and *Vietnam* "suggest that the reshaping of the national identity has been forged via an incursion into an Asian setting" (Doyle 134), *Vietnam* appears to be pessimistic about the potential of relations between European Australians and Vietnamese, because of the wounds received by all involved in the war.

A further recent Australian screen offering, dealing not with the war but
its aftermath of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees, is the min-series *Which Way Home* (1991). It tells the story of an American nurse who, in the words of Barbara Toner, "saved the orphans and didn't give up even though she had to battle the jungle, the Khmer Rouge, pirates, unfriendly governments, [and] cyclones ... a heroine so intrepid she could cover mighty distances on foot in a single scene without a blister, a bead of perspiration, or a map" (46). The mini-series blames the refugee problem squarely on the present Vietnamese regime, and implies that only altruistic (or paternalistic) Americans and Australians have the heart to do anything about it. "The only good Asians in *Which Way Home* are refugees or dead" (Toner).

The presence of Vietnamese immigrants is a central element of the recent film *Romper Stomper* (1992), which presents a view of Australia in which Asian immigrants have to all intents and purposes taken over, relegating the Anglos to minority status. The film's central characters are the members of a gang of neo-Nazi skinhead thugs who wage a brutally violent war against the local Asians, especially the Vietnamese. Despite their horrific methods and their blatant racism, the skinheads are portrayed a complex and, in many ways, sympathetic or at least morbidly attractive. There is no attempt made to balance this with complex, sympathetic portrayal of the Asians. The skinheads thus take on the status of underdog, and their methods are subtly condoned as understandable if not actually justified.

Despite the steady flow of screen offerings dealing with Vietnam and the Vietnamese, few stage plays have tackled the issue directly. To the best of my knowledge, no American plays on the subject have been given mainstage performances in Australia, although David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* (1980) was given a high quality amateur production at Sydney's New Theatre. *Sticks and Bones* is a strongly anti-involvement play, focussing on the disintegration of American values (especially the Family) in the post-Vietnam period. There are
no Vietnamese characters.

The stage show with the highest international profile, the musical Miss Saigon (written by two Frenchmen and premiered in Britain), has yet to be seen in Australia. In any case, Miss Saigon is a direct reformatting of the story of Puccini’s Butterfly, with the setting transposed to Vietnam instead of Japan. It is beset with all the Orientalist trappings of the original.

There have, however, been a number of Australian plays depicting Vietnamese characters. As early as 1967, Mona Brand and Pat Barret’s stridently anti-involvement Onstage Vietnam which was performed by New Theatres around Australia, included a smattering of Vietnamese characters in its agitational-propaganda format. They were portrayed exclusively as victims, without any character complexity or attempt to develop a Vietnamese viewpoint on the war. (To be fair, neither were Australian and American characters given much more development, as the style of the play is one of comic-strip caricature.)

Probably the most widely performed Australian Vietnam play is Rob George’s Sandy Lee Live at Nui Dat (1981), which falls into the “troubled veteran” category - showing the alienation and outcasting of returned soldiers that makes them begin to feel like enemy aliens in their own country. There are no Vietnamese characters in Sandy Lee. However, a Vietnamese civilian woman is frequently referred to by the lead character, Bruce, in an idealised, Orientalist infatuation. By the end of the play, however, it is clear that Bruce is insane, and there are serious doubts as to whether his Vietnamese girlfriend ever actually existed. So although Sandy Lee is an anti-involvement play, it does little to counteract the stereotypes.

Few Australian plays have yet acknowledged the fact that there is now a substantial number of Vietnamese Australians. The fringe-dwelling community theatres are still mainly concerned with Italian and Greek community issues.
Sydney's Carnivale, a high-profile celebration of multiculturalism, has yet to include any Vietnamese theatre.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this theatrical indifference. Louis Nowra's bitter-sweet Chekhovian drama *Sunrise* (1983) features a Vietnamese gardener, Ly, employed by the wealthy Shelton family whose Easter reunion is the subject of the play. Ly is a minor character in the play, but catalytic on account of his feral sexual appetite. He attempts to seduce two women in the three-day course of the play, and is successful with one of them. While this may expose the decadent ennui of the Shelton household, it also places Ly squarely within another long-held Australian stereotype - the "yellow peril" paranoia about invasion which depicted Asia as an "octopus whose tentacles wormed into every hallowed Australian institution, a venal usurper of Australians' jobs, and a creeping threat to their wives and daughters" (Broinowski 9). This stereotype is a corollary of the "yellow satin" attitude - despite (or perhaps because of) the way in which Western men fantasise about Asian women, Western women are assumed to be the object of sexual predation by Asian men.

*Sunrise* also contains a brief debate about Australian culture and its relationship with Asia.

**DAVID** Australians never take root. We never have and never will. We follow European and American culture as if we were lip readers trying to make out what's being said. Other countries have their roots in something, that's why they have ideals and ideas, they fight for them. That's their torture, to have to die for a vision. Our torture is to have no vision worth dying for. We're a silly hybrid, like the head of a monkey sown [sic] onto a dog - and have no soul. [Holding up his glass to RICHARD]. Make me human.

**RICHARD** [not taking the glass] I'm tired of people saying that about Australia. It's so easy and so wrong. Look, here we are - in Asia. Culturally, one of the richest parts of the world. We're inheritors of a two-thousand-year-old European culture, living in a land which has an Aboriginal culture going back forty thousand years. Think what would happen if we amalgamated these cultures; a unique alchemy of history. We would be a model for everyone.

**DAVID** [hanging the glass to RICHARD who takes it] You're an optimist, Richard, and history always proves the pessimist right. (16-17)
Nowra does not make it directly clear which side of this debate represents his authorial voice. However, as a professional politician Richard is a highly unoriginal character who speaks in clichés and is prone to inconsistency, not least in his views about Asia and Asians. Earlier in the play, he has already invoked the "yellow peril" myth by claiming that most Vietnamese refugees "stepped off their boats in Darwin and had Mercedes Benz' and gold bars waiting for them" (11). It is therefore hard to take his idea for a "unique alchemy of history" seriously, so the pessimistic view prevails, as it does in most other aspects of the play.

A Vietnamese character is also created in Rosemary John's *Luck of the Draw* (1985), which is another "troubled veteran" examination of the experiences of two men, Richard and John, whose lives continued to be dominated by the legacy of their involvement in the war. The Vietnamese character Khan, though quite substantial, is subordinate to the two Anglo male characters, and primarily serves the function of a "catalyst to uncover the resentment, violence and guilt still experienced by Vietnam veterans" (rear cover). Khan is a refugee who comes to seek out Richard, whom he had known in Vietnam during the war. His presence brings Richard's guilt and trauma to the surface, with fatal results for his mate John, and subsequently for Khan himself. Metaphorically, therefore, the play seems to suggest that the presence of Vietnamese in Australia is likely to be destructive.

Even at the literal level *Luck of the Draw* fails to avoid falling into stereotypic traps with its portrayal of the Vietnamese character, despite the best intentions of its author to tell a story of "the same traumas, but from a different point of view ... and through that telling ... enable the rest of us to understand a little better" (iii). For example, in describing life in Vietnam after 1975, Khan tells Richard anecdotes about the new regime:

> Once, a North Vietnamese soldier comes into the hotel and sit in foyer. And he saw a man walk into the lift. The door of the lift close. He is very surprised. He has not seen
a lift before. A few minutes time, the door of the lift opens and a lady comes out. He is very surprised 'Oh God! This machine is wonderful, it change a man into a woman!'.

Encouraged by Richard's laughter, Khan immediately tells another story about a North Vietnamese soldier using a toilet bowl to wash vegetables. Although both stories are told against the North Vietnamese, Australian audiences would be unlikely to note the distinction - Australian soldiers, after all, were unable to tell the difference even then. The North Vietnamese are no less familiar with Western plumbing and machinery, than their southern cousins. Western influences have been felt in the north - via the French and the Russians - just as long as in the south. In any case, in a nation where more than eighty percent of the population still live as peasant farmers in rural villages without electricity, reticulated water, or sewerage, such errors might be expected in the north or the south. It does not mean, however, that the people who commit the errors are morons - any more than Mick Dundee is when bewildered by ultra-urban New York after the wilds of Arnhem Land, in Crocodile Dundee.

Vietnamese immigrants also appear in Dust Off Vietnam, a collection of four thematically-linked short plays resulting from a collaborative writing project conducted in Darwin in 1988. I helped initiate the project; details of my involvement are elaborated in Chapter 4.

Alison Broinowski praises Dust Off Vietnam for its efforts to change attitudes to the Vietnamese.

For the first time in Australia, a veteran reflects on how the war must have been for the Vietnamese; a Vietnamese Australian tells Australians, who have never asked, about her experiences as a boat person; an Ethnic Affairs Minister in Darwin divides his time between the Vietnamese and Portuguese communities. (123-124)

Yet the reflective veteran is selective in his sympathies; in a letter home he characterizes the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong as ruthless thieves and rapists (2), and the South as incorrigibly corrupt.

Yes, there's corruption here, just like everywhere in Asia. It's a way of life here. You can't change a thousand years of custom just like that. ... The whole bloody system is
The boat person refugee pretends to be Malaysian, because people "don't want to know about unpleasant things in the lucky country" (15). There is no explanation of why her family wished to leave Vietnam; the underlying and erroneous assumption is that post-war Vietnam is not a fit place for decent human habitation. And the Ethnic Affairs Minister has a veteran minder who, as Broinowski acknowledges, "cannot shed old images" (124).

**PETER** If I could stop myself feeling like this, I would. I know I'm supposed to think of the Vietnamese as human beings who happen to come from South East Asia, but I looked at this guy and I kept thinking: don't expect anything from me slope, zipper-head... (28)

*Dust Off Vietnam* may represent a step in the right direction, but its portrayal of the Vietnamese remains confused and ambivalent. This may be one reason why it never progressed beyond a workshop to full production.

A more elaborate workshop production was given to Noel Janaczewska's *The History of Water* by Sydney Theatre Company's "New Stages" developmental arm at The Wharf Studio in June 1992. Less a play than a piece of performance art, *The History of Water* presents two female characters, one English, the other Vietnamese, who relate fragmented snippets of their experiences - the English woman in visiting Vietnam, the Vietnamese woman in migrating to Australia. The English character clearly embodies the authorial voice, with the result that she is more deeply understood and complex than the Vietnamese, though at least the stereotypes are avoided. There are substantial passages in the Vietnamese language, the salient bits of which are then laboriously translated by the Vietnamese character. A feeling of self indulgent, cosy mutual admiration between the two characters is underlined by the contrast of the occasional stylistic switches to direct audience address. The piece is non-dramatic, almost entirely devoid of conflict. Even an avid Vietnamophile like myself found it tedious - a reaction which, to judge by the shuffling and suppressed yawns
around me the night I attended, seemed to be shared by most of the audience.

Notwithstanding their shortcomings, however, plays like *The History of Water: Dust Off Vietnam* and *Luck of the Draw* at least reflect a gradual if tenuous change in attitudes to Vietnam and the war, and a growing acceptance of Vietnamese Australians. Such efforts run a constant risk of being swamped by the continuing negative stereotyping of supposed Vietnamese characteristics on our screens, especially in American films but also in Australian ones like *Romper Stomper*. This stereotyping not only presents a barrier to intercultural understanding and therefore to acceptance; it re-opens old wounds so they continue to fester. With *Hearts and Minds* I hoped to take a further step towards breaking down the cultural barriers, repudiating the stereotypes and healing the wounds - not just within our own community, but also in terms of Australia's relationship with Asia. How I came to be interested in embarking on such a project is the subject of the next chapter.
Origins of the Project: Personal and Impersonal

I was born in 1953, towards the end of the post-war baby boom. My mother's parents were of English and Scottish descent; my father's family mingled English and Irish. If any Australian family could have been described as Anglo-Celtic, it was ours.

It could also hardly have been more firmly immersed in the dominant culture. From a background of landed East Anglian gentry, my paternal lineage in Australia encompasses the Darling Downs squattocracy and the professional classes of Brisbane; my maternal lineage is firmly urban upper-middle-class. My maternal grandfather was wounded and decorated at Gallipoli; my father flew fighter-bombers in support of the Normandy invasion. My mother and father both attended reputable private secondary schools in Queensland, and both received a university education (although my mother's was interrupted by marriage and the raising of our family, and not completed until some three decades later). My father practised as a consulting physician in Brisbane for more than twenty years, before moving to an academic position in Perth.

I am sure my parents expected my siblings and me to follow a similar pattern in our own lives, and were determined that we should have access to material circumstances and educational opportunities of the best quality they could provide. Soon after birth we were enrolled in eminent private schools for our secondary education. From as early as I can remember, our futures were painted in terms of university and the professions - both my parents were intensely grateful for the start in life they had been given by their own parents, and their way of demonstrating that gratitude was to channel their own children in the same direction. The trades, retailing, clerical work and
other such options were to be considered only if we failed to achieve academic standards sufficient to gain entry to university.

All of this pointed very strongly to the likelihood of a life in the forefront of mainstream Australian aspirations for myself, my sister and my brothers: professional careers in medicine, the law or perhaps architecture, respectable marriages with partners from similar backgrounds, and a life of steady upward mobility in the firmly Anglo-Celtic Brisbane Establishment at a comfortable remove from other cultures and classes. This is what happened to the children of most of my parents' friends, and to our peers at Church of England Grammar School and Clayfield College where we received our secondary schooling. It did not work out exactly that way for my siblings and me. A career in the theatre with an interest in marginal cultures would never have been anticipated for me.

Credit (or blame) for this deviation from the mainstream must lie in large measure with my parents, whose own ingestion of conservative Establishment values was tempered with an egalitarian touch engendered, I suspect, in the difficult circumstances of the Great Depression and World War 2 - great social levellers both. For example, while their social circle embraced many people like themselves, it also included a significant number with working-class backgrounds.

It may have been this same egalitarian touch which influenced my parents' decision to put practicality above peer pressure when it came to buying their first home. While others were settling in Establishment suburbs - Hamilton, Hendra, and Clayfield in the north-east, Ashgrove and Taringa in the western foothills, or Chelmer and Graceville on the riverbanks to the southwest - my parents chose an elegant, rambling weatherboard house in the inner suburb of Herston. My father was still a medical student at the time, and the house was both across the road from the Medical School and a hundred metres
from the back entrance of the Royal Brisbane Hospital. I was under two when we moved in, and it remained the family home until after I turned twenty.

Brisbane is an exceptionally hilly city, especially in the areas close to the centre and west towards the mountains. The subtropical heat and humidity of its summer are relieved by frequent sea breezes, but the only houses that get the full advantage of these breezes are those on the tops of the hills. In the early development of Brisbane, therefore, the cool ridgelines had been claimed by the wealthier folk, while the valleys were left for the poorer classes. Our home was one of the highest, and sat on a heavily-treed three-quarters of an acre that dropped away steeply to a valley of remnant native bushland, while only a few doors down the hill the houses shrank to workers cottages on narrow, closely-packed blocks. So it was that I lived for my most formative years on a small patrician island in the midst of a large plebeian sea.

In that sea I - Anglo-Celtic and middle-class - was very much in the minority. The neighbouring kids were mostly from working-class Irish families. There were many of those at Kelvin Grove Primary School, too, but also, increasingly, there were the sons and daughters of the post-war New Australians - Italians, Greeks, Poles and people called White (as opposed to Red) Russians who were in fact mostly Ukrainians or Lithuanians or Estonians or Latvians. For me, cultural diversity was the norm, though of course I never thought of it in those terms. With the innocence of childhood, I simply adapted myself to whatever environment I found myself in. And with the curiosity of youth, I was drawn more strongly to those whose home lives were different from mine than to those whose were similar.

I had two very close friends in my primary school years. One was also a near neighbour, so we spent many afternoons together after school. I used to drop in on his place when my mother sent me down the hill to the local shop for milk or cigarettes, and often he would accompany me on my errand. His family
were very Celtic - small, dark and wiry, with a hard-drinking, hard-gambling
father and a quick-tempered, slovenly mother. My friend was the oldest of what
would eventually be five sons, though there were only two, with another on the
way when we first became mates.

Their house, a small workers' cottage, was eternally cluttered and messy,
with unfinished room-dividers and doors leading to giddy voids fifteen feet
above the ground - legacies of halfhearted attempts by my friend's father to
accommodate his burgeoning family. In fact, I scarcely ever saw his father,
although at weekends, he could sometimes be found in the dank underworld of
the garage beneath the house, drinking beer, studying the form and listening
to the races away from his wife's sharp tongue and the noise of his household.
For noisy it was, with the boisterous imbroglio of densely-packed boys, the
squeals of what seemed to be eternal babies, and the shrill scolding of the
mother. I had no wish to live like that myself, but it was a wonderful contrast to
the genteel, disciplined tranquility of my own home. I loved going there.

There was order and tranquility at the home of my other best friend, but of
a very different kind. He lived in Red Hill, several kilometres distant on the
other side of Kelvin Grove, so I visited his home less often. His parents were
Polish refugees, quite elderly to have a child at primary school. The father was a
labourer with the city council, and spoke little English. His wife was a fastidious
housekeeper who spoke almost no English at all. They were, I think in
retrospect, very poor, though again I did not think in those terms then.

They lived in the last house in a dead-end street, at the bottom of a very
steep hill. Their narrow front verandah directly abutted the footpath and led to
four rooms and a back verandah which had been enclosed and divided into a
bathroom and the tiny sleepout which did service as my friend's bedroom. We
usually played in the street, for there was no suitable space for active boys - the
back yard, not much more than a pocket handkerchief anyway, was entirely
given over to the growing of vegetables, neatly terraced and scrupulously free of weeds. This in itself was intriguing to me - in my own family, vegetable-growing was a brief stage we children each went through, begun with enthusiasm on a lower terrace invisible from the house, and rapidly abandoned when it became apparent that to do it properly reduced the time available for more instantly gratifying pursuits.

The lack of shade trees in my Polish friend’s garden compounded the hot airlessness of the valley, so curtains and blinds in the house were permanently drawn against the glare. To me, accustomed to open windows, airy rooms and wide, shady verandahs, the dark, low-ceilinged stillness inside, permanently suffused with the earthy bouquet of boiled potatoes, had an air of enticing mystery. On the walls, tables and sideboards of living room, half-seen in the semi-darkness, were ordered ranks of exotic bric-a-brac: faded photographs of wide Slavic faces and crowded, ancient places, trinkets and ornaments so different from those in my home, and a number of gilded icons surrounding a little shrine to Mary. Whether by accident or design, the statue of Mary seemed to catch what little light managed to seep into the room. Reared as a half-hearted Anglican, I was fascinated and a little awed by its ethereal aura.

I was also awed by my friend’s mother, so ancient compared with my own, and so utterly different with her short, dumpy build, her dark, heavy, long-sleeved clothes worn even in the hottest weather, her tired, unsmiling face and her gruff, incomprehensible tongue. Yet she was kind enough, plying me on every visit with buttery home-made biscuits, sweet blackcurrant cordial and occasionally, cold potato dumplings.

Experiencing these households and others like them, so different from my own, enriched my primary school years immeasurably. It provided first-hand experience of a range of ways of life and value systems, none of them intrinsically worse or better than my own - just different, each with its
attractions and problems. I also found that the experience of other cultures provided a yardstick against which to measure my own. The more I was exposed to them, the more I learned not to accept the received values and assumptions of my own culture uncritically.

This does not mean that I was outwardly rebellious, or that I wished to be other than what I was - the pay-off from my family’s lifestyle in terms of emotional security and material comfort was too great for that. And my parents, with their own values of tolerance, made no effort to prevent my choosing these friends, or to direct me towards more culturally similar ones. So from an early age, I came to view my own culture both personally and impersonally, from the inside and the outside, with a kind of involved detachment. This has characterized my approach to life ever since.

When I left primary school and went to Churchie, I was abruptly withdrawn from cultural diversity and plunged into a world of constrained homogeneity. It was boys-only, expensive and therefore exclusive: a training institution for the Establishment, modelled on English paradigms such as Eton and Harrow. Certainly it had a good scholastic reputation, but only within the narrow band of subjects required for entry into university courses leading to Establishment professions. It also had a good name for sport - again, in a narrow range - but no real standing in the liberal or creative arts, or social sciences, or a host of other disciplines. Its students were expected to make the most of what it had to offer in return for the high fees it charged - boys who went home at the end of daily classes were frowned on by the staff and snubbed by their schoolmates; the few boys who did arty things like music were dubbed poofers. I had neither the inclination nor the courage to go against the grain; I accepted this new phase of my life and set out to make the most of what it offered.

There was one small but important exception to the school’s self-righteous philistinism. Our senior English master was a wonderful eccentric - alcoholic,
chain-smoking, and a former member of the Nazi Party (he was also senior
German master) who still affected a moustache and hairstyle in the manner of
Adolf Hitler. He was also a brilliant teacher, and it was in his classroom that I
discovered the magic of drama. He refused to treat plays as literature, but would
have us read them aloud and occasionally stage little moved readings. I
discovered in myself some talent for mimesis, as well as the delicious feeling of
eliciting an emotional response from an audience. This was far more gratifying
than the envious admiration I occasionally received for prowess in games.

Nonetheless, my extra-curricular activities were dominated by sport and
army cadets which, combined with travelling to and from the other side of the
city, meant I seldom got home before six in the evening. Saturdays were also
devoted to interschool sport, so I rarely had time to spend with my old primary
schoolmates, and we drifted apart. In my new school, however, I never made
any really close friendships. I knocked around in a circle of half a dozen mates
who were in the same class and similarly sports-minded. These boys were all
from Establishment suburbs - the sons of doctors, lawyers, architects and
engineers - looking eagerly forward to emulating their fathers. We shared lots
of experiences, but were never intimate in the way my friends and I had been
in primary school. Apart from school activities and the preoccupations of
puberty, I found little to talk to them about. They were generally uninterested
in the political upheavals that were convulsing the world, and which had
already begun to capture my interest.

This was, after all, the late 1960's, the era of student protest, rock'n'roll and
flower power and, at the symbolic centre of it all, Vietnam. These things were
making themselves felt in my family, mostly because of my older brother. Five
years my senior, he was already at university, studying medicine like a good
scion of the Establishment. Dissatisfied, he took a year off to broaden his
horizons by means of a working holiday in Europe. He came back with long hair
and a mission to change the world. Due to register for National Service, he was going to refuse and go underground, to jail if necessary, rather than legitimise conscription and the war in Vietnam. My parents were mortified - fearful both for the adverse effects of a criminal record on my brother's future career prospects and for the family's reputation among their peers. Bitter arguments ensued, often late at night when I was assumed to be asleep. I took it all in, and was deeply affected by my brother's viewpoint.

Finally, a compromise was reached: my brother would register, but as a conscientious objector. It was not a solution entirely satisfactory to both sides, but it restored an uneasy peace in the family. As a side effect, however, Vietnam was rooted firmly in my consciousness.

Around the same period, a close cousin on my mother's side decided to volunteer for National Service with the express intention of going to Vietnam. He had been shiftless and rebellious for some years, and going to Vietnam was probably part of the same pattern - a search for some pulse to fill the spiritual void created by the death of his idolized father. He went off very gung ho, and came back very subdued. Vietnam had clearly affected him profoundly and painfully, but he could not be drawn into speaking about his experiences to others. He refused to join the RSL or the Vietnam Veterans' Association; two decades later, even the national healing symbolised by the Homecoming Pardes in Melbourne and Sydney could not tempt his participation. His attitude remains unchanged still, and in this - and this alone - he was an inspiration for the character of Skip in *Hearts and Minds*.

My cousin's transformation strengthened my belief in the injustice of the Vietnam War, so I arrived at university in 1971 eager to do my bit for the cause. I had enrolled in a course in Regional and Town Planning. It was a hastily-selected choice after I had been rejected from Architecture because I suffer from anomalous trichromatopsia - the condition commonly (and
erroneously) known as colour-blindness. Following this disappointment, I approached my university studies with little real commitment, throwing myself instead into extracurricular activities such as the protest movement and student theatre. In my first two years at university, I participated in several student demonstrations and rallies including the huge Moratorium marches of both 1971 and 1972 - the latter in Melbourne.

By that stage, however, my involvement in theatre was already beginning to eclipse my involvement in the protest movement (with my studies running a rather poor third). Australian involvement in Vietnam was being wound down anyway, and the twenty-three-year-old conservative national government was clearly on its last legs. Australian theatre, on the other hand, was on an upswing - the beginning of the period of "new nationalism" spearheaded by La Mama, the APG, Jane Street and the Nimrod. They were heady theatre days even at Queensland University; leading lights when I joined included Geoffrey Rush, Bille Brown, Kris McQuade, Peter Clarke, Michael and Jenny Macklin, Bryan Nason, Bomber Perrier, Richard Fotheringham and Errol O'Neill. When, while attending the Festival of Australian Student Theatre in 1972 (the trip on which I also marched for the Moratorium), I saw the original productions of Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* and Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous* I knew for the first time that the theatre was my chosen vocation.

To fulfil that vocation was, however, not easy in the circumstances. I was half-way through a university course of which my parents approved, and for which they held most of the purse-strings. There was no vocational training for theatre at Queensland University, nor anywhere else in Brisbane at the time, and so no way I could make the switch in a respectable way that would save face within the family peer group. (My older brother had once considered switching from medicine to economics, a far more respectable profession than the theatre, but had relented after intense parental pressure.) The way to get theatre
training in Brisbane was to get involved with a high-quality amateur group like Twelfth Night or La Boite, and hope to turn pro eventually. I joined La Boite.

For the next three years I worked intensely at La Boite, putting in just enough time in my studies to scrape through (I failed one subject twice before finally being conceded a pass). University attendance became simply a convenient framework for what became my real studies, in theatre. When my parents decided to sell the Herston house and move to a riverside hacienda in the new suburb of Jindalee, I scarcely shed a tear for the old place. Home, by that stage, had become primarily a place to sleep between the intense demands of the theatre and the minor inconvenience of studies in town planning, so Jindalee was as good as anywhere.

When, less than two years later, the Jindalee house was inundated with over two metres of muddy water in the 1974 Australia Day floods, I was deeply affected by the trauma and financial difficulties it caused my parents, but so little was my emotional commitment to the place that I felt little personal distress. I was even, to my shame, rather annoyed by the timing, because it cut short my first overseas trip - a working vacation in London for which my main agenda was to take in as much theatre as possible.

Less than twelve months later, my parents put the refurbished Jindalee house on the market and moved to Perth, putting the flood horror behind them and pursuing my father's dream of a career in academia. I stayed in Brisbane to finish the single subject that still stood between me and my degree, and to notch up some work experience. I got a temporary job in a planning office, then, when that ran out, worked as a casual stage hand for the Queensland Opera and Twelfth Night Theatre (by then professional). None of this paid well, and after twenty-one years in which my parents had picked up the tab, I had neither the experience nor the maturity to manage my finances properly. When, at the end of the year, I finally finished my degree course, I fled westwards to the security
of parental proximity. Once there, realising that I at last had a promising meal ticket, I sought - and soon found - work as a planner. For the next four years, the theatre remained essentially a hobby for me. I rapidly established myself as a regular director for one of Perth's leading amateur groups.

During this period I met and married my wife. She was another planner, and we were both employed with the state public service at the time. Significantly, her background was working class; she had had to battle every inch of the way to achieve the university education I had disparaged (she had much better grades as a result). With our combined incomes, we were able to consider purchasing a house; after a considerable search, we chose a run-down worker's cottage in the inner suburb of North Perth. This choice was to some extent dictated by the fact that it was cheap, but in my case it was also a return to the influences of my youth - the house was close to the city centre, it was located in a still-ungentrified working-class suburb and, most attractive of all, it was an area where post-war immigrants had chosen to settle. Our neighbours were Italian, Greek, Macedonian and Polish. The previous tenants of our house had been Vietnamese - a very new phenomenon in 1977. Our workmates, many of whom were also at the stage of buying their first homes, turned their noses up at our humble choice and retreated to fashionably homogeneous suburbs like South Perth.

After a couple of years of our marriage my wife, fed up with my weekend and evening absences in pursuit of my theatre passion and generally unimpressed with the results, hinted that if I were to continue I had better do it properly - that is, professionally. For the first time, I began to consider seriously the possibilities of postgraduate training. My wife also started to investigate postgraduate study opportunities in landscape and environmental design. We looked overseas, thinking to broaden our horizons while still unencumbered by children. At the same time, however, I applied for the
one-year postgraduate course in directing at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). To my overwhelming delight, I was accepted. The die was cast: from then on, my profession would no longer be planning but the theatre.

We let the North Perth house and headed for Sydney, where my wife, in full support of my career change, got a temporary planning job to support us both while I was at NIDA. We took a tiny bedsitter in cosmopolitan Darlinghurst in preference to the more middle-class suburbs around the NIDA campus at Kensington. Almost immediately, my wife was offered a postgraduate place in the renowned School of Environmental Design at the University of Calgary in Canada, with a generous scholarship in support. So while I studied at NIDA, we planned our next three years in North America.

The directors’ course was mostly a hands-on, learn-through-experience affair. My first assignment was to work on a group-devised piece with first-year actors, on a subject of our own choosing. A group comprising myself, the two Greek-background actors and one Italian-background actor in the first-year group, and a couple of Anglo actors, formulated a comedy revue called Thank God I’m a Wog, which was chosen to represent NIDA at the 1980 Festival of Australian Student Theatre. It was my first foray into multicultural theatre.

There was one substantial theoretical component in the director’s course. We were required to formulate a production approach to a major classic work of the theatre, taking a new angle that would illuminate the text for contemporary audiences. With the encouragement and guidance of Aubrey Mellor, I researched and developed a hypothetical production of Shakespeare’s Macbeth in the style of the Japanese Kabuki theatre. It was a pivotal experience - my first glimpse of the whole new world of possibilities offered by Asian theatre traditions, and my first attempt at melding one of those traditions with a more familiar European one. Inspired, I requested that my secondment (the final part of the course, to work as assistant director with a professional theatre company)
should be with Richard Wherret on Louis Nowra's *The Precious Woman* at Sydney Theatre Company. As directed by Wherret, Nowra's play, set in China in the 1920's, attempted a blend of European expressionism with visual elements of traditional Chinese opera. Though ultimately the spectacular production values overwhelmed the emotional heart of the play, I found it a valuable to experience the practical problems of realising the kind of exercise which previously I had considered only in theory.

My wife had already left for Canada in August, in time for the beginning of the northern academic year. I joined her in December, and immediately applied for and was accepted into the University of Calgary's Master of Arts degree program in Dramatic Literature. This program, I felt, would force me to do structured reading in the historical and theoretical aspects of drama in which there were large gaps in my knowledge because my undergraduate training had been in planning rather than English or drama. My thesis research focussed on the historical dialectic between the popular and literary traditions in the theatre, as manifestations of the cultures of plebeian and patrician classes respectively. This established a context for a comparative study of the works of Jack Hibberd and Canadian playwright Rick Salutin.

As part of my MA program, I attended Harvard University Summer School in 1981, taking (among other things) a course in playwriting run by American playwright John Ford Noonan. Although I had approached this course primarily as a director trying to gain a better understanding of the playwriting process, by the time it was over I knew that writing would become part of my future professional activity. For the moment, however, I concentrated on directing, with several productions for Theatre Calgary and other smaller mainstream companies during my two and a half years in Canada.

Living in Canada was a great consciousness-raiser on issues of national identity and multiculturalism. In terms of cultural issues, in many ways Canada
is Australia writ large. It has a similar heritage of British colonialism juxtaposed on a collection of ancient indigenous cultures, further complicated by the additional presence of the French as a founding colonial culture. It has been a place of refuge and new beginnings for people from many other countries. Moreover, because it shares a long common border with the United States, there is acute awareness of the problem of cultural dominance. As Rick Salutin put it, in Canada "culture becomes the question of politics, because the historical question was the cultural one" (Copeman 192). Debate on these issues had a very high media profile while we were there - much higher than it had had in Australia before we left. Separatist movements - based on indigenous land claims in the North-West Territories, or cultural issues in Québec, or regional issues in British Columbia, or all of these in Newfoundland - were flourishing and constantly threatening national stability. One of our Canadian friends suggested his country was not a nation at all, but a benevolent anarchy.

Towards the end of our stay in Canada, Jack Hibberd told me by telephone that the coming thing in Australian theatre was the new community theatre movement - a movement aiming to give theatrical voice to the marginal and minority cultures in Australian society. So immediately upon return to Perth at the end of 1983, I started to seek work in community theatre. My wife, meanwhile, had applied for admission to study for a PhD at Melbourne University, so I concentrated my job-hunting in that city. After freelancing for a time in Perth, I was offered a position as Artistic Director of Jika Jika Theatre, a community company operating in the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne, including substantial Italian- and Greek-background communities as well as many other smaller immigrant groups.

During the next twelve months, Jika Jika produced five productions - three pre-scripted plays and two original projects. Apart from keeping an artistic overview, I left the directing of the pre-scripted plays to the associate director.
and concentrated on developing the original projects. The first was *The Youth of Northcote Show*, a revue which canvassed a range of youth issues including racial and gender tension in inner suburban schools. I collaborated with one of the company’s actors, Chris Gaffney, on the script, and the company performed it under my direction in a number of schools and shopping centres in Northcote and nearby suburbs. The second was a more ambitious full-length production called *Good to Better?* - a pageant modelled loosely on the medieval Mystery cycles, saluting the history of the local community. This time I wrote it solo, though with input from the company through the process of preparing the production. Multicultural issues were inevitably an important part of the script.

At the end of my initial twelve-month contract, I left Jika Jika to do a project with The Mill Theatre in Geelong under a six-month Director's Development Grant I had been awarded by the Australia Council. The Geelong project, entitled *Over The Fence*, was a group-devised exploration of an inner-suburban working-class immigrant community under pressure from middle-class gentrification. The Development Grant then took me back for a further project with Jika Jika.

This was a hugely ambitious project produced jointly by Jika Jika and the Junk Orchestra with co-operation from several local schools. I had conceived it before going to Geelong, as a project which would acknowledge both International Youth Year in 1985 and the forthcoming International Year of Peace in 1986, as well as the pre-eminence of Greek and Italian immigrants in the local community. The concept was to involve some hundreds of local high-school students in a re-creation of the ancient battle of Hereclea, fought between the Greeks and the Romans and won by the Roman Pyrrhus at great cost because his own elephants, wounded, turned back on his army. The script for *Pyrrhic Victory* was a collaboration between myself and the poet Ken Smeaton, who was also an actor with Jika Jika at the time. It took the form of a
scenario for the staging of this huge outdoor event (complete with giant
elephant puppet) plus a commentary in verse to be spoken by a chorus of young
women to gamelan accompaniment by the Junk Orchestra. We were rather
heavy-handed with contemporary analogy: the end of the battle saw the
elephant transformed into a nuclear missile.

The event was planned as part of a larger, all-day peace festival in a park
on the banks of Merri Creek, but Melbourne's notoriously fickle weather was
against us: the week of dress rehearsal and performance saw unrelenting rain,
so the fête and show had to be abandoned. This caused great disappointment, but
a scaled-down version of the play was later successfully performed in the halls
of participating schools.

The completion of the *Pyrrhic Victory* project also marked the end of my
Director's Development Grant. So to improve my skills while I looked for work, I
took a part-time course in Writing for Television with the Australian Film,
Television and Radio School's Open Program. The script I wrote for this, called
*Maria*, was an elaboration of one of the segments of *Good to Better?* which dealt
with a romance between an Irish-Australian boy and an Italian-Australian girl.
This cross-cultural relationship was one kernel from which *Hearts and Minds*
eventually bore fruit.

*Maria* was never produced, but it was a good enough demonstration script
to get me into the pool of contract writers used by Grundy Television on the
*Prisoner* serial. I applied for such a position not only because I was in need of
income, but also because I felt my writing craft needed the sustained disciplined
development it could provide. I was particularly fortunate to be assigned to
*Prisoner*, which was unique among Australian and perhaps world TV serial
productions in being dominated by female characters whose numbers included
liberal sprinklings of sympathetically portrayed working-class women and
immigrants. The show was, of course, still a distortion of the reality of life in a
women’s prison; for instance, although nearly half Victoria’s female prisoners at the time were Aboriginal, there had not been a Koori character in *Prisoner* in all its eight years of production. I wrote the first one in.

Around the same time, I was employed for two weeks at the 1986 Australian National Playwrights’ Conference, where I worked as a dramaturg on the workshop of Rod Moncrief’s play about Aboriginal deaths in custody, *Nigger Nigger Pull The Trigger* (later known as *The Dead Boy*). Also round the same time, I was encouraged by John Clark from NIDA to apply for the position of Director of the incipient State Theatre Company of the Northern Territory (STCNT). I did so, expressing in my application a vision for a company which would embody the best aspects of both mainstream and community theatre as I had experienced them. I was interviewed and appointed on a two-year contract, moving to Darwin in August 1986 to establish the first fully professional company in the Territory. It seemed like a great opportunity.

In reality, it was a struggle from the outset. The company’s board was deeply split over which direction to take. Some wanted to follow my vision; others wanted a northern clone of the Royal Queensland Theatre Company. It was an uneasy atmosphere in which to initiate something as tremulous as a theatre company.

To achieve agreement in time to recruit actors and other staff and get the first show in production in its allotted time-slot, the first year’s program had to be primarily a mainstream one. So as soon as I had recruited personnel and got the first season up and running, I concentrated on devising a second year which would balance the mainstream shows with some of the more community-based programs I had originally envisaged. I started to develop two projects, both involving music - one, a rock opera dealing with historical black-white relations in Alice Springs; the other based in Darwin and exploring the historical exploitation of cheap Asian labour in the pearling industry.
For all its provincial conservatism, Darwin is a paradigm of successful multiculturalism, with large Greek, Macassan and Chinese communities dating back to the last century, substantial though more recently arrived groups of Vietnamese, Timorese, and Filipinos, and sprinklings of a many other cultures. Moreover, it is impossible to live in Darwin without gaining an acute awareness of Australia’s proximity to Asia - Jakarta is closer than Brisbane, Singapore than Sydney. It seemed to me that this presented an outstanding opportunity for cultural interchange, as well as for extending the touring range of the STCNT, thus amortizing production costs over longer seasons. I began to look into the feasibility of a circuit encompassing South East Asia.

The first season, meanwhile, was proceeding about as well as could be expected from a new company. We had solved many of the inevitable teething problems, and were midway through preparation of the fourth and final show for the season when the funding axe fell. This was not entirely unexpected, as the Territory Government was facing a massive fiscal deficit and looking to cut all "non-essential" services. But whereas we were anticipating a substantial reduction in subsidy and were adjusting our plans accordingly, what was announced was a complete withdrawal. After all the hard work, it came as a bitter blow - not just to me but to all the company’s staff and growing band of supporters.

The final show played its Darwin season but did not go on tour as planned. The company quickly disbanded, and the workers dispersed back where they had come from. I, however, was offered the chance to stay in Darwin and work out the remaining ten months of my original contract, as a “consultant” working freelance, but having my salary paid by the Territory Government. I decided to accept the offer on two grounds: firstly, it bought time to consider options for the future, and secondly, it gave me a chance to finish what I had started with the community-based project in Alice Springs. This show, the
black-white-issue rock opera I had been nurturing through the STCNT, had gained enough momentum to be taken over by the NT Arts Council, and with me available to work full-time as director and dramaturg the script was completed and we went into rehearsal in January 1988. *Come Hell or High Water* was a big hit everywhere on its Territory-wide tour. The script was published by Currency Press, and two of the songs were included on the second *Australia All Over* album issued by the ABC. I had the satisfaction of knowing my original vision for the STCNT had been at least partially vindicated.

Immediately following the completion of *Come Hell or High Water*, I was approached by the Artistic Director of the pro/am Darwin Theatre Company, to consider undertaking two separate projects. One was to conduct a series of community scriptwriting workshops, working as instructor and dramaturg for a small group of aspiring playwrights; the other was to adapt Terry Burstall's autobiographical book *The Soldiers' Story* as a stage play for production by the company. I agreed immediately to the workshops, but after reading the book declined the adaptation commission on the grounds that Burstall's documentary style and the story itself were not conducive to dramatization.

My imagination had been fired, however, by the notion of doing something on Vietnam, but I wanted to give it a contemporary angle and acknowledge the fact that there were now many Vietnamese living in Australia - especially in Darwin. Vietnam had recently become topical again - the Homecoming Parades had been held in late 1987, controversy still raged over the 1985 findings of the Evatt Royal Commission on Agent Orange, and there had been a number of reports of veterans going beserk in the bush round Darwin, suffering from severe post-trauma stress disorders. I made a counter-proposal that we turn the community writing workshop into a collaborative exercise, in which the group as a whole would devise and develop a contemporary play dealing with the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Darwin Theatre Group agreed.
and the project proceeded with a group of four under my guidance as instructor, dramaturg and participating writer.

The process initially involved research, in which we talked to Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese immigrants, and read such literature of the war as we could lay our hands on. Our findings were pooled, and we began jointly devising a storyline and characters which would cohesively encapsulate the way we each felt about the subject matter. This is not an easy process, but we made steady if sometimes painful progress to a point where we had reached broad agreement on a rough outline, and were nearly ready to think about a first draft.

At that point, my contract expired. With no prospect of its being extended, I reluctantly left the co-ordination of the project to Mary Hickson (the final result, *Dust Off Vietnam* is discussed in Chapter 3) and, in September 1988, left for Sydney where my wife had already started a new job.

We bought a small cottage in the inner western, working-class suburb of Tempe. Our street, a cul-de-sac of twenty-five houses, is home to Australians of Aboriginal, Macedonian, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Fijian and Vietnamese origin, and well as a sprinkling of Anglo-Celts. Nearby Marrickville - the closest shopping centre - is the second biggest Vietnamese community in New South Wales after Cabramatta.

With my wife in steady employment, I had the freedom to work freelance, getting a couple of directing gigs during 1989, as well as some part-time tutoring in Theatre Studies at the University of New South Wales. But I was also turning more and more to writing as my major creative activity.

I initiated two major writing projects in 1989. One was *Blood Right*, an outback epic dealing with contemporary black/white relations in the cattle industry. I planned it as a film but could not excite any script development funding, so adapted the idea to a theatre format and submitted it to Sydney Theatre Company for its "Dead Authors Subsidize the Living" commissioning
scheme. It was shortlisted, but not commissioned, and is still in development. The other was *Hearts and Minds* though I did not yet know it by that name.

I had left Darwin with a head full of material on the experiences of Australian soldiers in and after Vietnam, and the Vietnamese refugees who had fled the post-war oppression in their homeland. I knew I wanted to do my own solo project on the subject. I spent some of 1989 ordering my thoughts, looking for a fresh angle of approach. Then towards the end of the year I saw a brief video of the Vietnamese water puppets that had been performed at the previous year’s Adelaide Festival. They were charming, intriguing, and provided the key to my project - the idea that a play dealing with intercultural tensions ought to reflect those tensions theatrically as well as thematically.

Puppetry as an adjunct to actor-based theatre had been an area of increasing interest to me in the preceding years. I had seen Felix Mirbt’s renowned productions of Strindberg’s *Dream Play* and Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* - both of which mixed puppets with actors - while living in Canada. Soon after returning to Australia in 1983 I saw Nigel Triffit’s *Secrets* performed by Handspan in Melbourne, followed in 1984 by their production of *Cho-Cho San*, written by Daniel Keene with music by Boris Conelly and Dalmazio Babare. The latter was especially fascinating, combining actors with puppetry based on the Japanese Bunraku tradition in a reworking of the Madame Butterfly story.

My own work in the subsequent period began to include elements of puppetry. I have already discussed the community theatre piece *Pyrrhic Victory* which I devised and directed with Jika Jika Theatre in 1985 and which included large puppet elephants. A musical play, *On With The Show*, which I started to write in 1985 and which was commissioned by the NIDA Company in 1989 then given further development by the Australian National Playwrights’ Centre, was centred around the relationship between an aging vaudevillean and her ventriloquist’s dummy. The idea of using water puppetry in a
Vietnamese/Australian project was very attractive.

Also towards the end of 1989 I saw advertisements for the Doctor of Creative Arts program at the University of Wollongong. I had always enjoyed my associations with academia, and it had been a growing area of interest to me as a future career path. A doctoral degree would enhance my prospects. The DCA program provided a chance to carry through an innovative project in an atmosphere that would encourage risk while providing supervision and support facilities, as well as an opportunity to reflect and write in detail on the creative processes associated with the project. I applied and was accepted.

So it was that many strands of my life - my early and continued exposure to and interest in other cultures within Australia, my detached involvement with my own culture, the effect of the Vietnam War on my family, my interest in theatre and particularly in multicultural theatre, my growing interest in the cultures and theatrical traditions of Asia, my desire to increase my skills as both playwright and director, and my academic leanings - all converged at the School of Creative Arts at Wollongong University at the beginning of 1990. At that stage, all I knew was that for my major DCA project I wished to write and direct a contemporary play, using actors and water puppets, which would deal in a balanced and sympathetic way with the Vietnam War, its victims and its aftermath in Australia. The more I started to think about it, the more I realised that despite the research I had done in Darwin, there were still large gaps in my knowledge of the material I wanted the play to cover. Clearly there was much more research to be done.
With the commencement of the DCA program I resumed my reading of the literature of the Vietnam War - fiction and non-fiction, dramatic and non-dramatic, Australian and American, English and Vietnamese. There has been a quite prodigious amount written on the subject, some of which has already been canvassed in Chapter 3. I could not hope to cover all of it in the time available - nor was it necessary. What was important was to gain an overall understanding of the historical, political and social background of the war, then to focus on the details of the impact of the war on individuals.

The non-fiction falls into two broad categories: conventional histories and personal accounts. The most comprehensive of the conventional histories is Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*. It covers not only the political and military aspects of American involvement, but also the historical background within Vietnam, starting with the French colonial period and encompassing the Japanese and (brief) British occupations in World War 2, the re-establishment of French rule, the rise of the Viet Minh resistance movement, the expulsion of the French after the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the decision of America to fill the vacuum left by the French as part of its Cold War anti-communist strategy.

There is no Australian equivalent of Karnow's book. The closest any work comes is Frank Frost's *Australia's War in Vietnam* a modified doctoral thesis which concentrates on Australian military tactics and frustrations, ignoring Vietnamese history but documenting a considerable amount of Australian political history leading to involvement in Vietnam, together with some of the American story to illuminate Australian attitudes. Frost's viewpoint is essentially one of sympathy for the Australian military commanders for having
to be accountable to incompetent political masters and dependent on incompetent allies. Michael Sexton’s *War for the Asking* gives more detail about Australian political attitudes. He claims that the Australian government under Robert Menzies, fearful of a peril both yellow and red, was pro-active in urging a vacillating Washington to commit combat troops to Vietnam, and an equally vacillating Saigon to invite Australia to follow suit. Sexton’s book documents Menzies’ announcement of the decision to accept the invitation from the South Vietnamese government *before* such an invitation had been received.

Other conventional Australian histories include Ian McNeill’s *The Team*, an account of the work of Australian military advisers to the South Vietnamese Army, and a host of battalion histories. These are full of official detail but devoid of human colour. More useful from a dramatic viewpoint was *Vietnam Remembered*, a collection of essays edited by Geoffrey Pemberton and covering the political background to the war, the activities of the Australian soldiers in Vietnam, the protest movement in Australia, the aftermath for returned soldiers (including post-trauma stress disorders and the Agent Orange debate), and the influx of Vietnamese immigrants. Pemberton leavens the dry historical discourse with excerpts from newspapers, Hansard, popular songs and poems from the time, together with an excellent array of photographs.

Dry historical discourse may also be leavened by being fictionalised, as is the case with the epic novel *Saigon*. Despite an extraordinarily contrived plotline which sees at least one member of a single American family, over four generations, present at and personally involved in nearly every major event in a hundred years of Vietnamese history, *Saigon* manages to wrap the background, politics and conduct of the war in an accessible, human-dimensioned package - albeit a somewhat West-biased, Orientalist one. Significantly, perhaps, it was not James A. Mitchener or any other American who wrote this novel, but an Englishman, Anthony Grey.
Writing three decades earlier, before the commitment of foreign troops and without the benefit of hindsight, another Englishman had written a disturbingly prescient analysis of the naivety and gaucheness of American policy in Indochina. The author was Graham Greene and the novel was *The Quiet American* destined to become a minor classic with a spare, understated style imitated in many subsequent Vietnam War novels. In a less prophetic vein is Morris West's *The Ambassador* which, though written by an Australian, analyses the moral and political dilemmas faced by the American ambassador to South Vietnam in the early stages of the war. *Saigon, South of Beyond* by another Australian author, Robert Allen, also charts the rise of American influence in the South, contrasting it with the decadence of the vestigial French colonial regime. These novels were useful background research sources for my project, but of little value in terms of my specific objective to construct a contemporary dramatic story about the legacy of the war in Australia.

A class of Vietnam war literature which straddles the borderline between conventional history and personal account is the journalist's memoir. Probably the most famous of these works of "faction" is Michael Herr's *Dispatches* which depicts the American war effort as the mesmerising, surreal nightmare Francis Ford Coppola later successfully captured on film in *Apocalypse Now* (on which Herr worked as a script consultant). Australian examples include John Pilger's *Heroes* Hugh Lunn's *A Reporter's War* and Frank Palmos' *Ridding The Devils* together with Tim Bowden's biography of film-journalist Neil Davis, *One Crowded Hour*. Although full of dramatic human detail, these works proved to be of little use except as background colour because all the journalists concerned spent the war covering the main American feature rather than what they considered to be the Australian sideshow in Phuoc Tuy Province.

An Australian journalist's view of the war from the other side is provided in two books by Wifred Burchett: *Catapult to Freedom* and *Grasshoppers and
Elephants Burchett's pro-North stance earned him the status of *persona non grata* from the Australian government. American writer Mary McCarthy also suffered official wrath for visiting Hanoi during the war in 1968, and for publishing her pro-North attitudes in *Hanoi* Both Burchett and McCarthy display open admiration for the North Vietnamese cause and an uncanny prescience about the eventual outcome of the war, but their main usefulness to me was in their passing descriptions of Vietnamese customs untainted by the corrupting influence of the American presence in the South.

The most valuable part of the research in which I had taken part in Darwin had been face-to-face interviews with a number of Vietnam veterans. Through these we had caught vivid glimpses of the war and its aftermath from the soldiers' point of view - glimpses which in turn had amused, mystified, angered and horrified us, but which had touched a sympathetic nerve. Before leaving Darwin, I told the management of Darwin Theatre Company that I intended to attempt a solo project on the subject of Vietnam, and asked for copies of the tapes we had made of these interviews. They refused on the grounds that the material belonged to the specific project, which they were continuing without my participation. So I was left with only notes and remembered impressions.

Early in 1990, therefore, I made contact with the Vietnam Veterans' Association (VVA) in Sydney, with a view to conducting more interviews. After quizzing me in detail about my motives and approach in the project, the VVA were extremely co-operative, giving me names of veterans they felt would be willing to be interviewed. When I contacted these men, however, I found that while they were interested in my project and willing to help, almost all of them had already told their stories in interviews with ABC Radio for its *The Veterans of Vietnam* documentary series (1986), or with Stuart Rintoul or Noel Giblett for their oral history books *Ashes of Vietnam* and *Homecomings*, or in a number of
other publications documenting the Australian soldiers' experiences. Only a small number of veterans seemed prepared to talk openly about their experience to people such as me - many fewer than could meet the demand. Consequently, most of these veterans had had the same story featured in more than one publication. After I had met a few of them, I came to suspect that I would not gain any more information by conducting my own interviews than I would from reading these veterans' stories as already published. This impression was confirmed by the veterans themselves. So because of the difficulty of tracking people down, organizing and conducting interviews, and transcribing the results, I decided to abandon this form of primary research and seek the same information in already-published forms.

Stuart Rintoul's *Ashes of Vietnam* is an edited collection of interviews with more than a hundred veterans Australia-wide. Consciously modelled on similar lines to Mark Baker's American oral history *Nam*, Rintoul's book has been accused by Jeffrey Grey as being unrepresentative:

The depictions of Australian veterans and their 'quoted' experiences which follow are overwhelmingly negative, and quite obviously at times mark distinct psycho-sociological discontent, but there is never sufficient contextual material provided to enable the reader to decide whether the 'Australian Voices' of the sub-title are indeed representative. Rintoul's framing references are American and negatively sited; the framework is derived from an American model - the veteran as psycho-historical victim/problem ... (82)

This criticism is unwarranted. The American slant of the book seems inevitable - indeed, it is the "contextual material" Grey claims to be lacking. Vietnam was overwhelmingly an American war: Australia's part in it was dictated by the Americans. Australian soldiers' experiences of it were framed by American priorities: American news footage dominated Australian television coverage at home. From my own experience, it seems that unrepresentativeness is not so much a failing of this book or its writer's method, as a symptom of the reluctance of the majority of veterans to speak freely about the effect of the war on their lives. This was confirmed in discussions with staff at the Vietnam
Veteran's Counselling Service (VVCS) - of which there will be further discussion later in this chapter.

Moreover, the tone and framing of Rintoul's book are generally mirrored by the other Australian oral histories - Noel Giblett's booklet *Homecomings* published for the Homecoming Parade in 1987, and ABC Radio's *The Veterans of Vietnam*. Unlike Rintoul's work, both these publications do include exposition of the context of Australia's involvement.

There is a compelling sense of immediacy in the oral histories, a feel for the form and pressure of the times, that make them far more useful for a dramatist than the other first-hand accounts written by veterans. These include fictionalised accounts like Lex McAulay's *When The Buffalo Fight*, a documentary novel constructed in the form of naturalistic epic, episodically following the transition of its heroes from gung-ho innocence to hardened cynicism over the course of a twelve-month tour of duty. There is certainly no negativity here, the book seeks to place the reputation of the Australian troops in Vietnam squarely in the great tradition of ANZAC. There is also no American framing - indeed quite the opposite. Americans rarely appear in the book: when they do, they are derided as inferior soldiers and doubtful allies. Significantly in terms of Grey's thesis, however, this gives McAulay's novel a lack of context: it is impossible to believe that the story is representative. The same can be said of McAulay's other books - *The Battle of Coral* and *Contact* - as well as William Nagle's *The Odd Angry Shot* and Gary MacKay's *In Good Company*. By contrast, American veteran novels, such as John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, Philip Caputo's *A Rumour of War* and Gustav Hasford's *The Short Timers*, tend to be more searching and angst-ridden, trying to come to terms "with a war lost, perhaps needlessly, in which a tradition of national idealism, a concept of special destiny, were forever compromised" (Pierce 274). A comparison of the novels gives a strong indication of just how different in detail the Australian
experience of Vietnam was from the American, despite the similarities at the wider level.

The main value of the novels in terms of my project was in providing a strong sense of the military jargon and soldier slang invented during the war, and the strange poetry that could be constructed around them. The oral histories were also a useful source of jargon and colloquialisms. At the stage of reading these books, I had not yet decided whether or not to include an American character in my play, so I was interested in American slang as well.

There is another form of personal account - neither oral history nor fictionalised account. This is the written personal memoir, such as Memories of Vietnam, a collection of reminiscences edited by veteran Kenneth Maddock. Here, the descriptions of battles and bravery are interlarded with observations by army medical staff (including women) and recollections by officers of the regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the guerilla National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong (VC). None of the contributors are writers, however, and their stories are rambling and unstructured, with a stilted, self-conscious reticence. Most interesting from a dramatic viewpoint is the chapter called "Going Over the Limit?", written by the editor himself in an attempt to refute claims of Australian atrocities in the war. Maddock's attempts to blame the alleged atrocities on South Vietnamese soldiers (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam - ARVN) is in direct conflict with the eyewitness accounts and personal confessions of atrocities - murder and rape of civilians, torture of suspects, and mutilation and even necrophilia committed on enemy corpses - in the oral histories. This is perhaps because Maddock deals only with those outrages which gained attention in the press at the time, while the oral histories record events that were never officially reported.

What actually constitutes an atrocity is an issue of debate: one person's atrocity is another's legitimate act of war. Perceptions can change over time, as
they did for veteran Terry Burstall, author of two books about Vietnam. The first, *The Soldiers' Story* published in 1986, is a detailed account of the most notable single military engagement of the Australian forces in Vietnam, the battle of Long Tan in August 1966. Burstall took part in this battle, in which an Australian company (about 100 soldiers) faced an overwhelming force of NVA regulars in a rubber plantation, inflicting extensive casualties on the enemy (243 officially dead, unknown numbers wounded) while sustaining relatively light Australian losses of 18 dead and 21 wounded. *The Soldiers' Story* glorifies this action as evidence of the continuation of the ANZAC tradition in Vietnam.

Four years later, following four separate return trips to Vietnam, Burstall published his second book, *A Soldier Returns*. After interviewing North Vietnamese soldiers, former Viet Cong guerillas and South Vietnamese civilians, Burstall reassesses not only the battle of Long Tan but the whole Australian conduct of the war in its assigned area of Phuoc Tuy province. With respect to the battle, he concludes that the fact that it happened at all was due to a tactical blunder, and that the enemy body count was grossly exaggerated. He also finds that the North Vietnamese Army regarded it as an important victory. Concerning the general Australian conduct of the war, he deems that

*A war atrocity, by any definition, was committed on the people of Phuoc Tuy. There is much hard evidence to support the claim that the policies adopted by the Australian Army there resulted in the deaths of many civilians. There was also considerable destruction of the villagers' private property with no compensation or genuine "resettlement". Added to this were the deaths of many villagers who walked into ambush positions or who were in the wrong place at the wrong time; and the Army acted in all too many cases in an arbitrary manner that actually forced the local people into the arms of the VC. (173)*

According to Zsuzsa Barta, my contact at the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service (VVCS), uneasiness about the borderline policies of the Australian Army and shame about their own part in implementing those policies is a major factor in the reticence of many veterans to speak openly about their experiences. They are also a major cause of post-trauma stress disorders, and one of the
reasons why such disorders seem to be more common in Vietnam veterans than in returned soldiers of previous wars.

In terms of my ambition to write a contemporary drama dealing with, among other things, veterans issues, it seemed clear from my research so far that the most interesting avenue for exploration lay in the suppression of horrific memories and of feelings of guilt — internal conflicts with which most veterans had grappled to some degree. This presented a potentially insurmountable problem: the information I most wanted was that which the veterans were least inclined to give. Fortunately, however, a solution presented in the form of the VVCS, which exists precisely for the purpose of helping veterans resolve their internal conflicts.

I spent several lengthy sessions with Ms Barta, listening to the hair-raising stories of mental instability, psychosis, alcohol and drug addiction, violence, and incapacity to sustain employment or other interests that characterizes so many of her clients. Of course, by the time a veteran approaches the VVCS, his symptoms have usually reached a fairly extreme state — requests for counselling over minor disorders are extremely rare. This does not mean, however, that the counsellors are unaware of the extent of lower-level symptoms in the veteran community; on the contrary, they receive many calls from distressed wives, parents, children and friends of veterans displaying such symptoms. The counsellors find it one of the frustrations of working for the VVCS that while they can give sympathy and advice on these occasions, they are powerless to intervene until the veteran himself volunteers to be counselled.

I also learned from Ms Barta the fact that while stress disorders may be suppressed for years, they do not necessarily go away. A veteran may believe he has his problem under control, or even that he does not have or no longer has a problem, but a sufficiently threatening set of circumstances can still trigger
psychotic behaviour which may be all the worse for having been suppressed. There was clearly dramatic potential in this.

Parallel with my research into the veterans, I also began to investigate the backgrounds and customs of Vietnamese Australians. The Vietnamese community in Sydney is notoriously close and difficult for outsiders to penetrate, but penetrate it I must if I was going to achieve my aim of balancing Vietnamese culture fairly against Anglo-Australian customs. There were no Vietnamese oral history equivalents of *Ashes of Vietnam* or *The Veterans of Vietnam* and few publications of any kind dealing with the experience of adjustment to Australian society from the Vietnamese viewpoint. Books such as Carol Dalglish’s *Refugees From Vietnam* and articles such as Nancy Viviani’s “After the War Was Over” in *Vietnam Remembered* review the statistics and social policy issues surrounding the resettlement process, but lack the colour and drama of individual anecdotes.

My early, direct approaches to the Vietnamese Community Association in my own neighbourhood of South Marrickville elicited polite evasions, where I would be passed from one community representative to another until eventually being referred back to the first. I had, however, determined before commencing the project that part of the research would be some effort at learning the Vietnamese language. I had no illusions of being able to be fluent by the time I came to write the play, but culture and language are so intrinsically interwoven that it is not possible to do justice to the study of one without some understanding of the other.

When I came to look round for a suitable course in Vietnamese, however, I was surprised to find that despite the fact that it is now recognized as a major community language, there were very few beginners’ courses available in Sydney or Wollongong. None of the universities at that stage offered Vietnamese either in their degree or their continuing education programs (although the
University of Western Sydney has since introduced it). Eventually I found evening classes at Campsie College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), and although it was half-way through a term, I enrolled and started attending.

Vietnamese is a tonal language, so despite my ear for languages (French was always my best subject at school) and my talent for mimicry, I found it heavy going to begin with. Starting half-way through the term did not help, either, as the other students were well ahead and could not be expected to mark time while I caught up. The teacher was very helpful, however, giving me tapes - which she made herself - to work from at home. I started to catch up, despite the fact that the four other students in the class had the advantage that their reason for learning the language was that they were all in live-in relationships with Vietnamese Australians, with whom they could and did practise at home. By the end of the term I was sufficiently encouraged to enrol for the following term. The College, however, decided that interest in the course was not enough to cover their costs in offering it, so it was dropped from their curriculum.

My only recourse was to seek private tuition. I asked the Campsie TAFE teacher, Tran Thi Trong, if she would be prepared to take me as a private student, but by that stage she had already committed to a heavier workload as a regular high school teacher. We did, however, have a couple of long discussions about her experiences as an immigrant. These were not typical - she had been among the first wave of boat people in late 1978, so had been processed quickly and sympathetically in Thailand and had arrived in Australia within two months of fleeing Vietnam. The prelude to her flight was far more traumatic. She and her husband had looked forward to the Communist victory in 1975, because the South was in such a mess they believed anything would be better. It turned out to be worse - she and her husband, middle-class Saigon school teachers, had their property confiscated and were sent to a "New Economic Zone" for "re-education" that consisted of working as peasant farmers in barren
reclaimed salt marshes. They considered themselves lucky to be childless, because many children from the other families there died from malnutrition and lack of proper medical care. Trong, her husband and several others began to plan an escape route by land through Cambodia into Thailand, but were daunted by the heavy security at the border and stories of horror in Cambodia under Pol Pot. So they switched their efforts to finding a boat, despite the fact that none of them had any seafaring experience.

The Communist authorities got wind of their plans on the eve of their escape, and took in some of the men, including Trong’s husband, for questioning. Those arrested managed to get word to the others, urging them to leave immediately without them, not waiting for the original departure time. Trong and several other women had to make the agonizing choice whether to escape with their children or to wait and hope their husbands would be released, then make another escape bid later. While they grappled with this decision, one of the families was arrested. The rest decided to go.

Trong had never been able to determine for certain what became of her husband, though she had been told in letters from relatives that it was rumoured that he had been sent to a hard labour camp in the north. She had made several attempts to return to Vietnam in an effort to track him down, but each time had been refused an entry visa by the Vietnamese Government. She steadfastly refused to believe that he was dead, and so remained unpartnered and childless, living in hope that one day she would be reunited with him and able to atone for the guilt she so obviously felt at having left him behind.

Moving and dramatic as Trong’s story was, I came to learn in the course of my further research that it was by no means extreme: there was some kind of horror story associated with the escape of nearly all my other contacts in the Vietnamese community. These contacts were made via the private language tutor I eventually found by advertising through the casual employment agency
at the University of Sydney.

Do Hanh Thong was studying accountancy at the university. For more than six months he patiently coached me in the inflexional nuances of Vietnamese for two hours a week in his room in the crowded and chaotic Enmore house where he lodged with an extended Vietnamese family (not his own - they lived in Canberra). I made much better progress than I had at Campsie College.

Thong was very interested in my project, and pleased that someone was trying to include a Vietnamese immigrant viewpoint in a story dealing with the consequences of Australian involvement in the war. Thong was the first to acknowledge that his own family story was neither typical nor especially dramatic. They were well-to-do ethnic Chinese who had left before the reunification of 1975, bringing a fair proportion of their wealth with them. However, the family with whom he lodged was more representative, as were a number of his friends to whom he introduced me.

Through Thong’s circle I gradually came to hear many more stories of the refugee experience. Few of them did not contain passages at least as horrifying as Trong’s. All lived in constant terror of being caught during their preparations for escape. Most left loved ones behind; one man’s wife was shot dead by police in the process of boarding the escape boat. A woman told me of an acquaintance who, having no financial means by which to pay the high price of obtaining a place on a boat, prostituted herself to a corrupt official only to be betrayed by that official at the last moment.

Once out of Vietnamese waters, the refugees faced the perils of the open water in leaky boats, with unreliable engines, designed for river or inshore work. Few escapees had nautical experience; seldom had any of them learned to swim. The boats were usually overcrowded, so there was little room for provisions. Rationing was inevitable, and some died of starvation and exposure. Of personal possessions they took only what they could carry; most had traded
their belongings for gold before leaving. This made them prime targets for the marauding bands of Thai and Khmer pirates who ply the Gulf of Thailand; stories of robbery, murder and rape at the hands of these pirates were common. Those who survived all these hazards to reach Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia were frequently given fuel and provisions by military patrol boats and escorted or towed out of territorial waters. Some of these made it as far as Australia; unknown numbers perished at sea.

Under intense international pressure to treat the refugees more humanely, Malaysia allowed the small offshore desert island of Pulau Bidong to be used as a resettlement camp in 1979. Thousands would eventually be processed through this camp, some spending more than twelve months in overcrowded, insanitary, shanty conditions, with inadequate food and medical services, while awaiting acceptance by a Western country.

Arrival in Australia did not mean that the boat people's struggles were over. In 1980 immigrant support services were well established for the earlier European newcomers, but there was little in place for the Vietnamese. There was considerable hostility towards them from some sectors of the community - the rantings of the RSL's Bruce Ruxton were given a veneer of pseudo-respectability by pronouncements by prominent historian Geoffrey Blainey on the dangers of social disruption likely to emanate from Asian immigration. Some of this was probably a residue from the war, but most seemed a continuation of Anglo-Australia's longstanding paranoia about Asia. To the credit of the Australian community at large, however, the hostility seldom went beyond words. Indeed, some of the most overt animosity came initially from other Vietnamese - the small enclave of pre-1975 migrants who tended to be more right-wing than the more recent arrivals and who resented being associated with them and the publicity surrounding the boat exodus.

Thong's student friends talked of how difficult it was to be caught between
two worlds, especially those whose parents tried desperately to cling to the customs and traditions of the homeland. One of the students had a distant cousin who had been disowned by her family because she had refused to follow traditional Vietnamese courtship rules, and had established a live-in relationship with a young Anglo man. Even in the more liberal homes I visited, Vietnamese was the language spoken unless guests like myself were present, and the Vietnamese social and holiday calendar was strictly followed. Guests like myself were, in fact, extremely rare: few of the older generation mixed socially with anyone except other Vietnamese. The younger ones mixed more freely with people their own age from different backgrounds, but not at home. Every home - even those of Roman Catholic families, which were most of those I met - had at least one shrine devoted to departed ancestors and loved-ones, and occasionally to minor animistic deities. Most homes were crowded by Australian standards, containing an extended family - three or even four generations under the same roof - and observing strict traditional family hierarchies and social roles. Vietnamese cooking practices were universal, though the younger generation would eat hamburgers and chips when not at home.

I was aware of the privilege accorded to me in being allowed into these people's lives, and alive to the dramatic possibilities inherent in their stories, their ways and the pain and guilt many of them felt about their survival, escape and newfound prosperity. For prosperous they were. The crowding of their homes was a matter of choice rather than necessity - a cultural thing, a legacy of life in Vietnam. Most were quick to tell me, with considerable pride in spite of the guilt and pain, that they owned their homes debt-free, and that their businesses were profitable. No-one I met had less than two jobs - even those who worked as employees in one job ran some kind of small business in the evenings and weekends. They drove near new cars and smoked imported American cigarettes. Nor did their private pangs of guilt diminish their sense of humour.
which was quick and self-deprecating, with a well-developed sense of irony. This latter aspect could be disconcerting, as they could be impudent almost to the point of insult once they had come to know and trust me. At first I attributed this to imitation of an Australian habit - the affectionate insult - but I found during my trip to Vietnam that it was a widespread custom in the homeland as well.

I had felt from the outset that a visit to Vietnam would be an indispensible part of the research for the project. There were two essential ingredients of the play that could not be acquired any way other than by direct experience: a knowledge of the traditions, performance styles and mechanisms of the water puppets; and a feeling for Vietnamese culture in its "pure" form, rather than the Australian hybrid with which I had already gained some familiarity.

Water puppetry, unlike other Eastern puppet forms such as the Javanese shadow puppets or the Japanese Bunraku, is almost undocumented in Western scholarship. Even a work of such authority as Henryk Jurkowski’s *Aspects of Puppet Theatre: A Collection of Essays* makes scant reference to it as a "primitive" form, while it is ignored completely in the published proceedings of a 1990 American conference, *The Language of the Puppet*. In the three photo-documentations of world puppetry published in the last three decades by the Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA) - *World Puppet Theatre, Figure and Acting in World Puppet Theatre* and *The World of Puppetry* - the water puppets of Vietnam receive only passing recognition: a total of two paragraphs and half a dozen photographs. Significantly in terms of my project, the last of these three books - *The World of Puppetry* - specifically concerned with the use of puppetry in conjunction with actors - contains no documentation of such productions with water puppets. Not surprisingly, then, there is no record of Australian use of water puppetry - with or without actors - in Vella and Rickards’ comprehensive history of Australian puppetry, *Theatre of the Impossible: Puppet Theatre in Australia*. 
In May 1990, I attended the annual Australian National Playwrights' Conference in Canberra, which that year focussed particularly on writing for puppetry. All Australian puppet performance companies were represented, and a number of puppetry pioneers such as Richard Bradshaw also attended, so I was able to confirm that Vietnamese-style water puppetry had never been used by Australian puppeteers before - not even in its pure form, let alone mingled with actors. The visit to Adelaide and Melbourne by the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre (VNPT) in 1988 had, however, excited much interest from Australian puppeteers, so they were very curious about my project and my forthcoming trip to Vietnam. I was warned, however, not to expect too much from the VNPT, for whom the thousand-year-old traditions of Vietnamese water puppetry were a closely-guarded secret. Notable Australian puppeteer Peter James Wilson (then Artistic Director of Handspan) had not been permitted even to visit behind the scenes of their temporary puppet house in a lake in Melbourne's Botanic Gardens, let alone inspect the puppets and comprehend their mechanisms.

I therefore embarked on my trip to Vietnam with considerable apprehension concerning the primary objective of gaining sufficient understanding of water puppetry to enable me to reproduce some of it in my project. My qualms were fuelled by the fact that nearly a year's worth of attempted correspondence with the VNPT via the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture, attempting to gain their sponsorship for my visit, had elicited no direct response whatsoever. Such sponsorship - the endorsement of one's visit by an institution in the country - is essential under the Vietnamese communist regime, for without it the local embassy will not issue a visa. Despite frantic efforts on the part of the Cultural Relations Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra, and equally desperate endeavours by the Australian Embassy in Hanoi. I left Australia on the 5th of February 1991 without that all-important visa. I did have the assurance of the Vietnamese...
Embassy in Canberra that I would be issued with one on the way, in Bangkok, but their track-record failed to inspire my confidence. It was therefore with immense relief that, after a nail-biting forty-eight hours in Bangkok, I collected my visa with just enough time to make the hair-raising dash in an airport "limmo" for Bangkok International and my flight to Hanoi.

Even before landing at Noi Ba airport, there were reminders of less peaceful times in the dozens of bomb craters visible from the air under the runway approaches, and the scores of mothballed MIG fighter-bombers ranked along the taxi-ways. In the airport lounge, I was delighted to find a Ministry of Culture guide, Tran vu Phuong Lan, waiting to steer me through the entry bureaucrats and into a waiting car for the sixty-kilometer journey to Hanoi.

After the murky mayhem and honky-tonk hustle of Bangkok, Hanoi is another world. The poverty is obvious, yet there are no beggars or other signs of the abject misery prevalent in Bangkok. The city's thoroughfares, still largely untroubled by the private motor car or billboard advertising, are lined with trees and human in scale. Along them, twenty-four hours a day, streams a constant cacophony of bell-ringing bicycles, horn-tooting motor-bikes and bellowing pedestrians. Music blares from cheap Korean boom-boxes, the spoils of low-key capitalism permitted under Vietnam's version of perestroika. At night, after most Hanoi-ites have finished their government jobs for the day, the streets throb with the sights and sounds of this small-scale private commerce. Noise, constant and loud, is an integral part of Vietnamese life.

During the build-up to Tet Nan, the New Year - during which time I was there - the racket is boosted several notches by a continual tattoo of fireworks which reaches a deafening peak at midnight on New Year's Eve.

In the ancient Hoan Kiem sector, narrow winding streets follow paths picked among the swamps of Lam Son a thousand years ago by peasants bringing their goods to market from surrounding villages. The swamps are
gone of course, reclaimed by a teeming, picturesque jumble of houses, storefronts and sweatshops - none more than four storeys high - where six hundred people live in hectare. In the old French sector, tall tamarinds shade wide boulevards lined with elegant, crumbling colonial villas. Paint is a scarce commodity in Vietnam; new buildings, their facades cement-stuccoed in the traditional style, gain an instant patina of tropical mould that renders them indistinguishable from their centuries-old neighbours. Even in the post-war suburbs, built on former industrial sites cleared not by bulldozer but by B52 bomber, the serried rows of concrete apartment buildings have a human scale, the ugliness of their Russian-derived architecture softened by the unforgiving effects of tropical sun, monsoonal rains and year-round high humidity.

My guide and interpreter, Lan, continued to turn on VIP treatment for me. The staff of the Hanoi Conservatory gave a special concert of traditional music just for me, and I was treated to a tour of the National Museum of Fine Art with the museum's Director as my personal tutor. I was also taken to visit a thousand-year-old university, the Van Mhieu, as well as a string of temples, pagodas and historic sites including Ho Chi Minh's house and mausoleum. Everywhere I was greeted warmly by the intendant of these institutions, and found myself downing seemingly endless cups of the ceremonial tea habitually drunk on such occasions.

It was not until the third day that I was taken at last to the Nha Hat Roi Nuoc, the home of the VNPT. The tea ceremony with the company's Director, Nguyen Trong Bang, was rather stiff and formal, and I began to have a sinking feeling that the predictions of the Australian puppeteers might prove accurate. I had, however, brought with me a couple of my own recent scripts involving puppetry, and I made a small ceremony of my own in presenting these to Bang as a gift for the company. This broke the ice, for he immediately summoned three more members of the company and we got down to business.
5. Background Research

Figure 5.1

Nguyen Trong Bang, VNPT Director (left), and my guide, Lan, in the VNPT Rehearsal Theatre, Hanoi

Figure 5.2

Members of the VNPT Company in the company’s Meeting Room
Over the next three days, I was given a quite comprehensive initiation into the traditions of water puppetry. The first day, I was taken on a tour of their establishment, including the workshop where the puppets are made and maintained, the puppet storehouse, the small 100-seat rehearsal theatre, and the construction site next door where in 1993 they will open their new 600-seat permanent water puppet playhouse.

Also on the first day I was given a brief history of the tradition and the company. Water puppetry, I was told, is an art-form which originated in villages of the Red River delta around the present site of Hanoi at least a thousand years ago. Today, some thirty-five villages in the north and twenty-five in the south maintain this ancient amateur tradition; many such villages feature elaborate permanent puppet houses in the main pond adjacent to the village meeting house. Traditionally puppetry was the specialty of one extended family in each village, with the secrets of construction and operation jealously guarded and handed down from father to son. Women are still excluded from the village companies, although these days the puppeteers may be drawn from more than one family. Performances are traditionally given for specified festivals and holidays, of which there are many in the Vietnamese calendar.

In 1956 the VNPT was established as the first professional water puppet company, by decree from Ho Chi Minh himself. "It is necessary to have a professional puppet theatre so that our children can have more joy and laughter" (see Appendix 1). There are now two more professional companies - one in Ho Chi Minh City, the other a second company in Hanoi, run by the city administration (the VNPT is run by the national government).

Women were permitted to be members of the VNPT from the outset, and the original team of seven puppeteers has grown over the years to a troupe of more than fifty covering all facets of the art, from constructing and decorating the puppets, to performing them, to administering the company. The same troupe
also embraces other forms of puppetry - "ground" puppets, as they call them - as well as mime in the French tradition. In keeping with Ho's original instructions, the company still sees its primary function as performing for children. They are active members of UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionette), and have toured extensively throughout Europe as well as to Australia and Japan.

The second day was spent in the rehearsal theatre, most of it inside the puppet house or "Water Imperial Palace" as they call it. Here I was shown their backstage arrangements, the ordered chaos of rods, lines and puppets stored on a wide shelf above the water or hanging from hooks overhead. I also was able to get my first close look at the operating mechanisms of the puppets.

Water puppets are a form of rod puppet, using the surface of a pool of water as their stage. Standing between fifty and seventy-five centimetres tall, they are operated by a puppeteer who stands in the water concealed behind a bamboo screen, holding the rod and manipulating wires which articulate the puppet's moving parts. The rod is held parallel to and about ten centimetres below the surface of the water. The water is invariably murky, so the bamboo rods are virtually invisible. The puppets therefore create a quite startling illusion of walking on water.

In a typical hour-long performance, seven puppeteers operate a hundred or more puppets, assisted by an apprentice who hands them the puppets as required and relieves them of ones that have finished their performance. Most puppets can be handled by a single puppeteer, although a small number of larger puppets with more intricate mechanisms require as many as three operators.

The format of a performance is always the same. A number of flags burst from the water, heralding the entrance of Chu Teu, a comic peasant figure who acts as master of ceremonies. He welcomes the audience and introduces the rest
of the show, which consists of short vignettes depicting mythic and moral fables from Vietnamese folklore and history, interspersed with comic sketches from rural village life (see Appendix 1 for a typical program). About a dozen vignettes make up each show, selected from the company’s repertoire of more than sixty pieces, depending on the occasion. In accordance with tradition, the VNPT performs only on special occasions such as festivals and holidays. There is no regular puppetry performance program of the kind we are used to in the west. There are also no contemporary tales in the repertoire; they have resisted the temptation to adapt the ancient tradition to the strictures of socialist realism that pervade contemporary Vietnamese actor-based theatre and even, to some extent, the mime and "ground puppet" work of the VNPT.

It was a considerable privilege to be allowed to inspect the puppets and their mechanisms at close quarters - the members of the company were at pains to point out that these were supposed to be secret. Indeed, before being shown these treasures I was required to drink buffalo blood (only metaphorically - it was actually the ubiquitous tea) signifying my pledge not to reveal the secrets to which I was to be initiated. I of course complied, though not without some disquiet about the possibility that this might restrict my options when it came to the manufacture and use of water puppets in my own project. (This turned out not to be a problem, as will be made clear in Chapter 6.) Even so, there were a few mechanisms they were not prepared to show me or explain. They would also not permit me to take photographs inside the puppet house.

I was, however, allowed to take photographs during a performance which was given that night in my honour. Perhaps "in my honour" is overstating it - the performance was put on for my benefit, but I actually had to pay US$80 for the privilege.

By that stage, after several days in Hanoi, it had finally dawned on me that I was expected to pay for many of the things which I had thought were being
given freely. The Vietnamese, so long embargoed from many world markets, are desperate for hard currency. They feel that any Westerner is certain to be wealthy, and so the user-pay principle is applied. The car and driver that had been ferrying my guide and me round was, I learned, costing me US$35 a day. That is a large amount for a Vietnamese - enough to make it worth the driver's while to sit around for several hours at a stretch in his car, waiting to take me on the short, fifteen-minute trips between appointments. Thirty-five American dollars was also a lot of money for me, working as I was on a very strict student budget. I had gone to Vietnam with US$500 in cash, out of which had to come about half my accommodation, meals and incidental expenses during my three-week stay. There were no credit card facilities or international banking outlets in Hanoi, and nowhere that would accept travellers' cheques. I therefore had no access to further funds. So as soon as I found out about the cost of the car I paid up the driver and cancelled it. From then on, I went everywhere by pedicab or cyclo as it is known. For $US8 a day, I could hire my own personal cyclo with a driver who would take me anywhere in the city and wait for me as the car driver had done. My guide, Lan, was not impressed with this move, because it meant she no longer got to lord it in a chauffeur-driven car with a foreigner, but had to attend our appointments on her Honda.

So the eighty-dollar charge for the puppet performance was not the surprise it might have been. There was, however, no way I could afford it on my own. My solution was to invite a mixture of Americans, English, Swedes and French staying at my hotel, plus a small contingent from the Australian Embassy (including the Ambassador, Mr Graham Alliband) to attend the performance with me. I managed to round up a total audience of ten, bringing the cost per person down to a manageable amount of US$8 per head. It also was good from my point of view not to be the only person in the audience, and bringing Mr Alliband - a man greatly respected by the Hanoi regime - went
some way towards restoring the face I had lost with Lan, my guide, by downgrading my mode of personal transportation.

The performance I saw was their standard one for foreigners - identical to the one given in Adelaide and Melbourne in 1988. (A copy of the program is included in Appendix 1.) It was certainly a major highlight of my trip. Not only was the show delightful, entertaining and brilliantly performed - the reactions of my fellow audients confirmed this - but seeing it gave me a three-dimensional, kinetic sense of what I would be aiming for in the puppetry aspects of my own project. I took many photographs, and regretted not having had access to a video-camera (though when I expressed this regret the next day, I was told it would not have been permitted anyway).

My morning of my final day with the VNPT was spent in asking detailed questions about the show - the choice of items, the sequencing, the operating problems and, most of all, the symbolic meanings of the mythic elements. Over lunch, I plucked up enough temerity to ask if they would let me have a go at working some of the puppets myself. I had brought spare clothes - shorts and a tee-shirt - in the hope that this would be possible. They were surprised and amused at the request, but after some discussion among themselves, they agreed. Bang himself, the Director of the company, donned a wetsuit (a gift, he was quick to acknowledge, from the Australian Government) and accompanied me into the pool.

I quickly understood why they needed wetsuits. It was winter in Hanoi, and this particular pool, being indoors, gained no heat from the sun. The water was very cold. I soon warmed up, however, when I began to play with the puppets. Starting with the simplest one - a fish - I worked up to a peacock, a fairy and, finally, to Chu Teu. Even the fish took far more physical effort to work than I had expected. The resistance of water against a two-metre bamboo pole is considerable, especially if it is being moved at speed. The fairy was even harder
5. Background Research

Figure 5.3
Master of Ceremonies Chu Teu introduces the show, in the VNPT Rehearsal Theatre

Figure 5.4
Show Finale - Fire-breathing Dragon Dance.
VNPT Rehearsal Theatre
because, being humanoid in shape, most of it was above the water so that its natural buoyancy could not be used to advantage. It proved quite difficult even to hold it steady at the end of the pole, let alone to manipulate the levers that pulled the wires to articulate its moving parts. Chu Teu, larger still and with more complex mechanisms, proved even more difficult. After a couple of hours, by which time I was shivering with cold and exhausted, I had achieved some competency with the fish and peacock, but was still very shaky with the fairy and Uncle Chu. Bang seemed quite impressed that I had done as well as I did - after all, the company's puppeteers are apprenticed for four years before performing in front of an audience.

I said my farewells to Bang and the other members of the company with a great sense of satisfaction and achievement, having fulfilled my main objective and already exceeded my hopes and expectations in coming to Hanoi. I still had a few days to spend in the city, however. Lan had arranged a some more appointments - notably with the Directors of the Vietnamese Youth Theatre and the National Circus, but her heart was no longer in the job of looking after me. It was not just that I had cancelled the car; I was told by an American at the hotel that I had probably also been expected to pay her a per diem fee for acting as my guide. I therefore suggested to Lan, a little tongue-in-cheek perhaps, that if the people with whom I was to meet were able to speak English or French, it might be possible for me to keep the remaining appointments without her in attendance. To my surprise, she accepted this proposal with alacrity, even relief. My remaining days in Hanoi were therefore far less structured than the previous ones had been.

It had come as something of a surprise that I was completely free to move around Hanoi without official accompaniment. For the rest of my time there, however, this proved a boon. Apart from visiting the National Circus (at which I sat in on an audition for a new performing dog act) and the Youth Theatre
Background Research

(including the slightly bizarre experience of attending a performance of *Sinbad the Sailor* played in Vietnamese with glove puppets) I was on my own. I spent much of the time wandering the streets of the city, including crossing the Red River on foot via the French-built Paul Doumer Bridge, still broken-backed and twisted twenty years after the bombs stopped falling. The surrounding mudflats were pockmarked with water-filled craters.

In my perambulations I was frequently greeted warmly by the locals. In a couple of cases, I was invited into people's homes. This was a great honour, as to have foreigners in their homes would almost certainly have incurred official disfavour. I was thus able to gain a close-up view of living conditions in the crowded old Hoan Kiem sector.

One of these casual acquaintances first greeted me in English during a return visit to the Van Mhieu. There is a small tourist shop on this campus, selling art and craftworks. Khang, an artist, had come to place one of his pieces for sale. He was a man in his eighties, of mixed Vietnamese and French blood. His English was quite good, and his French was excellent, so between the two languages we could communicate well. It turned out he had once been quite famous in the North (still was in some circles, I found out later) but was regarded as something of a dissident - a bourgeois decadent - by the present regime on account of his refusal to paint in the socialist realist style. He refused to take the menial job offered by the government, and therefore had to survive without a government salary. His knowledge of the history of Vietnam - especially of Hanoi - was encyclopaedic, and I spent several fascinating hours with him in the single room that served as his entire living quarters and studio. I made a second visit a couple of days later with an American photographer staying at my hotel. My photographer friend found Khang an invaluable source of historical data for the book he was writing. We each bought a painting.

On another day, I went with the same photographer to visit the village of
Dong Ky, about fifty kilometers from Hanoi. Dong Ky is famous for its fireworks festival, held on the third day of Tet, which my friend was intending to photograph. This trip was to establish contacts and plan his angles for the day of the festival. It was an opportunity for me to get away from the city and gain some understanding of the rural village life - "behind the bamboo hedge", as the Vietnamese say - lived by eighty per cent of the population. We were greeted warmly by the Chairman of the Dong Ky People’s Committee and taken to visit a number of homes where whole families were engaged in a frenzy of firework manufacture. We were proudly shown the progress on the awesome centrepiece of the festival, a highly decorated giant firecracker measuring eight metres in length and about a metre in diameter.

Dong Ky is in many ways a typical delta village, interlaced with ponds for fishing, for washing in, and for providing drinking water, and surrounded by flooded rice fields. Visiting it brought home to me how organically connected was the puppetry I had been studying to this way of life; water is a fundamental part of the spiritual fabric of Vietnamese culture, and is treated with a respect verging on reverence.

I was booked to leave Hanoi on the 15th of February, travelling by train - the Reunification Express - to Ho Chi Minh City, with stopovers in Hue, Da Nang, and Nha Trang. The 15th of February was, however, was the first day of Tet - the New Year - the most important festival day in the Vietnamese calendar. It is a nation-wide public holiday, for which everything closes down. And everything means everything, trains and planes included. My travel agent in Australia had neglected to tell me this important information before making my bookings and taking my money. Indeed, the next train would not be running until the following week, which meant I would have to go by plane if I was to see anything of the South at all. And even the planes would not be running until the third day of Tet, which meant spending an extra two days in Hanoi and
3 Background Research

severely curtailing my time in the centre around Da Nang and Hue.

Disappointing though this was, it did have a positive aspect - I was in Hanoi for the major celebrations of Tet Eve, including mingling with a crowd of over a million around the Lake of the Restored Sword in the centre of the city to watch a spectacular fireworks display and cheer the New Year in. I was very impressed by the relaxed and friendly nature of this enormous crowd - in Australia I associate large crowds with drunkenness and loutish behaviour. In Vietnamese custom, it is very bad form to be drunk or obnoxious on the first day of Tet - it brings bad luck for the rest of the year.

Much of Hanoi life is lived on the streets - which is not surprising considering the smallness of the people's dwellings - so I spent my extra days wandering around, taking in the festive ambience, and observing the customs. The extra time therefore provided a bonus immersion in Vietnamese culture.

On the morning of the third day - the 17th of February - I finally caught a plane south to Da Nang. There, I was met by a guide from Vietnam Tourism and immediately whisked into a car for the two hundred kilometre drive over the Hai Van Pass to Hue. I was now in the South, below the 17th parallel which had marked the Demilitarized Zone during the war. Evidence of the war was immediately apparent, much more so than it had been in Hanoi. The beautiful Hai Van mountains still bear the scars of chemical defoliation, and are dotted with bunkers and shell holes. Every ten kilometres or so along the highway there is a large war cemetery, each one the last resting place of hundreds of Vietnamese dead.

Hue itself was the site of one of the fiercest battles of the war, during the Tet Offensive of 1968. The almost empty, weed-infested site of the old Imperial Palace, which in size and slendour had been second only to the Forbidden City in Beijing, bears forlorn testament to the indiscriminate destructiveness of war. Nonetheless, Hue - the former seat of feudal government in Vietnam - remains a
beautiful small city of hilly, treelined streets lined with impressive architecture, nestling on the banks of the romantically named Perfume River. Ten kilometres upstream, the mountain foothills shelter the grand tombs of several emperors from the Ngyuen dynasty which ruled Vietnam from 1802 to 1945. Of more interest for my research, however, was the Lin Mhu Pagoda, which I visited by sampan along the river through a cool, misty dawn. Established in the 17th century, the Lin Mhu remains one of the largest pagodas in Vietnam today. It was from here that a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, left in June 1963 for Saigon, where he committed ritual suicide by self-immolation in front of the world's press, to draw attention to the Southern regime's brutal treatment of Buddhists. The grey-green Austin sedan which carried him to his rendezvous with death is still housed in a garage at the pagoda.

From Hue it was back to Da Nang, a sprawling, ugly port city at the mouth of the Han river delta. The signs of American influence are much stronger from here south, manifested in architecture, advertising (of which there is much more), the vehicles on the road (Fords and Dodges from the sixties) and the more mercenary attitude of the people. I stayed in a new hotel built by the Russians ten kilometres out of town at the magnificent My Khe Beach, on the site of the former American M.A.S.H hospital and in-country rest-and-recreation centre known as China Beach (of television series fame). From there, I climbed the nearby Marble Mountain, one of seven carsts which tower more than a hundred metres above the flat delta plain. Near the top of the mountain I visited a huge underground grotto which remained undetected as the local NLF headquarters for the length of the war, and from which the guerrillas made continual excursions to lob mortar rounds on the China Beach facility. Today, this grotto is a place of ecumenical worship shared by the Buddhist, Catholic and Cao Dai faiths.

After only one night in Da Nang, I flew on to the southern capital Ho Chi
Minh City, formerly Saigon (and still known locally by that name in all but official circles), landing at Tan Son Nhut, once (during the war) the busiest airport in the world but now a vast, nearly empty wasteland, most of its hangars and storehouses crumbling from disuse and concrete cancer.

After the northern cities, Saigon's appearance was a disappointment. Though the city was once called the "Pearl of the Orient" or the "Paris of the East", the haptic, human sense of scale and design achieved in the marriage of Vietnamese and French Colonial architectures has been buried in the jerry-built high-rise boom of the American sixties. The new capitalism is even more evident here than in Da Nang; I had a feeling that private entrepreneurship had never really been suppressed in Saigon as it clearly had over the much longer period of Communist rule in the North. There were more motor vehicles on the streets, more consumer goods for sale in the markets; more high-pressure salesmanship from the stall-holders, and less friendliness but more sycophancy towards Westerners. There were beggars everywhere, and each night the park opposite my hotel was full of the sleeping homeless. Two attempts were made to pick my pocket - there had been no such incidents elsewhere - and I was directly approached in the Saigon streets by prostitutes and black market money dealers. The city was also much dirtier than Hanoi, its air thick with petrol fumes. Another Bangkok in the making.

Nonetheless, it was exciting to visit the legendary places of the nightly news broadcasts of my youth - the Majestic, Rex and Caravelle Hotels, the former American and Australian Embassies, and the Presidential Palace, the massive iron gate of which still shows the dent where it was wrenched from its hinges by North Vietnamese Army tank No. 843 on the 30th of April 1975 - the symbolic moment of reunification captured so courageously on film by Australian cameraman Neil Davis. I spent many hours wandering the length of Dong Khoi Street, where there is little these days to indicate that this was once the
infamous Tu Do Street, where every shopfront was a bar where soldiers on leave could get grog and girls, and where the windows were fitted with metal mesh to repulse Viet Cong grenades thrown from passing motor bikes. The bars are gone now, the shops sell artefacts and souvenirs - including gruesome ones like the dogtags and zippo lighters of dead GI’s - to Western tourists.

In one of these shops in Dong Khoi Street I was stunned to find a large collection of water puppets for sale. When I questioned the shopkeeper about them, she explained that they were old ones, past their useful life because their articulation mechanisms were worn out. They had been given to her for sale by the Puppet Theatre of Ho Chi Minh City. I was determined to acquire one of these, though my cash reserves did not really allow me to do so if I was also to eat and pay for my hotel for the remainder of my stay. However, I noticed that she had some VISA Card slips in a package on her desk, and asked if I could use my card. To my delight, she said it would be possible, if I could come back the next day by which time she would have been instructed in how to process purchases this way. This I did, and she even gave me a ten per cent discount for being the first VISA customer in her shop. I must have been among the first in the whole of Vietnam; I noticed that even the five-star Saigon Floating Hotel had no credit card facilities when I visited it out of curiosity.

The next day I had a further serendipitous encounter with water puppetry. It was Sunday, the day on which, according to my guide, large numbers of Saigon-ites visit the Botanic Gardens and Zoo. My guide being unavailable for any other tours that day, I decided to take in the ambience of this holiday crowd. I made my way to the Gardens, to find a beautiful park laid out in 19th-century fashion on a French design, with late 20th-century additions such as rides and sideshows to turn it into something resembling a Western theme park. In the middle of it, I found a specially dedicated outdoor water puppet theatre, with the local professional company performing 28-minute shows on the half-hour.
every half-hour throughout the day, rotating two teams of puppeteers between performing and resting. The price of admission was 4,000 dong - about half a US dollar. I bought a ticket and sat through three performances in a row. The show was the same each time, a potted version of the sequence of vignettes I had seen in Hanoi. Clearly this was the standard repertoire. It gave me a chance to take in some of the subtleties I had missed in the Hanoi performance.

From Saigon I arranged to visit the main areas of Australian influence during the war - the former Phuoc Tuy Province (now part of Dong Nai Province), where the Task Force had been stationed and operative, and the coastal resort town of Vung Tau, where the Australian Logistical Support Group had been quartered and where the Australian in-country rest-and-recreation centre had been located.

I was disappointed to learn that the former Task Force base at Nui Dat was in a restricted zone, to which foreign travellers were not permitted entry. I did, however, persuade my guide and driver to turn east from the old provincial capital of Ba Ria and take me to the edge of the restricted zone, on the eastern side of the Long Hai Mountains and about 10 kilometres from Nui Dat. The country was gently undulating, alternating between large rubber plantations (still operated, through all the years of turmoil, by the Michelin Company), rice paddies, fruit and nut orchards and swampy jungle country. There were few signs of the war other than an occasional broken-backed bridge, and the still-bare gullies of the defoliated Long Hai hills. No building rubble or visible bomb craters. But the villages of the South are deceptive. Their bamboo-and-palm-thatch houses, so easily and quickly erected, look temporary to the Western eye, belying the deep-rooted spiritual attachment the peasant people feel towards their ancestral lands.

Continuing on to Vung Tau, I visited the former Australian soldier’s club. Situated on the resort’s Back Beach, its bar, restaurant and swimming pool
Figure 5.5

Village near Nui Dat. Australian Task Force area.  
former Phuoc Tuy Province

Figure 5.6

Former Australian Soldiers’ Club and Harold Holt Memorial Pool.  
Vung Tau
(dubbed the Harold Holt Memorial Pool after that Prime Minster’s putative death by drowning) are now frequented mainly by Russian oilworkers. The Back Beach these days is a holiday resort for Saigon-ites, and its secondary and tertiary dunes are covered with low-rent holiday shacks, but the beach itself is wide and white, with quite a good surf running on the day I was there. A place where Australians would feel at home.

In Saigon, and in Vung Tau, and on the eastern side of the Long Hai Mountains. I had got what I had come for in the South - a sense of place and local custom.

I rounded out the Saigon leg of my Vietnam journey with a visit to Cu Chi, about forty kilometers north-west of the city, near the border with Cambodia. This had been the location of a major American Army base during the war, placed there in an attempt to stem the flow of supplies from the North to the NLF guerrillas in the South, via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The presence of the American base had simply driven the supply route underground, into a network of two hundred and fifty kilometers of tunnels, some of which went right under the American base itself. It is possible for visitors to enter and inspect parts of these tunnels which have been preserved intact as a kind of living war museum. I was taken down into underground kitchens, first-aid stations, meeting halls and living quarters, and given the opportunity to crawl for a hundred metres on my hands and knees in pitch darkness along a connecting tunnel four metres below the surface. It was a very uncomfortable, claustrophobic experience, and a salutary lesson in why America and its allies never had a chance of winning that war.

On my final day in Saigon, I visited the War Crimes Museum, to be outraged by a close view of the huge range of high-tech American weapons of remote destruction, and the photographs of their devastating effects. I could not help but be struck by the contrast between the Western view of the world on display
5. Background Research

Figure 5.7
Underground National Liberation Front Meeting Room.
Cu Chi

Figure 5.8
National Liberation Front War Cemetery.
near Cu Chi
in this museum, and the Vietnamese approach etched in the tunnels of Cu Chi. As I was leaving, my eye was caught by a small glass-fronted case attached to the wall in a corner. In it were mounted a number of American service medals, together with three medals for bravery - two Purple Hearts and a Congressional Medal of Honour (the US equivalent of the Victoria Cross). Engraved on the case was an inscription which read: “To the people of Vietnam. I was wrong. I am sorry.” It was signed by an American soldier. If only, I thought, nations could admit their mistakes as this brave man had done.

The next morning I flew out of Tan Son Nhut on my way back to Australia. My research was complete. I had glimpsed into the troubled minds of ordinary, honourable people whose lives had been irrevocably damaged by the war. My heart had been captivated by the resourceful, resilient, laughing people of Vietnam, and by their beautiful country on whose soil so much blood had been so uselessly spilled. At last I felt ready to start writing my play.
I am what is known in the trade as a story-driven writer. This stems from a preference in my own playgoing and reading for well-structured dramatic narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, and from a reaction against several years of assessing playscripts for the Australian National Playwrights' Centre before I had begun to write seriously myself. The most common problem with even the most promising dramatic ideas was poor construction.

The word 'playwright' is spelled that way for a very good reason. Shipwrights build ships, wheelwrights fashion wheels, and playwrights construct plays. If they construct them badly, they quickly fly apart at the seams. (Niven 286)

Not that I hold plot to be more important than character or theme - or even imagery for that matter - in the development of the play. Plot is character in action, so it is impossible to achieve one without the other. But whenever I get an idea for a play - no matter where that idea comes from - the first steps I take on the long journey to turn it into a play involve ensuring that it can be worked into a good story in three acts (by "acts" in this instance I am referring to structural divisions, not to the points at which the audience might be granted an intermission).

Three-act structure is a theory of dramatic narrative first given comprehensive expression in 1946 by Lajos Egri in his seminal work *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, although in practice it has been around for much longer. It can be stated simply in the following manner:

... find an interesting character and give him [or her] a goal, plant the seeds of opposition to that goal in the first act, escalate the opposition in the second act leading to a moment of truth, and resolve all the elements of conflict in the third act. (Wolf and Cox 39-40)

Or in the colourful language of George M. Cohan, "get your character up a tree,
throw rocks at him, then get him down - dead or alive" (Saks 35). The character may not articulate their goal or even realise they have it; the goal frequently takes the form of a predicament from which the character is forced to extract her/himself. Ideally, the narrative line of every major character should follow this three-act structure, no matter at what stage of the play that character is introduced. However, the first and third acts of the main story - that of the central character - should each comprise no more than twenty-five percent of the total length of the play, with the second act - the complications, the most interesting part of the story - comprising at least fifty percent. Egri and others have demonstrated that many if not most of the world's acknowledged dramatic masterpieces - from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Ibsen's *Ghosts* to Brecht's *Mother Courage* to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* - conform to this structure. (It was from analysing such plays, of course, that the theory was derived.) It is a theory which relates only to structure, placing no restriction on the style or genre of the play, which may be epic or naturalistic or expressionist or absurdist or a whole range of other styles according to the playwright's predilection.

My process for developing a play thoroughly systematic, following a series of stages more usually associated with the development of feature film scripts than scripts for the live theatre. The preparatory stages which occur before the commencement of the first draft of the script are:

- the germination of the dramatic idea;
- expression of the dramatic idea in terms of a story premise;
- selection of a central character of sufficient dramatic strength to embody the story premise;
- tentative sketching in of other characters whose own goals provide obstacles to the central character's goal achievement;
- a very preliminary outlining of the story as a series of brief "plot points" - a process that gives the first assurance that the story is workable and that the central character can carry it;
6. Script Development

- the writing of a fairly detailed prose outline or "treatment" of the play's story; and,

- the writing of detailed "backstories" (pen portraits) of all major characters to flesh out the hitherto hazy sketches.

Only then do I feel ready to embark on a first draft of the playscript proper - before this, not a word of dialogue has been written, although the treatment will have given some indication of what might be said. Of course, the steps listed above rarely happen in such a strict sequence - for example, plot points and character selection frequently happen more or less simultaneously.

Somewhere during the process a choice is made about dramatic style. This is not the exclusive decision of the playwright - designers, actors, and especially directors will influence the style of the final presentation. But the playwright must at least write with a style in mind. In the case of *Hearts and Minds* - for which, in any case, I was to be both writer and director - the style was partly dictated by the decision to use water puppets. I decided that, since realism has dominated Euro-American theatre and its Australian imitators in this century, and remains a style which mainstream theatregoers are comfortable, the style for this project would be a blend of realism with the water puppetry.

The initial story idea for *Hearts and Minds* came with my realisation that enough time had elapsed since the war for veterans to be old enough to have children of the same age - early adulthood - they themselves were when they were soldiers. This put me in mind of the unproduced teleplay, *Maria*, which I had written for the Open Program of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in 1984, and which was itself a development of a scene from the play *Good to Better?* which I had written for Jika Jika Theatre earlier the same year. The central character of *Maria* is a young Italo-Australian woman whose romantic involvement with an Irish-Australian man brings her into conflict with her culturally hidebound parents. It occurred to me that if the son or daughter of a veteran were to become romantically interested in a Vietnamese person, this might be sufficiently threatening to the veteran to trigger delayed
post-trauma stress disorders. I checked this with Zsuzsa Barta, my contact at the VVCS. Her reaction was a most definite "yes". So here I had the beginnings of a story and three characters - a young Anglo-Australian, his or her father (a Vietnam veteran), and his or her boy/girlfriend, a Vietnamese Australian.

As early as mid-1990, Theatre South - Wollongong's professional company - had given an in-principle commitment to including my play in its 1992 subscription season. Theatre South is a small mainstream company with a reputation for balancing its more commercial ventures with innovative, risk-taking ones. Its home is the Bridge Theatre, an intimate 130-seat converted community hall arranged in a semi-circular thrust configuration with entrances through upstage wings and a central vomitorium through the audience. The script of *Hearts and Minds* was developed within parameters defined by the resources and constraints of this company.

In April 1991 - very early in the script development process - the company's Artistic Director, Des Davis (also one of my DCA supervisors), asked me for a title and some kind of synopsis to include in his funding submissions for 1992 subsidy from the Australia Council and the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts. At that stage I had given little thought to possible titles, so I scanned the oral histories looking for a word or phrase to encapsulate my embryonic story. The closest I could find was in Noel Giblett's *Homecomings* where I found this quote from an anonymous veteran:

Some people might laugh at this, but I'm going to say it anyway. Vietnam veterans are a special breed of men. When you go to the supermarket, or the footy, I can pick 'em and I see them looking at me. They know. And they know that I know. We share a secret, a secret pain about what we went through, particularly what we were put through when we came home. (Giblett 55)

The working title became *A Secret Pain*. I was not happy with it for a final title - who would be attracted to see a play with such a name? - but it was a phrase that neatly distilled the idea of a veteran suppressing guilt, moral confusion and trauma in a seemingly unsympathetic society.
After grappling for some time with the issue of genders for the young couple - would the story be better served if the child of the veteran were a son or a daughter? - I concluded that the psychological threat to the veteran would probably be greater if his child was a son whose involvement with a Vietnamese woman somehow mirrored or was an inversion of a relationship the veteran himself had had with a Vietnamese woman or women during the war.

I also had to establish a plausible environment in which a relationship between the veteran's son and the young Vietnamese woman might develop. One such place very familiar to me at the time was the University of Wollongong campus, which has a large contingent of Asian students, many of them Vietnamese. It seemed just the kind of environment in which two young adults from different cultures might meet and get to know each other free of the expected behavioural codes of their own communities, so that an intercultural romance might develop.

Having made these basic decisions, I wrote the following "synopsis" for Theatre South's funding submissions:

Skip Small, an Australian veteran of the war in Vietnam, has always prided himself on the way he's coped with his war experiences, never suffering post-war stress disorders or other health problems. But Skip's smugness is shattered when his twenty-year-old son Donny brings his new girlfriend, Mai, home from university to meet the family. She's attractive, intelligent - and Vietnamese...

A cross-cultural blend of realism with nightmarish fantasy, in which actors perform together with traditional Vietnamese water puppets, A Secret Pain is both an exploration of multiculturalism and a metaphor for Australia's changing relationship with Asia.

Of course, this is not a synopsis at all, but an enunciation of the play's premise or dramatic starting point. It is similar to what is known in the screen trade as a "pitching statement", designed to capture the attention of potential producers and backers. In this case, it seemed to do its job by satisfying the funding bodies.

Funding, or more precisely budget limitations, were an important factor in the further development of the script. As a small regional company Theatre
South has very restricted resources. It is subsidised not only from the usual sources such as government arts organisations and corporate sponsors, but also by its small permanent staff who work long and irregular hours for award minimum wages without overtime supplements. The company is also assisted considerably by its association with the School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong, whose theatre students and staff undertake a substantial amount of unpaid work as occasional technicians and performers in return for the opportunity to work in a professional milieu. Yet despite all this assistance and the loyal support of a regular audience built up over more than a decade, the company’s survival is never guaranteed. Expenditures are therefore severely constrained. Large professional casts and expensive sets are out of the question.

Bearing this in mind, I had set myself the task of limiting the cast to five - a number with which Des Davis indicated the company could cope financially. (By that stage it had been determined that the puppeteers were to be university students from the School of Creative Arts, and so would not need to be paid.) Apart from whatever the puppetry might offer (which will be further discussed later in this chapter), this meant I would either be limited to five characters, or would need to write the script in such a way that some or all of the actors could play more than one character. I have, however, never been fond of “doubling” in a play on purely financial grounds - it requires an extraordinary ability to adopt different “masks” that few actors possess, even those who are otherwise highly skilled. Doubling where there is a dramatic point to be made by having the same actor play more than one role is another matter. I therefore decided to restrict myself to five main characters unless any doubling could be justified dramaturgically.

It seemed clear that one of the additional characters would need to be a parent of the young Vietnamese woman, Mai. This would balance the conflict of the Anglo family with conflict in the Vietnamese family, and enable a
comparision of attitudes to cross-cultural relationships from both sides. It also seemed clear that for reasons of balance this character should be a woman: if Skip was to be portrayed as a victim of the war from the male Australian viewpoint, Mai's mother could demonstrate the suffering both of women and of the Vietnamese. It must also be acknowledged that the majority of people from the Vietnamese community with whom I had spoken during the research phase of the project were women, so that theirs were the experiences with which I was most familiar.

Having decided on these four characters, the fifth fell easily into place as the wife of Skip and mother of Donny. It seemed essential to have her as a buffer between Skip and Donny, as a deeply concerned witness to Skip's degeneration into near-insanity, and as a possible conciliator and catalyst for the resolution of the play. In contrast, it was not important for Mai to have a father as well as a mother - indeed, the absence of a Vietnamese husband/father could be tied in with Mai's mother's own "secret pain" of guilt and remorse associated with the war, its aftermath, and especially the escape from Vietnam.

In selecting names, I opted for what I hoped would be a subtle symbolism which would give some kind of universal resonance to the characters. "Skip" is a term for Anglo-Australians used by NES-background immigrants. The name is intended to suggest that, in Anglo terms at least, Skip may be a kind of Everyman. The choice of surname - initially as "Small", then finally as "Ordman" - was meant to reinforce this notion: a conscious imitation of Arthur Miller's choice of "Loman" in *Death of a Salesman*. I rejected "Small" in favour of "Ordman" because I know a real woman called Norma Small - an American nurse who served in Vietnam - and I wished to avoid any implication that the Norma character might be based on her. "Donny" is a contraction of "donnybrook", a colloquial term for an argument or brawl - a note to his character. "Norma" was intended to convey both ordinariness and a quality of
stability and strength. "Mai" is the name of a beautiful Vietnamese flower, while "Phuong" is Vietnamese for phoenix, the legendary bird that rises from the ashes of its own defeat. The surname "Nguyen" is the most common name in Vietnam.

The next step was to fabricate a tentative narrative structure in the form of plot points. This was done in the form of handwritten notes, with much scrubbing out and restarting and dragging the narrative back from tangential trajectories. By June 1991, however, I had achieved a sequence of twenty points which constituted a workable, if extremely bare, structure for the play. The plot points are listed in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

The process of formulating this skeletal structure had clarified the issue of just whose story it was, and therefore who would be the central character. My instinct had been inclined towards Skip, but as the narrative was shaping up it was abundantly clear that the story was Donny's. At base, it was simply an old-fashioned tale of love in the "boy meets girl, boy goes after girl, boy almost loses girl, boy gets girl" tradition. What made it different was the culturally-based nature of the obstacles - Mai's reticence, Phuong's opposition, Skip's aggression, Norma's apparent alliance with Skip, and Donny's own blundering insensitivity - which he would have to overcome to win his heart's desire.

I felt there would be several advantages in working from a simple love story. The first was that it would provide an element of instant recognition to the audience, and therefore construct an accessible path into the murky jungle of prejudice and xenophobia with which the play would deal. The second was that, in structural terms, it was possible to make Act One - the establishment of the central character's goal and predicament - very short. Donny's goal is clear as soon as he asks her out, and his predicament is established when she refuses him. Act One is accomplished with the completion of the very first plot point.
This allows a small luxury of extra time in Act Two for Donny’s goal of winning Mai’s heart to place the other characters in predicaments which engender their own narrative trajectories. Mai’s predicament is that she is drawn to Donny despite the strict behavioural codes and expectations of her mother and community. Phuong’s is that by imposing the strict codes of her background to appease the spirit of her dead husband, she risks losing the only thing that matters to her - her daughter. Skip’s problem is the need to keep his guilt and shame suppressed in the face of a major threat in the form of his son’s attraction to a Vietnamese woman. Norma’s goal is to prevent her family from disintegrating under the pressure of Donny’s stubbornness and Skip’s teetering on the brink of dangerous insanity.

Having thus made a satisfactory beginning with the narrative structure, it was time to consider the puppetry. Two potential ways of integrating it had occurred to me during my trip to Vietnam. The first was to begin my play with a brief vignette as similar as possible to the puppetry as I had seen it performed in Hanoi and Saigon. This would serve to introduce the audience to the concept of water puppetry (with whom most would be totally unfamiliar) and prepare them for its on-going use throughout the play. It also meant that the whole play could be established as a story told by the traditional puppet master of ceremonies, Chu Teu, thus immediately establishing common ground between the two cultures by linking their traditions of dramatic storytelling.

The second application of puppetry I had already conceived was in the area of flashbacks. These are, of course, common and widely accepted dramatic devices for revealing events from a character’s past. The subject matter of my play gave the use of such devices additional dramaturgical justification, because veterans suffering from post-trauma stress disorders (PTSD’s) frequently experience a kind of waking nightmare in which they relive the past incidents which brought about the trauma. These waking nightmares are commonly
6. Script Development

called flashbacks. Any flashback scenes in my play, therefore, would probably be aiming for a nightmarish effect which could only be enhanced by the fact that the use of slightly bizarre, stiff-jointed, human-yet-inhuman, water-walking puppets.

The fact that I had chosen water puppets posed a considerable challenge for development of the script. Water puppetry, as described in Chapter 5, requires a pool of water deep enough to come up to a puppeteer's waist and with enough surface area to be divided by a screen to make the water stage in front and the puppeteers' space behind. Effectively, this means a body of water no smaller than a small backyard swimming pool. Such a pool weighs well over a tonne when full - not something that can be trucked on and off stage during scene changes. Unless there could be some simple way of covering it quickly, the pool would have to be a permanent feature on stage, and therefore part of the set for each scene. Given both the budgetary constraints and the limitations of Theatre South's performing space, the Bridge Theatre, I felt it was better not to rely on the possibility of devising a way of covering the pool. In any case, I had set myself the task of integrating the puppetry into the action of the whole play. I therefore decided to place all my scenes in settings which included some kind of water feature which in turn would permit the use of puppets.

This presented an exciting opportunity to explore the contrast between Australian and Vietnamese attitudes to water. In Vietnam - a very wet country - water is a fundamental part of the spiritual fabric of the culture, and is treated with a respect verging on reverence. In Australia - a very dry country - water is taken for granted, often squandered. Its foremost place in the psyche of Australian urban-dwellers is as a medium of leisure or decoration. I therefore chose four primary settings:

- a jungle pool in which to play the opening scene of traditional water puppetry;

- a quiet, contemplative outdoor corner of a university campus, complete with duck pond, for scenes between Mai and Donny (I did not wish to specify a particular
university, although the University of Wollongong features several such locations);

- the summer terrace and swimming pool in the backyard of the suburban home of Skip, Norma and Donny; and

- the small garden, landscaped in the manner of a domestic courtyard in rural Vietnam (including a fish pond), at the rear of the Housing Commission town house where Phuong and Mai live.

I envisaged that these four primary locations could be represented by a single basic stage set, to which minor alterations could be made to indicate location changes for each scene. This also allowed the same set to become other secondary locations such as rice paddies in Vietnam, during flashback scenes.

Conceptualising the flashbacks indicated in the plot points raised a problem which needed to be solved before the next stage of script development. If Skip was to be represented as reliving incidents from his past, his waking dreams would need to be peopled with characters other than himself. He would need fellow soldiers with which to communicate, and Vietnamese people - the rape victim at least, but possibly Viet Cong soldiers as well - against whom to act. Traditionally, however, water puppets are about one-third the scale of real humans, with the tallest - Chu Teu - standing no more than 600 millimetres above the water surface. While this size difference presented some exciting opportunities - to create a false perspective and therefore a sense of distance, for instance, or to reflect visually the David-and-Goliath relativity of the NLF's struggle against the might of America and its allies - it also conjured up prospects of unintended comic effects, such as the grotesquery of a human actor raping a small wooden doll. I also felt that to have non-Vietnamese characters such as Skip's fellow soldiers portrayed by water puppets would be too great a departure from the tradition and a distortion of the cultural balance.

My solution was to find a midline between actor and puppet, creating a range of characters which were played by actors but non-naturalistically - masked, costumed in stiff material and mimed with mechanical, puppet-like movements, and with offstage vocalisation like the actual puppets. This, of
course, demanded either a larger cast of actors - out of the question financially - or a decision to incorporate the doubling which I had so far sought to avoid. However, it seemed possible that any Vietnamese character in flashbacks - the rape victim, for instance - might be played by a puppeteer rather than an actor, as their appearances would be brief, their puppet-like movements could be closely choreographed, and the actors could vocalise them by the same voice-over technique used in the puppetry segments.

This left the problem of Skip's soldier colleagues. It seemed possible that one other soldier - perhaps a close mate of Skip's - might suffice. Unlike the Vietnamese characters, however, such a character would of necessity be more naturalistic (that is, not mechanical like a puppet), and would make longer appearances, with more to say, than the Vietnamese characters. This role would therefore have to be played by an actor, doubling with one of the roles already established. And as Donny was the only other male character, it would have to be the actor playing Donny. The question then became how to justify the doubling dramaturgically. The answer was to invent a character who was not only Skip's best mate, but also his mentor and protector as a rookie soldier - someone to whom Skip owed a great deal, perhaps even his life - and name this soldier character Donny as well. If he had been killed in Vietnam - a convenient way of making sure he did not have to appear in the play's present reality - it would be credible, even natural, that Skip might have wanted to name his son after him. Moreover, if the manner of his mate's death was the cause - or at least part of the cause - of Skip's secret pain, naming his son for that mate might work in Skip's mind as an appeasement of Donny's ghost - even a kind of resurrection. So was born the character of Donny Smith, with that most common of Anglo-Australian surnames again intended to connote a kind of Everyman.

One further decision had to be made before I embarked on the next stage. Des Davis had confirmed my own misgivings about the working title of the
piece, and had asked me to come up with a final one as soon as possible so it
could be integrated into early publicity for the 1992 season. In any case, a good
title can itself have an effect on the angle of approach to writing the text, so it
was important to settle the issue at this stage. Looking for inspiration, I scoured
the histories of the war and particularly the glossaries of slang, acronyms and
military jargon from the time. I quickly dismissed such prosaic possibilities as
"Wounded in Action" and "Victims of War". I lingered over the potential of
"Bodycount", but rejected it as not having enough direct connection to my story.

Then I remembered the slogan of the Civil Action Program - the cynical
scheme whereby soldiers would sink wells in villages and inoculate children
in an effort to persuade them that it was better to be on the Allied side than on
the side of the Viet Cong. This was officially called "winning hearts and minds".
The Americans even had an acronym for it - WHAMO, or Win Hearts And Minds
Operations. The phrase "hearts and minds" could pick up resonances not only of
the war and its military doublespeak, but also of my play's underlying love story
(the "hearts" aspect) and Skip's brush with insanity (the "minds" angle). Within
a few minutes of my thinking of it, no other title seemed possible.

(There came a few hours of anxiety for me some months later when, just
before the start of rehearsals. I discovered that there was already another
Australian stage play by the same name. To use the title of an existing play is
potentially a breach of copyright, so I made frantic efforts to contact the
playwright, Fred Spalding, and was eventually successful. A Vietnam veteran
himself, he was entirely sympathetic to my plight and, declaring that his play
had run its life, raised no objection to my use of the title. I invited him to the
opening night.)

The next stage in the process was what, for me, is the most crucial and
usually the most difficult stage of the development of any script - the writing of
a detailed script treatment. This is the stage at which the skeletal structure of
6. Script Development

the story is fleshed out to its full dimensions, although the details of the final shape as yet lack definition and refinement. This script was no exception; indeed, if anything it was more difficult, owing to the complexity of the issues involved, the necessity to integrate the puppets, and the fact that I had set myself the task of plotting and intertwining complete three-act narratives for each of the five major characters.

The resulting treatment, completed by early August, was long even by my usual standards, and quite detailed. This detail was necessary, however, in achieving the following:

- confirmation of the structural soundness of the narrative and reinforcing it with detail;
- mapping the thematic and emotional topography - the twists and turning points of the play - with a fair degree of precision;
- arriving at some idea of what expositional information should be included, and where;
- beginning to put some flesh on the bones of the characters;
- beginning to consider how the expositional, characterisational and emotional demands of the theme could be carried through dialogue; and,
- working through the contribution of the puppetry in detail.

The treatment comprises Appendix 3 of this thesis. In developing it, the twenty plot points were compressed into fourteen scenes, all set in one of the four locations described earlier in this chapter. A prologue was added to introduce the puppetry and create a metaphor for the historical context. The playlet chosen for the prologue is one central to Vietnamese historical mythology - the story of Le Loi, the legendary leader who raised a peasant army and expelled the mandarins of the Chinese Ming emperors in the eleventh century. The resonances with the American war were irresistible. The allusion to a magic sword bequeathed by a turtle from a lake, with its obvious echoes of the Arthurian legends of English mythology, made the story doubly suitable.

The prologue set the Le Loi playlet within a framework of storytelling by
the puppet master of ceremonies Chu Teu. It therefore seemed logical to extend that framework to the main story - that is, to establish Donny's story as being one of Chu Teu's as well. This meant bringing Chu Teu back after the conclusion of the Le Loi playlet, in order to segue with the first scene of the main play. It also demanded that Chu Teu return at the very end of Donny's story to balance the prologue and complete the frame - hence the addition of the epilogue.

The main narrative structure showed every sign of being able to cope with the demands made of it as the play's thematic and emotional topography were charted in greater detail and relief, with the twists and turning points tightened and heightened, in the treatment. For example, Donny's gift to Mai, at plot point 1, of a cassette tape of Midnight Oil - that most quintessentially Australian rock band - could become the culturally-based focus of conflict between Mai and Phuong at plot point 3; at plot point 6 Donny's mention of it could rekindle Mai's anger with her mother and give her courage to take Donny home to introduce him, and at plot point 7, it could become a means of embarrassing Phuong into allowing Mai to visit Donny's home and meet his parents.

Plot points 4 and 5 were amalgamated into a single scene. A preliminary flashback - brief and mild, and witnessed by Norma - was introduced early in this scene to prepare the ground for the more substantial one already proposed at plot point 5. A further flashback - again witnessed by Norma - was also added between plot points 8 and 9, to introduce the character of Donny Smith and begin a build-up to the revelation of the atrocity at plot point 13. Yet another - the actual depiction of the rape - was added after plot point 9, because there was other material to be dealt with in the flashback at plot point 13 - the aftermath of the rape, leading to the death of Donny Smith in such a manner that Skip blames himself. The actual rape, as a major turning point occurring about half-way through the play, seemed an appropriate "cliff-hanger" moment at which to plot the interval - the various narrative trajectories of the characters
having been sufficiently well established and complicated to carry the momentum through a twenty-minute break.

Points 10, 11 and 12 were amalgamated in a single scene dealing with the wash-up of the disastrous events the night before.

Then came the only major change made to the structural shape of the play during the development of the treatment - a reversal of plot points 13 and 14. This was done for reasons of rhythm. In the original design, the angry, ugly scene represented by plot points 10, 11 and 12 was followed immediately by another angry, ugly scene in Skip's flashback to the rape of the woman in Vietnam (plot point 13). Separating them with plot point 14, the scene of Donny's love declaration - a scene intended to be tender and optimistic - provided a different, though still intense, emotional level and a strong contrast in tone and content.

The scene represented by plot point 15 remained essentially the same, but with the addition of Phuong's vision of dancing peacocks at the end, after Norma had left. These were an important presage of Phuong's eventual decision to withdraw her resistance to the relationship between Donny and Mai, and to seek conciliation and understanding with Skip in the resolution of the play.

The dramatic crisis of the play, represented by plot point 16, was fleshed out into a swimming lesson given by Donny to Mai, picking up on the contrasting attitudes to water alluded to earlier in this chapter. The early part of the lesson, with scantily-clad bodies and the necessity of physical contact, provided an opportunity for a gentle build-up of sexual tension between the young couple. As the lesson progressed, however, Mai's own sense of guilt about not having been able to save her drowning father during the escape from Vietnam created the possibility of her suddenly panicking in the middle of the lesson, which in turn created a struggle between Donny and Mai which could replicate the struggle between the rape victim and Donny Smith in the previous
flashbacks. This set the present scene for Skip's further flashback and his confusion of his son with Donny Smith, and thence to Skip's desperate attempts to reverse the course of history and prevent Donny Smith from perpetrating the atrocity. The resulting near-drowning of Donny provided a suitably catastrophic dramatic crisis with which to conclude the second structural act.

The following two plot points, 17 and 18, could logically be amalgamated to provide the main resolution in both dramatic and thematic terms. Skip could be dissuaded from taking his own life by Phuong's gesture of conciliation, and Phuong's telling of her own story of guilt and shame could provide both a balance to Skip's and a catharsis for Phuong. I decided to bring Norma back at the end of the scene, to pick up her anger at Skip's action; there had been no suitable moment for this at the point of crisis with Donny apparently drowned.

The final two plot points were also amalgamated into a single scene, giving Mai a chance to bring about a reconciliation between Donny and Skip, and tying up the love story with Mai's revelation of Phuong's symbolic vision of peacock's dancing, apparently sent by her dead husband's spirit.

The detailing of the narrative represented by the treatment also advanced other aspects of the script's development, such as a preliminary placement of expository information at appropriate points, and a thorough working through not only of the puppetry (with some form of puppetry now being present in nearly every scene) but also of the use of the pool of water for purposes other than puppetry. Some flesh had also begun to appear on the raw bones of the characters.

Nonetheless, at this stage the characters remained fairly hazy in my mind - not yet familiar enough to ensure that a distinct voice would emerge for each in the writing of the first draft. I therefore undertook the final preparatory stage of writing backstories of the main characters. My process for this was, for each character, to respond to a list questions recorded in Egri's *The Art of*
Dramatic Writing (36-37). The backstories of the five main characters comprise Appendix 4 of this document.

Of course, much of the information included in these portraits never finds its way into the script, nor is it important that it should do so. Moreover, the portraits are not designed to be used as guidelines for the actors portraying the characters - on the contrary, it is essential that actors are given the freedom to bring their own imaginative creativity to the interpretation of the characters. The purpose of the portrait exercise is one of writer familiarity, making the characters live in my mind with as much reality as possible so that their unique individuality pervades their every word and action as it transpires on the page. This is probably what other writers sententiously refer to as "characters writing themselves", but in my case there is nothing mystical about it - it can only happen as the result of meticulous preparation.

Before writing the character portraits I had given copies of the script treatment to my DCA supervisors, Ron Pretty from the School of Creative Arts and Des Davis from Theatre South, who at this stage of the process were jointly performing the role of dramaturg. Mr Davis gave me a verbal go-ahead, indicating his general approval of the treatment together with his desire to reserve detailed comments until the first draft stage. Mr Pretty also expressed general approval, with his main reservation expressed in a memorandum to me in early September 1991:

At present it feels a bit too direct. A leads to B leads to C, with very little slippage. For example, I felt the need of something else, something different, between Scenes 1 and 2 in the first act. Or perhaps just a bit more variety at the beginning of Scene 2; we seem to be into the cultural complexities too quickly (despite both their disclaimers). I missed the complexities of ordinary living. Such things of course may be suggested in the dialogue, but I wondered about the possibilities of sub-plots or at least undercurrents. I know that keeping the number of actors down is at a premium in these lean times, but a sibling in either of the families would open up all sorts of possibilities.

While I acknowledged the pertinence of this observation, additional cast members were impossible financially. It was necessary to try to achieve
"slippage" - a subplot or at least undercurrents - within the existing cast limits and within the same basic structure.

Mr Pretty's concerns had focussed particularly on the beginning of Act One Scene Two, and the lack of the complexities of day-to-day life. In my own review of the treatment, I had already decided that the first sight of Skip at Act One Scene Four was not early enough to allow him enough development before pitching him into the flashbacks. Bringing him into the beginning of Scene Two had the potential to address both these problems. A sense of Ordman family life - the constant sparring between Donny and Skip, with Norma as referee - could be established. The problem of fixing a broken electric fan could gently introduce the issue of Skip's psychic sensitivity regarding his Vietnam experience before that sensitivity was exacerbated by the threat of Mai.

The question of a sub-plot was more difficult to address without additional characters. However, it seemed to me that there were arguably two plotlines - albeit closely interwoven ones - already in the story: the boy-meets-girl strand referred to earlier in this chapter, and another strand dealing with Skip's slide towards insanity. If these two strands - older generation versus younger generation - could be teased apart a little further, perhaps the problem of "slippage" would be resolved or at least reduced to tolerable levels.

Bearing this in mind, three further small but significant changes, in addition to the one in Act One Scene Two mentioned above, were made to the superstructure of the story as the first draft took shape. In Act One Scene Four, for example, it became Mai, rather than Donny, who gave Phuong the lecture about coming to terms with living in Australia rather than trying to build a small corner of Vietnam. This change achieved three desirable ends: it helped to demarcate the older-generation plot strand from the younger; it made Mai a stronger, more independent-minded character; and it made Donny less boorish and therefore more sympathetic.
As a way of raising stakes in the scene in which Skip is introduced to Mai, I contrived for Phuong to insist on accompanying her as chaperone. This not only made the threat to Skip stronger - not just one but two Vietnamese in his own back yard - but it also made the social disaster of Skip’s drunken, obnoxious behaviour worse and therefore the path of Donny’s courtship of Mai all the more slippery. It also reduced the need for exposition when later Norma asks for help from Phuong - the latter has witnessed Skip’s behaviour at first hand and therefore needs no explanation of Norma’s motives. Similarly, when Phuong finds Skip on the verge of suicide after his violence to Donny, she has no need to explain who she is. She has also had a chance to consider and begin to understand Skip’s behaviour in relation to her own “secret pain”, as a result both of having met him and having seen the consequences of his behaviour.

The third change between treatment and first draft was to make the peasant rape victim’s weapon - the one with which she attacks Donny - a knife rather than a pistol. For a woman to carry a concealable weapon would almost certainly designate her a member of the Viet Cong, which some members of the audience might have felt was enough to justify her treatment by Donny Smith. The question of whether or not she was an NLF member or sympathiser was irrelevant to her fate at Donny Smith’s hands, so I contrived to have her use the kind of knife that any peasant might carry when working in the rice fields.

The final change between treatment and first draft again involved Phuong. By the time I came to write Act Two Scene Six - the scene of tentative conciliation between Skip and Phuong - I had already written all the flashback scenes concerning Skip and Donny Smith, and so was much clearer in my mind as to the nature of Skip’s “secret pain”, which revolved around the fact that he had taken part in a sexual atrocity which had resulted in the death of his best mate. It seemed that the conciliation between Skip and Phuong would be more dramatically satisfying if her “secret pain” could parallel Skip’s. Her gesture
towards Skip therefore became focussed on her having sold her own sexual favours as a means of winning a place for her family on an escape boat, only to have her husband killed in the actual escape attempt. (As mentioned in Chapter 5, I had heard a story of a woman prostituting herself for such purposes during my research.)

Apart from these changes, the first draft generally followed and fleshed out the structure that had been set down in the treatment. There was now a decision to be made about the form of the dialogue.

My decision to adopt a realistic style has been discussed earlier in this chapter. Yet realism can itself encompass a range of styles, from the naturalistic to the epic, and it was towards the latter that I thought I wished to push *Hearts and Minds*. I also wanted to create a distinction between the English spoken by those characters accustomed to speaking it, and those - particularly Phuong - for whom speaking it was a struggle. This seemed to point to a possible parallel with the way in which dialogue styles were broken up in the plays of the English Renaissance, with high-born characters speaking in blank verse and low-born ones speaking prose. I was also attracted by the rhythmic momentum of blank verse, and interested to see if the Australian version of English could be successfully adapted to it. I decided, therefore, to experiment with a blank verse style in the first draft.

After writing five scenes in this style, I gave it to my supervisors/dramaturgs for comment. Both of them advised against continuing with it on the basis that the result was over-writing rather than better writing.

To quote Ron Pretty:

I'm not convinced that blank verse is the way to go; the use of iambic pentameter is having too damaging an effect on the quality of the dialogue. I feel that the dialogue is saying too much, and often tends to be gauche rather than heightened. Some of these lines, I think, would be very hard to deliver.

Both Mr Pretty and Mr Davis felt that such epic qualities as were inherent in the
story structure were being adequately brought out with the use of the puppets and flashbacks, and that Phuong's dialogue as I had written it so far had sufficiently captured the broken rhythms and inaccuracies of grammar and syntax expected in such a person. I therefore decided to abandon the experiment in blank verse. For the record, however, a copy of Act One Scene Two written in this style is subjoined to this thesis as Appendix 5.

Having rendered the already-completed verse scenes back into prose, cutting obviously extraneous words in the process, I continued to write the rest of the play in prose. The first draft was completed by the end of January 1992. Two scenes of this draft - Act One Scene Two and Act Two Scene Seven - are subjoined to this thesis as Appendix 6, to record samples of this draft and to enable comparisons with the same scenes in later drafts.

The reactions of my supervisors/dramaturgs to the first draft were generally favourable, although they reserved detailed commentary until a reading workshop of the play on Thursday 13 February. This workshop, organized by Theatre South and held at the Bridge Theatre, was a largely in-house affair using regular staff from the company as actors, with no attempt to cast it exactly for age or ethnicity. The reading was virtually "cold" in as much as none of the cast had read the script more than once prior to the event. It was attended by other staff from the company - the designer, costume maker, and head of workshop, for example - together with Ron Pretty and Clem Gorman, the newly appointed lecturer in playwriting at the School of Creative Arts.

This reading and the discussion which followed proved extremely useful in the further development of the script. Hearing it off the page for the first time, the first thing that was obvious was how overwritten it was, especially the first half of the first act which was overcrowded with unnecessary exposition. I had anticipated much of this, because although some may have been a legacy of the experiment with blank verse, most was a deliberate inclusion as much detail
from the research base and character portraits as possible at the earliest available opportunities. Too much exposition too soon in the first draft can easily be fixed in subsequent drafts; too little too late is much harder to rectify.

Apart from this need for a fairly ruthless pruning, however, several other important changes resulted from the workshop feedback. Mr Pretty still felt there could be more non-plot-directed material at the beginning of Act One Scene Two, to establish more of everyday Ordman family life before the introduction of the cultural complexities. In an attempt to alleviate this, I took some of the material surrounding the fixing of the fan out of Scene Four and put it into the beginning of Scene Two, building into it the bickering nature of the relationship between Skip and Donny, Norma's mediation of that bickering, and some expositional material about Skip's position as a union official and member of the Labor Party and Norma's job with Telecom.

Feedback from the workshop also indicated that there might be some problem with the beginning of Act One Scene Seven. As Mr Pretty put it in a memorandum to me:

When we last saw Skip, he had decided to be tolerant and rational. I think we need to see his deterioration to the point where this scene opens; otherwise I don't feel his behaviour is sufficiently motivated: all we really have is Skip's unprovoked boorishness.

I was not entirely convinced that this would be a problem in the playing, because the two incidents of flashback in Scene Four had by this stage given ample evidence that Skip felt threatened by even the thought of Mai, let alone her actual presence. To provide more exposition as to the reason for Skip's drunkenness at the beginning of Scene Seven seemed to fly in the face of the strong advice I had received regarding greater subtlety of exposition generally. I therefore felt that Skip's explanation of his drunkenness could wait until later in the scene, at the point where he tells Norma that he thought it would help as a form of social lubrication.
A further change was made because of a concern expressed by Des Davis and endorsed by others that Skip would be a more sympathetic character - especially to women - if he had not actually participated in the rape of the Vietnamese peasant woman except as a bystander who had failed to prevent it despite the dictates of his conscience. This made immediate sense to me - one of those suggestions that is so obvious it makes you wonder why you hadn't thought of it yourself. There was no need for Skip to rape the woman himself: this could be left to Donny Smith who, because he almost immediately meets his death, could be given major responsibility for the atrocity without a need to nurture audience sympathy for him. Not that his action was unmotivated: it was still important to have his behaviour based in his distress about the previous death of his mate Roy, near the end of a long and very arduous patrol.

The other major suggestion resulting from the workshop was to eliminate the passage depicting a tentative reconciliation between Donny and Skip from Act Two Scene Seven. Some of the workshop participants were in favour of eliminating Act Two Scene Seven altogether, feeling that the drama had already been powerfully resolved in the previous scene between Skip and Phuong. Scene Six, however, only resolved the plot strand involving Skip's slide into insanity. I felt it important that the boy-meets-girl love story, as the primary plot strand, ought to have its remaining loose ends tied up. The solution was to restrict the scene to Mai and Donny, and keep it as brief as possible.

With all these suggestions in mind I set about editing the script into a second draft. Although this did not involve nearly the same amount of work as any of the previous stages, it was not completed until the middle of March because by that stage the pre-production demands on my time as director of the play were beginning to become substantial. Nonetheless, the second draft produced a much tighter script - about ten percent shorter - with the suggested changes incorporated. Second draft copies of Act One Scene Two and Act Two
Scene Seven together comprise Appendix 7 of this thesis.

Both my supervisors/dramaturgs felt that the script could be tighter still. I was still too close to the script to be completely objective, so we agreed that they would each independently go through it and “blue pencil” those areas where they felt it was still too wordy. Oddly, they mostly picked different lines; there was very little concurrence between their opinions of passages still overwritten. This was very useful to me, however, because I was able to prune the script even harder than if they had both reached the same conclusions. Writing my third draft - the one which would become the script with which we would commence rehearsals - was therefore mainly a matter of making further cuts to the script along the lines suggested by my advisors. For example, the following passage in Act One Scene Five of the second draft:

**DONNY** Uhuh.

_Pause._

Look, in spite of what happened, I'd still like to go out with you. A date.

**MAI** Donny. I thought I made it clear. I can't.

**DONNY** So you keep saying, but you don't say why.

_Pause._

Look, if our friendship's serious enough for you to worry we might have blown it, you might at least do me the courtesy of telling me the reason.

**MAI** I don't think you'd understand.

became, in the third draft, the following:

**DONNY** Uhuh.

_Pause._

I'd still like to go out with you.

**MAI** Donny. I thought I made it clear. I can't.

**DONNY** So you keep saying, but you don't say why.

**MAI** I... I don't think you'd understand.
This typifies the kinds of edits made throughout the script in the third draft.

There was one minor dramaturgical change made at this stage. Because I came to playwriting from a background in directing, my writing is usually underpinned by a cognizance of the practicalities of staging such as allowing sufficient time between exits and entrances for actors to change costumes if required. For example, the passage at the beginning Act Two Scene Six where the phone rings, and Skip vociferously refuses to answer it, all takes place offstage to allow time for Skip to change out of the wet clothes of the previous scene. However, in bringing Phuong into the beginning of Act One Scene Seven, I had neglected to allow enough time for her to change from the previous scene. I therefore contrived to have the drunken Skip onstage alone at the barbecue for a period at the top of this scene, listening with growing frustration and paranoia to the sounds of merriment from within. This had the additional benefit of addressing some of Mr Pretty's concerns regarding motivation for Skip's boorish behaviour in the scene.

The third draft was finished by the end of March. I then engaged the services of a woman from the Vietnamese community in Wollongong, Viet Do, to translate to Vietnamese language passages into Vietnamese. Her instructions were to translate not too literally, but to find colloquial Vietnamese equivalents to the English version I had written. Ms Do completed the translations just prior to the start of rehearsals on 14 April.

During the rehearsal period, further cuts were made to the script. Most of these were minor - things that could be achieved by a gesture or look between actors without the support of words. However substantial cuts were made in two particular areas - the puppetry and the scenes in Vietnamese. The puppetry cuts were made particularly to the length of Chu Teu's speeches, when it became apparent that the limited movements available to the puppets could not provide enough visual variety to sustain audience interest through longer speeches.
The cuts to the passages in Vietnamese - especially to Act One Scene Three - were made primarily because the actor playing Phuong could not speak Vietnamese and was having trouble learning it. The Vietnamese passages were therefore severely lopped. This had the secondary benefit of confining Act Two Scene Three to its absolute bare essentials, leaving the dramatic action abundantly clear to non-Vietnamese-speakers. I suspect that even if the actor playing Phuong had spoken fluent Vietnamese I would still have made the cuts for the benefit of clarity to non-Vietnamese-speaking audiences.

A copy of the complete script as finally performed can be found in Volume One of this thesis.

Of course, it was not only during the rehearsal period that work on the script coincided with work on the production of the play. Preliminary production work had started as early as July 1991, before even the treatment was complete, let alone any draft with dialogue. The process of preparing the production from those early stages through to the opening night, is the subject of the next chapter.
My desire to direct as well as write the play was based on the fact that it presented a deeply personal vision - exploring hitherto uncharted waters in its intercultural issues and their theatrical reflection with the use of puppetry - which I wished to carry through to its full conclusion. This seemed particularly apt in the context of the play's being the linchpin of a doctoral degree program, so it was on the basis that I would both write and direct that the project was accepted by the School of Creative Arts.

Because I knew I would be directing it, the staging of the play inevitably exercised my mind from the outset, and production decisions began to be made as early as the research phase and especially during the development of the script. Most of these early decisions related to the problems of integrating the water puppetry with actor-based realism.

When in May 1990 - very early in the DCA program - I attended the Australian National Playwrights' Conference for its puppetry workshop, I made the acquaintance of Steve Coupe and Sue Wallace who together comprise Sydney Puppet Theatre, Sydney's only professional puppetry company since the demise of the Australian Marionette Theatre. When I described my embryonic project to them, they expressed interest in becoming involved if funds could be found.

I asked Des Davis, who had already committed Theatre South to the project in principle, whether the company's financial resources would run to paying a couple of professional puppeteers as well as the cast of five or six I had in mind at that stage. He told me that, given the extent of the company's risk on a new, untried play there was no way he could budget for large houses, so all spending on my project would need to be kept to a minimum. In other words, there would
be no money for puppeteers from the company's normal sources of box-office takings combined with subsidy from federal and state governments.

Mr Davis did, however, suggest that I apply for additional funds from the Australia Council, and offered to support the application wholeheartedly. He also suggested that I do this in two stages: firstly, an application for Creative Development assistance to cover the research and development phase of the puppetry; and secondly, a follow-up application, perhaps made by the company rather than me, to assist the rehearsal and performance phase. Mr Davis expressed the opinion that the application to the Australia Council ought to have a reasonable chance of success, given that the project encompassed two areas of growing interest to the Council at the time: Asia/Pacific issues and cross-artform integrations.

I therefore set about preparing an application for Creative Development funding. In early September 1990, however - about two months before the November 15 deadline for the Australia Council application - Steve Coupe and Sue Wallace informed me that owing to continuing and increasing commitments in Sydney, combined with a reluctance to commute on a regular basis to Wollongong, they could no longer commit to my project.

When I reported my disappointment at this development to my principal supervisor Ron Pretty, he suggested I approach Dale Woodward, a local Wollongong-based puppeteer who had studied for a Master's degree in the School of Creative Arts some years previously. This I immediately did, and was delighted when Mr Woodward agreed to take the place of Sydney Puppet Theatre in my grant application to the Australia Council.

However my research into the water puppets, even at that early stage, told me that each puppet required at least one operator, and common sense therefore dictated that if there were to be interaction between puppets in the play, there would need to be at least two puppeteers. The fact that Mr Woodward was
singular, as opposed to the duo that had comprised Sydney Puppet Theatre, therefore posed the problem of where to find at least one more puppeteer. There was also another problem associated with Mr Woodward’s participation: his usual occupation as a drama teacher in a local secondary school meant he would have difficulty fitting into the normal daytime rehearsal schedule of a professional theatre company.

The solution presented itself in the form of a new kind of undergraduate subject being offered in the School of Creative Arts. The new Head of the School, Professor Barry Conyngham, had introduced Interdisciplinary Projects as a means of promoting Bauhaus-style cross-artform interaction among the various strands of the School - Theatre, Music, Writing and Visual Arts. I was already working part-time as a lecturer in writing for the School, so I put forward a proposal to offer an Interdisciplinary Project in Puppetry for the second semester of 1991. The proposed project would comprise an introductory course in puppetry, with myself as convenor and involving contributions from the School’s sculpture lecturer, Ian Gentle, the Technical Officer (Sculpture), Dick Taylor, and of course Dale Woodward. My hope was that this project would recruit and give basic training to a number of undergraduate students who would then participate in a follow-up Interdisciplinary Project, focussing on the production of my play, in the first semester of 1992. The School accepted this proposal on the proviso that it did not have to find any funds to pay Mr Woodward. My submission to the Australia Council therefore became an application to cover fees for Mr Woodward’s contribution.

It seemed, however, that the fashionability of my project was not enough to outweigh the Council’s longstanding reluctance to fund projects with which universities are associated. In May 1991 I was advised that my application was unsuccessful. This left me with two major problems: no professional puppeteer involved in my project, and an Interdisciplinary Project in Puppetry to which
the School was committed, but for which there would be no puppeteer as lecturer. On reflection, however, I realised that no puppeteer in Australia had more experience with water puppets than even the small exposure I had had in Hanoi. I also knew that, one way or the other, I would need puppeteers for the production of my play. The only course of action left open was to teach the course myself - or rather, to structure the project as a shared learning process with the undergraduate students.

The project was structured in two strands. One was concerned with the design and construction of one or more prototype water puppets, solving such problems as what kind of wood to use, how to articulate the puppets' moving parts, and what local materials would substitute for the traditional bamboo and brass rod mechanisms. The other strand involved jointly devising and performing a short puppet play using puppets made by the students from found objects. For this latter project the group - six students drawn from the Theatre, Visual Arts and Writing strands of the School, and myself - created a very creditable twenty-minute children's comedy on environmental themes entitled Good Riddance to Bad Rubbish, which was performed as a moved reading for the School in the second last week of the semester.

The water puppet prototype also proved successful. In consultation with Dick Taylor, I chose to have the group work on the manufacture of the three life-sized ducks I had very recently decided would be part of the play. Western red cedar was found to have similar qualities of low density, high durability and susceptibility to carving and shaping to the ramin and other jungle softwoods used by the Vietnamese. Much of the basic shaping could be done with the benchsaw and bandsaw available in the School's sculpture studio, which also provided the necessary workbenches, chisels, mallets, drills and hammers needed to do the job. Machine tools - especially the studio's linisher (a combined belt and disc sander) - also made the task of fine finishing much easier.
Because the puppets were designed to be painted, it did not matter what they looked like under the paint. Gaps between bits of glued-together wood - such as the area where the duck's beak joined its head - could therefore be filled with auto-body putty, a two-part plastic filler known in the trade as "nicky" or "bog" which dries hard within twenty minutes of being mixed, and which can then be chiselled and sanded like wood.

The rods, plates, screws and springs used for the articulating parts of each puppet, along with the pulleys and fastenings of the levers by which the puppets were manipulated from the other end of the rod, had to be brass so as not to seize up from rust after exposure to water. For the two-metre-long rods connecting the puppet with its operator behind the screen, thirty-two-millimetre-diameter PVC plumbing pipe proved to have the combination of lightness and rigidity to serve as an adequate substitute for bamboo. Fifty-pound fishing line was found to stand up to the considerable strain of manipulating the puppets without breaking or stretching inordinately, and was also invisible from a distance.

For a time, a major stumbling block proved to be the method of connecting the puppet to the rod. This connector was required to hold the puppet fast to the rod, while at the same time allowing it to swivel when pulled by the fishing wire attached to a lever at the other end of the rod. I had neither the time, the finances (by arrangement with Theatre South and the School, I was paying for the puppet materials on the understanding that I would keep the puppets after the play had finished), nor access to the expertise to emulate the Vietnamese model of brass fittings, each specially designed for the individual puppet. The members of the group, including Dick Taylor, discussed this problem at length without reaching a satisfactory solution. Then one evening at home I was setting a water sprinkler in my garden when I realised that the plastic clip-on hose fitting in my hand was designed to grasp and hold the hose nozzle or
sprinkler while allowing it to turn. Such fittings are abundantly available in hardware stores and quite inexpensive. The most nagging problem of puppet mechanics was therefore solved.

By the final class meeting of the semester, the group had completed the three ducks (still unpainted), and one of them had been connected up fully in the manner of a water puppet, with rod, pulleys, fishing wires and levers to enable the remote manipulation. It had also been coated in water sealant. I had asked the members of the group to bring their bathing costumes for the last meeting; we carried the duck down to the university’s swimming pool and, with due ceremony, launched it. It was a joyful moment, made all the more so by the fact that the duck performed admirably, beyond my expectation. By the end of an hour, we had the duck swimming (with a very realistic wiggle as it went), pecking and duck-diving with a skyward waggle of its tail-feathers. We even attracted a small crowd of curious onlookers.

Joyful though that last meeting may have been, the reality was that there were fourteen other puppets still to be made - some, such as the Viet Cong soldier puppets, to be designed from scratch; there are no contemporary stories in traditional water puppetry so there were no models to follow. All of them had then to be painted and decorated and connected up to rods, before the beginning of rehearsals less than six months away. And for the period of November 1991 to late February 1992 - the summer vacation - there could be no student help. There was nothing for it but to make the rest of the puppets myself. Mr Woodward had kindly offered to remain an honorary consultant on the project; I could (and did) turn to him for advice whenever I struck a snag regarding the puppetry.

Fortunately, the sculpture studio did not close down with the cessation of formal classes. For the next three months (apart from ten days around Christmas) I commuted from Tempe to Wollongong three or four days each week,
spending six or seven hours on each of those days grappling with the unfamiliar craft of wood-carving. I was fortunate to have had some background in woodwork - I have renovated two houses, and several pieces of wooden furniture of my own manufacture adorn my present one. At least I was familiar with most of the tools and their functions, and with Dick Taylor present to answer questions and provide technical advice, I was confident I could make a fair fist of the task. Nonetheless I made many mistakes - most of them redeemable, thankfully, by the judicious application of nicky. At one low point, for instance, a chisel slipped and Chu Teu's nose parted company with his face. An hour later, however, he had a perfectly good replacement which I knew would not be noticeable once the first coat of paint was applied.

Inevitably, my relatively low skill level meant that the results of my efforts were considerably cruder than their Vietnamese counterparts - at least, their professionally made counterparts. In the National Museum of Fine Arts in Hanoi I saw village-made puppets with which mine would have been on par. I took comfort in the knowledge that few, if any, of my prospective audience would be likely to have seen water puppets in performance before, so as long as my puppets worked at all the risk of invidious comparisons was minimal.

By the end of February 1992 I had finished the basic construction of all the puppets except two - one of which, consisting of Le Loi and a manservant in a boat, was the largest of all. Other aspects of pre-production were by this stage demanding an increasing amount of my attention, but I was optimistic that all would be manageable once the students returned for the second Interdisciplinary Project in puppetry. I was therefore disappointed to learn that, of the six students enrolled for the project, only one had been in the previous class. My disappointment soon passed, however, when I discovered that I had been blessed with a very talented group of students - one writing major (continuing from the previous project), two visual arts majors, two theatre
7. Pre-production and Rehearsals

Figure 7.1 (left)
Chu Teu
- VNPT version

Figure 7.2 (right)
Chu Teu
- my version
majors and a dancer exchange student from Massachusetts—who threw themselves into the project with great commitment and self-sufficiency. Over the course of the first half of the semester, I was able to entrust a good deal of the painting and decorating of the puppets to these students, with minimal supervision beyond initial instructions about colours, style and so on. This allowed me to finish the construction of the remaining puppets and concentrate on other aspects of pre-production.

It was clear very early that, whatever the details of the set design, its construction would be a major undertaking because of the pool of water, requiring a much longer "bump-in" (the period in which the production is moved from workshop and rehearsal hall into the actual theatre) than normal. Moreover, the unfamiliar demands of acting in water, plus the need to have adequate puppetry rehearsal, made it essential that as much of the rehearsal as possible take place on the actual set in the theatre, rather than on a marked floor in another room as is usually the case. The season had therefore been set for May—the second play in Theatre South’s subscription line-up for the year, but the first in the Bridge Theatre. The company’s opening production of Shakespeare’s Richard III was to be performed in the open air on the University of Wollongong campus. Furthermore, the style of the Shakespeare production was minimalist, making relatively small demands on the company’s workshop staff and leaving them mostly free to work on Hearts and Minds.

In September 1991, Mr Davis assigned the company’s Production Manager, Michael Coe, to design my production. As soon as he had read the treatment, which was the stage the script development had reached by then, we had a series of preliminary meetings to begin the process of working up a set design. I scarcely knew him before these meetings, but we immediately established a good rapport, especially when it became clear that we were thinking along quite similar lines in terms of the design.
In the script development process so far, cognizant of qualities of the intimate thrust stage arrangement at the Bridge Theatre, I had been working with a stage plan in mind that had the pool upstage centre with raised decks on either side. I had envisaged that the Ordman backyard would use the whole of this set but be focused round a table and benches placed at stage level, downstage centre near the vomitorium, while the university pond and the Nguyen courtyard would each be confined to one of the raised side decks and half the pool. These acting areas would be differentiated only by lighting and the space-defining abilities of the actors.

The kind of pool I had had in mind was the smallest "off-the-shelf" above-ground model available from a company like Clarke Rubber, probably oval or rectangular in shape. I had also envisaged some kind of barrel-drop screen, probably commercially-available bamboo blinds, which would roll down to conceal the puppeteers when required. I had thought it might be possible to extend the bamboo motif by having all the set backdrops made out of bamboo blinds twisted, rolled and shaped to give the impression of trees and foliage. I had also wondered about the possibility of hanging camouflage netting over the whole stage and audience, filtering the lights with an effect of foliage but also resonating the military themes of the play.

Mr Coe agreed that the pool should be upstage centre, and that the Ordman backyard should use the whole space. He argued, however, that the downstage area near the vomitorium was visually too weak to be the focal point of the major action written to take place there. He also pointed out that, allowing for the angled timber struts required to keep the pool upright, any pool big enough to suit the minimum puppetry requirements would leave too little space downstage centre for an acting area including permanent furniture. He therefore suggested that the focal point of the Ordman yard should be up on the deck, stage right. The Nguyen courtyard, with its need for a shrine, could take
the deck stage left, while the university scenes could be confined to the
downstage edge of the pool, using the narrow pool-height deck that would
necessary to cover the external timber struts. He also stated his hope that the
side decks for the pool could be trucked in such a way that they could be moved
to cover parts of the pool, thereby changing the pool's shape for different
scenes. This idea attracted me a great deal.

Mr Coe made a rough sketch of a stage plan incorporating his ideas, and we
picked it over together in detail, mocking up bits on the theatre floor to gain an
idea of the size of the pool, the heights of decks and so on. Finally, I agreed that
this arrangement would indeed best serve the requirements of the play.

Mr Coe also liked my idea of extending the bamboo screen motif. However
he was concerned that a barrel-drop mechanism with bamboo blinds would be
likely to be unreliable, possibly catching and sticking during operation and
thus exposing the puppeteers to view. He also expressed concern at the likely
cost of purchasing enough blinds to make an effective set, and stated his wish to
recycle as much material from the company's stock as possible. In essence, this
meant constructing the drops in the form of timber-framed, craftwood-covered
flats. I had been hoping for something a little less firmly in the Euro-American
theatre tradition than this, but agreed to reserve judgment until Mr Coe had
made a model of the set according to his proposed design.

Before he could produce such a model, however, Mr Coe needed to
investigate what suitable swimming pools were available, and at what cost.
Inspecting the pools and negotiating costs would inevitably take some time, and
Mr Coe warned me that with this and his other commitments to the company, the
model would not be available until early in the New Year.

When I did finally get to view the model in January, I was surprised to find
that the pool represented there was kidney-shaped. Before I could express any
disquiet about this, however, Mr Coe told me he had been offered a very
generous contra-deal by a local manufacturer of fibreglass in-ground pools, whereby they would loan the company a specially-made reinforced version of their smallest pool - for which the mold happened to be kidney-shaped - and install it complete with filtration system free of charge, in return only for a small amount of advertizing and acknowledgement in the publicity material generated by the play. Well aware that a small company like Theatre South does not have the financial flexibility to look such a gift horse in the mouth, I had little choice but to accept the kidney shape as a _fait accompli_ and make the best of it, even though it was not the only problem associated with this particular pool. Because of its height of 1200mm above the normal stage level plus a further 100mm to allow for timber weight-spreaders underneath, the decking could not be built flush with the top of the pool without placing the actors too close to the theatre's ceiling for effective lighting angles to be achieved. This ruled out the possibility of trucking bits of deck to change the pool's shape and thus diminishing the impact of its so-suburban shape.

The rest of the model, however, showing in considerable detail the decks and levels, the stairs leading down to the vomitorium, and a false proscenium housing sliding screens to hide the puppeteers, looked very promising, as did the jungly criss-cross of semi-abstracted foliage with which the flats were to be painted. Though by no means ideal it could, I felt, be made to serve the production more than adequately, and in any case the time for major rethinking had well and truly passed. I therefore accepted the design and set about planning the staging of the play according to its dictates.

Not that that was the last of the problems associated with the pool. Mr Coe's model had been in black and white, but he had talked of colours in the green-brown-black range and I had assumed that this included the pool. It was therefore a considerable shock to discover, when the pool arrived for installation, that it was sky blue. I suspect it was mostly my fault for not having
specified the colour previously - I always lack confidence when dealing with colour decisions because of my colour-impaired vision. In any case, it was too late to do anything but accept what we had and make the best of it. It would have achieved nothing to creat a fuss, and in any case I was too preoccupied with finishing the script, making the puppets and trying to cast the play to agonize over such an issue.

While I had anticipated that casting the Vietnamese roles might prove difficult, I had not expected problems finding suitable actors for the Anglo roles. Indeed the casting of Norma had been a foregone conclusion from the moment the character had been conceived in my mind - Lainie Grugan, a regular Theatre South actor who also worked in the company’s administration, and whose previous work and professionalism I knew and admired, seemed well suited to the role. Des Davis agreed to make her available for the production, so the character of Norma developed with her proposed performance of it firmly in my mind. None of the company’s other regulars were suited to any of the roles, however, so with the company’s help I began the tedious process of consulting the *Showcast* directory, selecting possible actors, approaching their agents to gauge the interest and availability, and arranging to meet and, where necessary, audition them.

My first choice for the role of Skip was Australia’s most famous Vietnam veteran, Normie Rowe. Although mostly known as a singer of popular music, Mr Rowe has had considerable acting experience, including many guest roles in television series and serials and a long stint in the lead role of Jean Valjean in the smash hit musical *Les Miserables*. Des Davis was attracted by the publicity value inherent in such casting, and approached his agent with the offer of a fee which, at more than three times the wages of the regular actors, would have made Mr Rowe the highest-paid actor in the company’s twelve-year history. Mr Rowe was tempted by the role, but after some negotiation his agent declined the
offer on his behalf because the two music gigs he would have had to cancel were going to net him more money than the entire period of rehearsals and performance in *Hearts and Minds*.

We then approached Ray Meagher, a familiar face from screen roles in *Breaker Morant, A Fortunate Life*, and more recently from a long sustaining role in the television serial *Home and Away*. I had worked with Mr Meagher many years previously in Brisbane, when we were both amateurs with professional aspirations at La Boite. Like Mr Rowe, he was attracted by the part, but in this case the scheduling of his continuing work on *Home and Away* clashed with our rehearsal period.

The next approach was to Mervyn Drake, a well-known Sydney actor best remembered for his sustaining role over several series of the ABC's *Patrol Boat*. Mr Drake, too, was keen to play the role, but again money became an issue - he was prepared to accept the fee offered, but insisted on having his own private accommodation in Wollongong instead of sharing the company's rented house with other members of the cast.

I was beginning to feel anxious at not having Skip cast with only a matter of weeks before the scheduled start of rehearsals when Faye Montgomery, the company's Associate Director, suggested Terry Brady. She had already run an availability check with his agent, the results of which had been positive. I was completely unfamiliar with Mr Brady's work. He does little screen work, and has seldom worked with the major Sydney companies such as Sydney Theatre Company or Belvoir Street. However his resumé showed a solid body of continuing work with regional and interstate theatre companies, and he was the right age. Discreet enquiries to a few colleagues indicated that he was talented, versatile, and excellent to work with. I sent him a script, met him at his agent's office, and viewed a videotape of one of his rare screen appearances - a regular guest role on the television serial *A Country Practice* playing, of all
things, a Vietnam veteran. We established a rapport very quickly, and by the end of the same day he had accepted the part.

The role of Donny proved even more difficult to cast. I had anticipated that the agencies would be full of eager, talented young men just out of training and keen to accept a lead role without quibbling much about money. However, of the dozen or more that I auditioned, most were too old, and none had the quality of brash, youthful naivety I was looking for in Donny. There were a couple of possibles, but none that immediately caught my attention. However with the commencement of rehearsals looming I decided to take the risk and cast the most likely of the possible list, only to find that on the same day he had been offered a role by Sydney Theatre Company. I was on the verge of asking Theatre South to offer the role to the only other actor on the possible list when Ms Montgomery phoned to tell me that one of the agents had just put forward another actor, Paul Kelman, for consideration. Mr Kelman had just arrived back from Melbourne, where he had been working in a science-fiction children’s comedy for television, and his impressive previous credits included major roles in the serial *E Street* and the series *The Flying Doctors*. He had no formal training, however, and his stage experience consisted of a single theatre-in-education tour of northern New South Wales. He was in fact looking for more stage experience on the advice of his agent, and his several years in well-paid television roles meant that money was unlikely to be an issue. With some misgivings I agreed to audition him. Within minutes of meeting him, however, before he had read a line, I knew he had the right qualities. His audition confirmed these impressions, and within twenty-four hours he was contracted for the role.

For the role of Phuong I initially approached the two best-known female Vietnamese-Australian actors, Pauline Chan and Grace Parr. Both have extensive screen experience including major roles in the Kennedy-Miller
mini-series *Vietnam*. Neither was available.

However, there is an agency in Sydney, run by John Alan-Su, devoted exclusively to representing actors of Asian background. My next approach was to them, in the hope of finding actors to play both Phuong and Mai. They only had one actor on their books of the correct age for the role of Phuong, a Hong Kong Chinese woman by the name of Chin Yu. She had extensive stage credits including lead roles on Broadway and in London’s West End. She and her husband had established and run the *Showcast* directory in Australia many years previously, and it was only since his recent death that she had been easing herself back into the acting profession. She had played a couple of recent screen parts, but it was a long time since she had set foot on a stage. Still, there was a quality of authority and internal resilience about her that I felt would work well with Phuong. The only problem was, she could not speak Vietnamese. The fact that she could speak Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese indicated that she could probably learn the required Vietnamese in the time available, but I decided to hold out a little longer in the hope of finding a native Vietnamese-speaker.

At John Alan-Su’s agency I also took auditions for the role of Mai. Half a dozen hopeful young Chinese women presented themselves. Chinese ethnicity was not a problem in itself - much Chinese blood mingled with Vietnamese over the centuries of Chinese occupation of Vietnam, and the physical features of the two races can be quite similar - but none of these women could speak Vietnamese or displayed either outstanding acting talent or had the experience or the personal qualities to fall into the role of Mai instinctively. A couple of Asian-background actors I interviewed with other agencies all presented the same difficulty. I was extremely reluctant to have both the Vietnamese characters played by non-Vietnamese, not only because of the language problem but also because of the potential lack of credibility among Vietnamese
I therefore came to the conclusion that, rather than cast a non-Vietnamese of limited talent and experience, it would be better to go to open audition and invite people from the Vietnamese community to try out. With luck, I might find someone talented and Vietnamese-speaking, even if they had no experience. It even seemed possible that there might be people with acting experience in that community, and maybe even that I might find a Phuong as well as a Mai. And it made sense to try the Wollongong Vietnamese community before widening the search to Sydney, so Amanda Field, an officer with the Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council and member of Theatre South's board, was asked to use her networks to find out if anyone in the local Vietnamese community would be interested.

There was a surprisingly quick response from a seventeen-year-old girl in her final year of high school and her thirty-five-year-old aunt. Neither had any acting experience, though the girl had done some modelling and the aunt was an occasional dancer in community festivals.

I met them both on the same afternoon. The girl, Huong Le, turned out to be attractive, intelligent, and mature for her age, with considerable self-confidence and a good sense of humour. She had read the script and liked it and was very keen to be part of the project. Her audition showed a strong presence and a good dramatic instinct. Her aunt, Viet Do, was also attractive, intelligent, and keen. Her audition, however, was disappointing, and in any case she looked too young. My conclusion from the meeting was therefore that, while the emotional demands of the role of Phuong were too great to warrant risking Ms Do, such a risk was probably worth taking with Ms Le. I recommended to Theatre South that she be contracted.

Des Davis, alive to the publicity and community relations possibilities and the low financial cost of thrusting an unknown local into stardom, required
little persuasion to support my recommendation regarding Ms Le. There remained only the problems of obtaining permission from her parents and her school principal for her to be involved and to miss some class time in the process. (The rehearsal period straddled the Easter school holiday break, but still overlapped the second term by two weeks.) An anxious couple of days followed while the script was vetted by her family, and concessions for a small amount of time off from rehearsals for Ms Le to sit for her trial Higher School Certificate exams were negotiated, but finally approval was granted.

The casting of Ms Le brought a number of secondary benefits. The endorsement of her family - one of the most prominent Vietnamese families in the Illawarra region - gave me added confidence concerning the portrayal of the Vietnamese characters in my play, and held the promise of attracting members of the Vietnamese community to the performances. It also left me free to cast Chin Yu as Phuong, confident that her experience and obvious skill as an actor would meet the demands of the role, and that with Ms Le's help she would be able to learn the required Vietnamese language passages. Ms Do's disappointment at not being cast was mollified a little by my request that she undertake the translation of those passages into colloquial, actable Vietnamese, and then speak the lines into a tape recorder to assist Ms Yu's learning process.

With the casting achieved, the rehearsal script nearing completion and the finishing of the puppets proceeding to plan, the last weeks leading up to the commencement of rehearsals (scheduled for Monday 13 April) also saw the first two production meetings called to organize schedules with the stage manager, Ruth McRae, to organize publicity, and to give preliminary briefings to the lighting designer, Paul Davison, the sound designer, Vanessa Hutchins, and the wardrobe co-ordinator, Penny Watts. An occasional extra person at these meetings was Wendy Richardson - a Wollongong-based playwright with a long association with Theatre South - who had volunteered her services as a
part-time prop buyer.

Publicity in the pre-rehearsal period focused mainly on the local daily newspaper, the *Illawarra Mercury*, and the weekly free community newspaper, *The Advertiser*. I was interviewed and photographed for stories for each of these papers. Copies of the resulting articles, together with other printed publicity material for the production, are subjoined to this thesis at Appendix 8. My brief "synopsis" of the play written for the funding submission a year previously (see Chapter 6) had been adapted for the subscription brochure and the leaflet produced by Theatre South as a "flyer" for the production.

I was also asked by Des Davis to write a suitable "logline" or slogan — a few words that would both encapsulate the play's premise and capture the reader's interest. The resulting copy, which read

She came from Vietnam. His father fought a war there. HEARTS AND MINDS - more than a love story.

was used in the paid advertisements in both papers, in conjunction with photographs of Ms Le and Mr Kelman (see Appendix 8).

Mr Davis also asked me to write notes for the program: a relatively easy task involving adapting the opening paragraphs of this thesis, the introductory chapter of which I had already written a first draft as a demonstration of my proposed thesis structure to my supervisors. The program notes were also adapted for a press release with little modification. I was concerned that because this would make the program notes seem to be a copy of the press release rather than the other way round, but Mr Davis assured me that few people would actually read them both. The use of the notes for the press release was simply intended to avoid an unnecessary impost on my time, thus leaving me free to concentrate on the other aspects of pre-production such as the lighting.

I had always envisaged that lighting would be an important component of the production, not merely illuminating the action and helping to define the scene changes, but also playing a major role in underscoring the play's
emotional landscape - especially where this landscape was more rugged, such as in the flashbacks. I had even gone as far as to write lighting instructions into the script for these scenes, specifying the use of strong green light. Apart from the obvious connotations of jungle, green light makes a human face look ill - an effect that seemed highly appropriate to Skip's state of being at those moments. Mr Davison concurred with the general thrust of my intentions, and promised jungly dapple effects as well. His major concerns were the flat lighting angle he would be able to achieve (the raised floor reduced the distance between actors' faces and the lighting bars), and the likelihood of uncontrollable reflection off the water. There was little we could do about the former; with the latter, I suggested that he turn the problem into an opportunity and actually design some of the lighting to make use of the very pleasant visual effect of light reflected from rippling water.

In terms of sound for the production, I had originally had in mind a live ensemble of flautist and percussionist to provide an intermittent music score to underlie the action in the manner of a film soundtrack. I had hoped that my Interdisciplinary Project might attract some music students interested in composing and performing such a score, but when no music student enrolled I was forced to revert to the more conventional use of recorded music and sounds. Vanessa Hutchins, the sound designer, was a senior undergraduate theatre student from the School of Creative Arts, highly recommended by her lecturers. My first meeting with her rather flummoxed me, because she came armed with a plan not only for the practical sound effects specified in the script - shots, offstage voices and so on - but a proposal to make a sound score using four basic sounds associated with four separate emotional states she had identified as recurring through the play. The way she initially described this made it sound very cerebral - like a theoretical undergraduate exercise - so I gave her ideas a fairly cool reception, especially when she was unable to produce samples of the
kinds of sounds she was intending to use. Yet the fact that she had independently come up with the idea of a sound score, with no previous instruction from me, at least indicated that her thinking was running along vaguely similar lines to my own. so I suggested she go away and gather her samples and mark the script specifically where she intended to use them - at which stage we could meet and consider the matter again. There would still be time for a complete rethink if what she came up with was unsuitable.

As it turned out, her proposal when properly articulated was both creative and innovative. The four emotional states, and the sounds with which she wished to link them, were:

- **guilt**: a folk tune played on the traditional Vietnamese *dan bau* (monostring)
- **pain**: a melody improvised in counterpoint to the *dan bau* tune, on a fretless electric base guitar
- **brutality**: percussive sounds played on traditional Vietnamese drums, and
- **fear**: the insect chirping of jungle crickets

Ms Hutchins had also indentified places in the play where she thought each of these sounds could be used, and for how long. I was not convinced that the sounds would be appropriate in all the places she was suggesting, but that was something we could leave until the sound plotting session during production week, just before opening night. The principle of her idea was very solid, so I urged her to continue with and refine her proposal.

Ms Hutchins also had found some traditional Vietnamese *dan tranh* (moonstring) music which she thought might be suitable to open and close the puppet sequences that comprised the Prologue and Epilogue. I agreed. That, however, was as far as her thinking had progressed at that stage, and she asked for guidance regarding music or sounds to fill the brief set-change blackouts between scenes, and for mood-setting music to be played before and after the performance and during the interval. For the set change music, it seemed imperative to use the same *dan tranh* music used in the Prologue and Epilogue, thereby linking the two Chu Teu vignettes and continuing throughout the
performance the convention that the main play is one of his stories.

For the pre-show music I asked Ms Hutchins to find some traditional Vietnamese folk songs (not instrumental tunes but songs with vocals). For the interval I requested rock’n’roll songs from the time of the war, especially the songs that were known to have been popular with the soldiers in Vietnam - "We Gotta Get Outa This Place" by the Animals, "Leaving on a Jet Plane" by Peter, Paul and Mary, "A Whiter Shaed of Pale" by Procol Harum, and so on. I also specified that the first song played in this bracket be a sickly-sweet love ballad, to provide an ironic counterpoint to the rape scene just witnessed by the audience. Ms Hutchins selected "I Will Follow Him" by the Chantelles. For the post-show, I asked her to find a recording of a cover-band doing Vietnamese-language versions of Western pop songs - the kind of music frequently played in Vietnamese restaurants. This, I felt, would round off a progression from Vietnamese folk to Western rock to a kind of hybrid of the two, thus reflecting (albeit rather tenuously) the thematic trajectory of the play.

The most straightforward parts of the production's technical development were the wardrobe and props. For the most part, costumes were to be comprised of mass-produced contemporary summer clothing that could be found in Theatre South's store, borrowed from friendly sources or bought cheaply from op-shops, K-Mart or Target. There were, however, some specialty items that had to be made or substantially modified from original stock by the company's wardrobe co-ordinator, Penny Watts. For instance I felt that Phuong, so bound to the traditions of her homeland, would wear traditional peasant garb - drab-coloured, high-collared, long-sleeved blouse over loose black pyjama-like pants - in the privacy of her home, and the national Vietnamese costume, the ao dai, when attending the barbecue at the Ordman home in Act One Scene Seven, or after church for her meeting with Norma in Act Two Scene Four.

The most problematic costumes were those for the full-human-sized
manifestations of puppets in the flashback scenes - the Viet Cong soldier in Skip's first patrol flashback, the peasant woman in the rape flashbacks, and Phuong's younger self and her husband Lat in her boat escape flashback. These needed to be made of a stiff, almost rigid material which would resemble the puppets not balloon up when worn in water, and not cling to the puppeteers' bodies when wet. The solution, suggested by Michael Coe, was to use the thick rubberised cloth from which wetsuits are made.

I also wanted Donny Smith, whose only appearances were in the flashbacks, to represent mid-point between the heavily stylised human-sized puppet figures and the naturalism of the main characters. Mr Coe suggested that we should start with the basic jungle greens that constituted a soldier's uniform from the period, and add strips of rough material such as hessian almost like camouflage, making it seem part of the jungle. This seemed a promising idea.

Under the general ambit of wardrobe came the question of masks for the flashback characters to disguise and "Vietnamize" the puppeteer/performers' faces. I had originally thought of using a form of children's mask commonly used during the Tet celebrations. It is a very simple affair, comprising a featureless half-egg shape rather like a fencing mask but made of woven rattan, on which cartoon-like facial features are painted. I had brought a sample with me from Hanoi, but under low stage lighting conditions it obscured so much light for the wearer as to be dangerous.

Wendy Richardson recalled a play she had seen many years ago in which Caucasian actors had portrayed Asian characters by wearing nylon stockings over their faces, thereby flattening the features. I would not have countenanced this possibility for any realistic characters, but it seemed to offer a workable solution for the Vietnamese flashback characters who would, in any case, be seen only under low-level, deeply-coloured light. It was not appropriate for Donny Smith, however. Des Davis described a play he had acted in some
years previously in which actors had worn masks which were full-featured but transparent, resulting in the actors' facial features being visible yet blurred, altering them beyond immediate recognition. He described the effect as "quite spooky". Transparent plastic masks are available very cheaply from novelty shops, so we decided to purchase one for trial.

Like the costumes, most of the props needed for the production were of a kind easily borrowed or purchased cheaply by part-time co-ordinator Wendy Richardson. A few items, such as the SLR rifle carried by Donny Smith in the flashbacks and the puppet/doll representation of the young Mai in Phuong's flashback, had to be made specially, but pieces such as Phuong's teapot, cups and incense burner were readily available in Asian grocery shops. We were fortunate in being able to borrow from Frank Hunt - a veterans' activist and office-holder in the VVA - a complete set of soldier's memorabilia including dog-tags, pay book, infantryman's manual, good luck charm, medals and miniatures, and discharge papers - for Skip's shoebox.

Substitute props - stand-ins until the real ones were acquired - were rapidly assembled ready for the commencement of rehearsals. Unfortunately, the same was not true of the set. The target of having the set ready for our use by the first rehearsal had not been met, and I was told we would not be able to work on it until after the following weekend. This was of no great concern regarding the actors, because most of the first week would be taken up with basic blocking - plotting the actors' physical moves to provide the foundation for the visual structure of the performance - which in my usual work method is not pre-planned but worked out "organically" through trial and error, according to the emotional, physical and visual demands of the moment. The repetitive nature of this process indicated that even the passages involving actors in the pool would first need to be worked through in detail out of the water - shedding new light on the term "dry run".
It was the puppetry I was worried about. The weekend following the first rehearsal was Easter, which meant not only the loss of two days' rehearsals with the actors, but also the beginning of the university's mid-semester vacation which lasted until and including the weekend after Easter. All the puppeteers had commitments elsewhere during the break, which meant no puppetry rehearsal in the week after Easter. Given that only one of the puppeteers had yet operated a puppet in the water - and that six months previously, with only one puppet - I had been counting on making a solid start with the puppetry in the first week. This setback was therefore the cause of considerable anxiety on my part, but there was nothing to be done about it other than to adjust the rehearsal schedules to allow for lots of puppetry practice in the third week.

The weekend before the commencement of rehearsals I moved into residence in Wollongong, billeted in the hillside village suburb of Mount Kembla with Wendy Richardson. This was to prove important in helping me cope with the next few weeks - not only because it spared me both the demands of family and the two-hour grind of daily commuting, thus allowing me more time and energy to spend on the production, but also because Ms Richardson's understanding of the demands of a play production, together with her cheerful good humour and tolerance of my idiosyncrasies, helped me keep a sane perspective as the pressure continued to mount.

The first week of rehearsals revealed a rather disconcerting dynamic in the cast. I had of course anticipated that Ms Le would require a crash course in basic stagecraft in the process of rehearsing the play. What I had not expected was that Mr Kelman would need something very similar. The problem was that, as a self-trained actor whose entire experience, to all intents and purposes, had been in television drama, Mr Kelman's technique was completely internal - a combination of intuition with his own version, as far as I could make out, of the American "method" school based on part of Stanislavski's teachings. This was
fine as far as it went, but he was so used to having all his moves precisely marked for him that his ability to contribute to the process of organic blocking of moves based on the emotional and practical demands of the text was as undeveloped as Ms Le’s. For both these actors, therefore, I had to abandon my normal approach and choreograph their moves for them, in the hope that they would “claim” these moves as their own as other aspects of their performances developed.

To some extent, the same was also true of Ms Yu. This was because the bulk of her stage experience had been more than two decades previously in major West End and Broadway shows, in which moves were pre-plotted by the director and dictated to the actors. However, her stage instincts and personal technique were far more flexible than Mr Kelman’s, so by the third day she had adapted quite well.

Fortunately, Mr Brady and Ms Grugan were used to blocking plays organically. I was therefore able to count on their professional self-sufficiency and creativity while devoting a disproportionate amount of my effort on the others. So despite the problems, by the end of the four-day pre-Easter week, we had rough-blocked the whole play and run it once in its entirety to gain a sense of overall shape. The actors left for Easter with exhortations to find some time during the break to learn lines, as I expected them to start working “off book” - without scripts in their hands - by the end of the following week at the latest. I spent Good Friday and Easter Saturday putting finishing touches to the puppets and connecting them up to their rod mechanisms, then headed back to Sydney to spend Easter Sunday and Monday with my family.

When we resumed rehearsals on the Tuesday after Easter, the set was at last ready enough to work on, and the pool was full. The second week was devoted to working through the whole play again, this time focussing in more detail in the emotional landscape of the play and exploring the relationships between
characters. Some fine tuning of the blocking was necessary because of the
difference between a flat floor and a multi-level one, and because the visual
picture was different watching from a raked auditorium rather than from
stage-floor level.

Mr Brady and Ms Grugan were continuing to work well, especially in their
scenes together; it was obvious that they had already achieved an excellent
rapport. Ms Yu was by this stage also hitting her stride, although beginning to
show anxiety about the learning of the Vietnamese lines. She even asked if
there was a possibility of saying them in English. This was of course out of the
question, but I immediately sat down with the script and cut every word from
the Vietnamese lines that was not absolutely required to convey the action. This
cut her learning task by about thirty percent, and incidentally made the scene
much tighter. I also discovered that part of Ms Yu's learning difficulty stemmed
from the fact that Ms Do had been speaking too quickly when she had taped the
lines as a guide, so when we called her in and asked her to re-record the
abridged version, we took the opportunity to get it down at a slower speed.

There were still problems with Mr Kelman and Ms Le. Another legacy of
Mr Kelman's background was that, being used to the technical support of
cameras and microphones at close hand, he had little idea about how to project
his character - not only vocally but emotionally as well - to the back row of a
live theatre even as small and intimate as the Bridge. He also had a television
actor's attitude towards the script, continually paraphrasing and cutting bits of
his lines, and becoming resentful if I insisted that he speak the words as
written. I suspect he thought I was quibbling because I was also the writer, but
in fact I would have done exactly the same directing him in another writer's
play. Eventually, after I had pointed out to him that the precise wording of
particular lines happens not by accident but because playwrights sweat blood
over them, and that what he was doing was therefore highly disrespectful to a
fellow artist, he began to take the trouble to learn them properly.

All this was awkward to deal with, because unlike Ms Le who was a rank novice, Mr Kelman was an actor of some professional standing - even fame - who was not supposed to have these kinds of problems. He was obviously feeling very insecure, and his way of coping with it was to project it onto Ms Le, blaming her for his difficulties.

This was exacerbated by the fact that most of Mai's interaction in the play is with Donny. Ms Le's most immediate role model for an acting process was therefore Mr Kelman, so she was imitating his bad habits of laziness with lines and poor projection, thereby providing targets for Mr Kelman's scorn. My approach to solving this was simply to continue working at improving the stagecraft of both these actors, instilling a technique as we went along; to his credit, Mr Kelman quietly took much of the advice I was giving to Ms Le and absorbed it into his own method.

Nonetheless, the tension between Ms Le and Mr Kelman continued to simmer and I sensed that the other actors were beginning to wonder if I had made the right choice in casting an untried actor in the role of Mai. As best I could, I doused these small brushfires of concern whenever they broke out by reminding the other actors that they could not expect Ms Le to progress at the same pace as they could, that I was focussing on one aspect of her process at a time, and that I remained confident that she would not let us down in the end. I also had continually to remind Ms Le that she was not expected to deliver a finished performance during early rehearsals, so she must not expect too much of herself or allow others to do so. I also asked Ms Le to make time to help Ms Yu learn her Vietnamese lines. This, I hoped, would not only allay some of Ms Yu's anxieties, but also give Ms Le another role model.

Notwithstanding these interpersonal issues, the development of the production generally proceeded according to schedule in the second week. The
only significant hitch was a technical one: the temperature of the water in the swimming pool was very cold. This was, after all, late April. Not only was it cold when it first went in: after several days without exposure to the sun it was positively icy. This posed a problem for rehearsing any scene that required actors in the water - even wearing the wetsuits, we rapidly borrowed for the purpose, they quickly became extremely uncomfortable. I therefore could not ask them to carry out the fundamental component of rehearsal, which is repetition. The water scenes therefore remained under-rehearsed.

The problem was worse for the puppeteers when they assembled on the Sunday of that weekend to have their first practice with the puppets in the water. The actors' water scenes were at least short in length and surrounded by dry-stage scenes; the puppeteers needed to do all their work standing waist-deep in the water. Nonetheless they were well aware of how much had yet to be achieved and how little time was left for it, so they donned the wetsuits with which they had come prepared and set about familiarising themselves with the operations of each puppet. Good progress was made until, after a couple of hours, one of the puppeteers complained that she had lost all feeling in one of her little fingers. I decided it was time to call it quits. The rest of the day I spent exhorting Michael Coe and Des Davis to find a very quick way of increasing the temperature of the pool to a reasonable level.

As a temporary measure Arthur Sherwin, the president of the Friends of Theatre South (the company’s lay support group), scrounged around and found a couple of old-fashioned electric immersion elements of the kind used to heat washing coppers or bathwater. These were left in the pool overnight with the top of the pool covered, and by the next morning, when the actors' rehearsals resumed, there had been a quite noticeable improvement in the temperature. The actors were at least able to repeat their water scenes a few times before it became unbearable. Moreover, by replacing the elements during the lunch and
dinner breaks, we were able to keep the pool at the same temperature for the puppetry rehearsal scheduled for that night.

Meanwhile, Michael Coe was pursuing a safer and more powerful means of heating the pool. The UFI Company that had provided the pool was not a dealer in pool heaters, so could not provide one direct. They did, however, offer to make enquiries through their own contacts in the industry. Within thirty-six hours, they had found a heater not in use, disconnected it, brought it to the theatre and installed it - all like the pool installation itself, at no cost to the theatre.

The third week was devoted to putting the play together. The small segments we had previously been rehearsing were joined together into the scenes as written in the script, then each scene was run several times, with fine tuning work of particular details in between. The scenes were then run together into each act of the play (the acts separated by the interval, not the structural acts). This was the first real chance to check that the rhythms and cadences of the production were reflecting those of the script, working not in isolation but in the continuous flow of the narrative as it would be seen by the audience. Finally, we began running the play as a whole.

Each night of the third week, after the actors had finished for the day, the puppeteers came and rehearsed. There was some difficulty in scheduling for them, as they were all students with different demands on the rest of their time. So while I had hoped that the six puppeteers would divide into two fixed teams of three (the number of puppeteers required for each performance) and roster their performances turn and turn about, the students found they needed more flexibility. To ensure that three puppeteers would turn up to each performance, the team composition therefore had to be variable. This, in turn, meant that the puppeteers would not be able to specialise on particular puppets, but that each must become adept at operating every puppet. While this had the advantage that if any puppeteer were to be injured or become ill during the season, one of the
others would be able to take his or her place, with time for practice now at such a premium it indicated that the general level of skill with the puppets would not be as high as I had hoped for.

I decided to concentrate my time with the puppeteers on ensuring that all of them could operate all the puppets to the minimum acceptable standard. At least there were two things working in my favour: one was that there was not actually a great deal of puppetry in the play, so the learning task was not enormous; the other, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, was that our audiences would be unlikely to be familiar with water puppetry and so would have no benchmarks against which to measure our performance.

On the Saturday of the third week the tension between Mr Kelman and Ms Le came to a head during a full run of the play. Before this run, the actors had been working "off book", but with prompting of uncertain lines from the stage manager or assistant stage manager. For this run, however, I had told them there would be no further prompting; if they got into difficulties with lines they would just have to help each other through. This is an important step in any production, as otherwise actors become reliant on the prompting and do not concentrate hard enough.

During Act One Scene Five, Ms Le "dried", going totally blank with not a clue as to what came next. Mr Kelman just stood there - probably, from his television-steeped outlook, waiting for me to yell "cut" and order a retake. He certainly made no effort to give the kind of disguised prompt that actors normally give each other in these circumstances, or even to improvise some lines until Ms Le got back on track. There was a long pause which lengthened into an agonizing silence as the two of them stood there on stage in increasing embarrassment. Mr Kelman finally called for a prompt, but I intervened before the stage manager could open her mouth. I let them stand on the stage for fully three minutes until finally Ms Le regained her presence of mind, remembered
where they were and restarted the scene.

During the interval break a bit later, Mr Kelman came to me in panic, telling me that it was impossible to work with Ms Le if she could not be relied on to remember her lines, and demanding to know a fail-safe strategy if such a thing should happen again. I told him that Ms Le had probably received enough of a shock that it would be unlikely to happen again, but that in any case line-drying was not unheard-of in even the most seasoned stage actors, the only solution being for everybody on stage to be sufficiently on the ball to improvise their way out of it. He grumbled that he had enough to worry about without having to support other actors, so I tried to explain the importance of trust and mutual support as the basis of ensemble acting. He was clearly unconvinced, but we were due to resume so I suggested we take it up again later.

During the run of the second act, the same thing did happen again - except that this time it was Mr Kelman who dried. There was another long silence, but it was Ms Le who finally restarted the action. Mr Kelman was thus hoist with his own petard, and the point made more strongly than any argument that I could have put forward. I learned later that in fact Mr Kelman had given Ms Le a thorough dressing down before coming to see me at interval, and that she had given him an even stronger one after the incident in Act Two. Fortunately, it had the dual effect of clearing the air between them and frightening them into more thorough script revision and concentration on stage. From then on, neither had a major line problem or displayed any serious interpersonal animosity. There was the additional benefit of a major boost to Ms Le's confidence; her performance immediately leapt to a new plane of maturity and believability, and continued to improve apace.

As we began to run the play at something approaching full performance energy, some new problems became apparent concerning the set. The area behind the sliding screens was very cramped for the puppeteers, especially
when there was a rapid interchange of puppets such as during the prologue. The theatre’s minimal wing space also meant there was a problem with storage of the puppets when not in use, and with moving them around backstage without their wires and levers getting caught on the masking drapes. A couple of additional theatre students from the School of Creative Arts were dragooned as stage hands so that the puppets could be stored at the greater and safer distance of the theatre’s office, yet still be brought to the stage in time.

The need for the puppets and puppeteers to make rapid exits backstage also meant that a considerable amount of water was streaming from sodden wetsuits and the puppet rods onto the stage floor at the back of the pool. This, in turn, was creating hazardously slippery conditions for the actors. When the stage decking to either side or downstage of the pool got wet, it could be mopped up by the stage hands during the scene changes, but the upstage floor was receiving too much water to be removed by a cursory wipe. Mr Coe’s solution was to acquire some lengths of rubber carpet underlay, which absorbed the water like a sponge and which was replaced by fresh, dry ones during the interval. Both sets of underlay could then be hung out to dry between performances.

There was also a problem of backstage noise related to the puppets. (This is not a problem for traditional water puppetry, which is performed to loud musical and vocal accompaniment, and which does not have to allow for actor-based scenes being performed while puppets are moved about backstage.) Whenever a puppet rod was immersed for the first time, the air would bubble loudly out the end in a manner which sounded disconcertingly rude from front of house. This was solved by drilling holes at thirty centimetre intervals along the length of the rods, allowing the air to dissipate silently. Another problem emerged when the puppets were removed from the pool: water would stream noisily from the rod either onto the stage floor or back into the pool. Mostly this could be avoided if the puppeteer held the end of the rod against the side of the
pool, but it was unavoidable if the puppeteer needed to make a rapid exit to allow for the screens to be slid back. Fortunately the noise of the sliding screens tended to mask both these sounds and those of the waterlogged backstage scurryings of the puppeteers.

As production week began, I allowed myself a modicum of confidence that the production would be ready for the opening night the following Friday. Nothing that happened in the following days was to dampen that confidence, despite the fact that Mr Coe had left for Melbourne on tour with the company’s production of the children’s play *Hating Alison Ashley*. Mr Davison’s lighting rig did undoubted justice to the now-finished set, and Ms Hutchins’ tapes were assembled and sounding good. The Monday sessions for plotting and setting levels for light and sound cues were lengthy and tedious as such events inevitably are, but the results were very encouraging. The cue-to-cue technical run with the actors on Tuesday not only took the whole day allocated to it, but ran into the evening as well. Not that there were any major hitches; the complexity of the production’s technical demands simply needed more time than had been anticipated.

Cue-to-cue technical rehearsals are notoriously hard on actors, and this one was no exception. If there are going to be tantrums, this is one of the most likely times. I took heart from the fact that the long and arduous day passed in an atmosphere of congenial good humour. Even better, the growing sense of excitement among the members of the company was quite palpable. Everyone was beginning to believe that the show had a good chance of success.

The full technical rehearsal which had been scheduled for Tuesday night was cancelled, and the first dress rehearsal scheduled for the next day became a combined tech/dress run. This was the first opportunity I had to view the costumes for the human/puppet hybrid figures, and for Donny Smith. The former worked well, although in the course of the run it became immediately
apparent that the nylon-stocking face masks obscured too much of the wearer’s vision for safety in the low-light scenes in which they were worn - one of which, the Viet Cong soldier scene, also required the mask to be worn under water. The simplest solution was to cut small eye-slits in the stockings.

Donny Smith’s jungle green soldier’s uniform with strips of hessian attached made him look like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. In the absence of Mr Coe there was no chance of a complete rethink, and in any case it was too late to make a whole new costume. I asked Penny Watts to remove the strips of hessian and break the jungle greens down to look as though they might have been worn unchanged in the jungle for a week - Donny Smith was to have a naturalistic costume after all. The anti-naturalistic effect of his mask, however, was reinforced by his bare feet - bare not because we had no boots, but because there was not enough time for Mr Kelman’s quick changes if they involved wet boots as well as wet clothes.

Apart from these matters and a few minor vexations, the tech/dress rehearsal went very smoothly. So, too, did the first full dress rehearsal that evening. The energy and concentration of the actors was growing steadily, and I now had complete confidence that all the actors would do justice to their roles and the play as a whole. The only thing still lacking in their performance was a really strong sense of ensemble: they were yet to relax, really listen, and start giving their performances to each other, instead of focussing so much on their own individual roles. I assured them that they were all ready to do so.

My only disappointment at this stage was that the fireworks - intended to comprise a tattoo of explosions at the very opening of the play, and the fire-breathing spectacle of the dragons at the very end - could not be made to work. Despite my repeated requests to Mr Coe and other production personnel, the organizing of these pyrotechnics had been left till the last minute. Frantic eleventh-hour enquiries failed to find an expert who could tell us how to make
the dragons breathe fire under water as I had seen it done both in Hanoi and in Saigon. As a reluctant compromise, I agreed to eliminate the tattoo of crackers from the opening and have it instead at the end, accompanying the dragons' dance. On the Thursday morning Mr. Davison finally produced a box of firecrackers twice the size of the Tom Thumbs I had requested. When tested in the intimate Bridge Theatre, a single cracker produced a blast of deafening proportions: there was no question of setting off even one, let alone a string of them. Under protest, I decided to cut the fireworks altogether. This also meant cutting the dragon dance because its visual impact relied on the pyrotechnics; without them, the dragons made a decidedly unspectacular finale.

The day before opening - Thursday - was scheduled to include two dress rehearsals. The first of these I cancelled, substituting instead a low energy line-run for the actors while the puppeteers did some last-minute fine-tuning with me in the theatre. The second, night-time dress rehearsal included a small invited preview audience. Previews are not normally the custom with Theatre South but I had requested one because it was important to allow Ms. Le and Mr. Kelman a chance to perform in front of an audience before the opening night. About thirty stalwarts of the Friends of Theatre South turned up, plus a couple of lecturers from the School of Creative Arts. Not only was it enough to reassure me that none of the cast would be phased by the presence of people in the bleachers, but it was with considerable pleasure that I saw the performances - of the puppeteers as well as the actors - lift several notches in response to a "live" house. Apart from a few minor technical hitches, the preview went as well as I could have dared to hope.

I could see no point in calling any rehearsals for the following day. More important than anything else was the need for the whole company to rest and relax, mentally preparing for the opening performance that night. The same did not, however, apply to me. I was press-ganged into more of the media...
interviews that had been going on all week, snatched between rehearsal calls and demands for last-minute decisions on technical matters. I had already taped an interview for the local ABC radio station, and spoken live-to-air on ABC Sydney's 2BL morning show. Both local commercial radio stations had also had me in for a chat, and on the morning of the opening night both WIN TV and Prime Television sent crews to interview me and tape short segments from the show for their local news that evening.

By lunchtime there was nothing more to be done. The production was as ready as it was going to be. The coming together of many strands of my life, and the culmination of more than two years' intense work, had now passed from my control to the cast and crew. I retreated to Wendy Richardson's home in the hills and tried, unsuccessfully, to relax for a while.
If there is such a thing as a typical audience for a play, it certainly does not attend the opening night. For a start, few in an opening night crowd actually pay for their tickets. The large numbers of invited guests include those who help the company on a permanent basis (officers of funding bodies and corporate sponsors, members of the board and so on), those who have helped in some way with the particular production (lenders of equipment, donors of cash, company workers like the wardrobe co-ordinator and workshop staff, and so on), those who may help in the future (newspaper reviewers and other journalists, representatives of organisations that may take block bookings, and so on), and the personal friends and family of the production's cast and crew.

Those who do pay for a ticket mostly comprise a small band of opening night "groupies" who go as much to mingle with the crowd as to enjoy the play. Not that a small regional company claims an especially bright "glitterati", but the informal nature of Theatre South's approach does give anyone in the audience an easy chance to meet the play's actors and crew in the foyer after the show.

The opening night audience for *Hearts and Minds* was overwhelmingly made up of people who had helped either the company or the production, or who were friends of the cast and crew. They were therefore undoubtedly partisan, eagerly anticipating success. Nevertheless, the enthusiastic applause which greeted the end of each scene during that first performance came as something of a surprise. Even applying the proverbial grain of salt, I had not expected quite such a positive response. More gratifying, however - because more reliable as a measure of audience attentiveness and interest - was the fact
that the usual bad signs of coughing, shuffling, and rustling programs were conspicuously absent.

A few baffled guffaws and giggles greeted the beginning of the Prologue - which was of course designed for the purpose of making the audience feel at ease with the unfamiliar puppets, but by the beginning of the first scene the reaction was one of delighted acceptance. The energy level of the actors rose strongly in response to the presence of a full house; Ms Le, in particular, hit her straps and found a broader emotional range. There were no technical hitches. As the final blackout fell on Chu Teu, and the performers returned to an ebullient ovation, I felt enormous relief. All the work and risks had paid off and, for one audience at least, the play had worked. I was, however, surprised to be called down to share the plaudits; no-one had remembered to tell me that this is a Theatre South tradition when the playwright is present on opening night.

The foyer "buzz" after the show was good. A lot of people, many of them complete strangers, sought me out to pay compliments. Particularly gratifying were the reactions of those most directly affected by the play's issues - the Vietnamese (a sizeable contingent of Ms Le's friends and relations) and the veterans (Frank Hunt, Fred Spalding and several others). Both groups expressed appreciation at finding complex and difficult issues close to their hearts presented sympathetically and accurately. Zsuzsa Barta, my contact from the Vietnam Veteran's Counselling Service, waxed enthusiastically about the play's therapeutic potential, and promised to send more veterans along.

Arthur Sherwin, president of the Friends of Theatre South, compared the puppetry favourably to the original, which he had seen at the Adelaide Festival in 1988.

There were two newspaper reviewers present at the opening performance. This in itself was remarkable, as Theatre South has a great deal of difficulty persuading even the local paper, The Illawarra Mercury, to review its
Sincerity soothes cultural conflicts

THE title refers to the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, which our troops were somehow supposed to win by fighting a long and terrible war.

It also refers to the troubled hearts and minds of the survivors — scarred veterans and even more scarred refugees — all of whom are expected now to live peaceably together under the smoothly reassuring regime of multiculturalism.

The play's story of these veterans and refugees is told with naive goodwill and comfortable humanist optimism. It does not shirk from delving into some of the horror they faced back in Vietnam but its focus is firmly on the present, as they struggle to soothe the spirits which torment them.

At the centre is the budding love between Donny Ordman, a pleasant young Anglo-Australian university student, and Nguyen Tri Mai, an even more pleasant young Vietnamese woman who helps him in his work and eventually teaches him how to be a sort of gardener of the soul.

Provocative connections

The most weed-infested soul is that of Donny's father, Skip Ordman (I'm sorry, that really is his name) — a well-intentioned man, like everyone in this play, who is driven to violence and bigotry by the memory of a nightmarish experience he had on patrol in 'Nam. Mai and her mother, Phuong, have nightmares of Vietnam. Mai and her mother, Phuong, have nightmares of 'Nam. Mai and her mother, Phuong, have nightmares of 'Nam. Mai and her mother, Phuong, have nightmares of 'Nam. Mai and her mother, Phuong, have nightmares of 'Nam. Mai and her mother, Phuong, have nightmares of 'Nam.

It is a remarkable dream scene in which Skip and his army mate shoot small puppets of Vietcong soldiers on the water — like shooting fish in a barrel or ducks in a penny arcade.

Michael Cee's design does not serve the idea well. It is so Australian-suburban, with its standard moulded kidney-shaped pool and tiled surround, that the ambiguity of the water is lost and the puppets and the dream scenes become bizarre intrusions on the local reality of the pool and the barbecue.

Perhaps this is a sign of the comfortable middle-class earnestness with which this sincere attempt to explore cross-cultural issues has been written and produced.

Emotional play captures hearts, minds

PETER Copeman's *Hearts and Minds* proves an emotionally disturbing play pulling a few punches but rarely becoming tedious.

Tying together themes of multiculturalism, racism, war and emotional chaos, the play grabs you from the opening minutes, raising your awareness of society's problems.

Based around one man's reaction to his son who brings home a Vietnamese girlfriend from university, there's lots of anger in the piece but also plenty of humour and passion.

The use of beautifully carved water puppets adds sharp contrast and depth to the play while a strong cast brings the characters vividly to life.

The first half of *Hearts and Minds* is punchy, well-scripted and bold.

The story is quickly set and the use of flashbacks to show emotional and mental instability is used brilliantly.

By intermission you will be emotionally stunned but entertained.

In the second half, the play loses some of its power. The short, snappy verbal interactions are replaced by longer monologues which are informative but dry and the dialogue loses its edge.

In the final scenes it is hard to imagine two university students having the sort of flowery conversation Donny and Mai have.

Newcomer Huong Le (Mai) is raw but promising, and in a top-class cast, Paul Kelman stands out as the rebellious Donny.

This is one of the best plays to hit Wollongong recently. Don't miss it. It continues at Theatre South until May 24.
shows, let alone attracting anyone from one of the major Sydney or national papers. For *Hearts and Minds*, however, there seems to have been a high level of curiosity about the themes and the use of water puppetry, so not only was the *Mercury* represented by Denise Everton, but John McCallum was there to review for *The Australian*. Ken Healey from *The Sun-Herald* had also been expected, but changed his booking to the second week at the last minute (and to my knowledge never did to get to see the play).

The first review was published in *The Australian* the Wednesday following the opening night. Under the headline "Sincerity soothes cultural conflicts", Mr McCallum's review was generally positive. He particularly admired the use of the puppetry and the allusive intent of the pool:

> The central theatrical metaphor in Peter Copeman's script is a pond of water which is at once the Ordman's backyard swimming pool, the swamps of Vietnam, and the stage for some splendid *roi nuoc* puppets, operated by students of Wollongong University's School of Creative Arts.

> The puppets, as Phuong's sacred fish, as ducks on the university pond where Donny and Mai meet, and as small human figures in the great swamps of Vietnam, enact significant parts of the story.

> It is a wonderful device - allowing some provocative connections to be made between the comforts of suburban Australia and the imported horrors of war.

> There is a remarkable dream scene in which Skip and his army mate shoot small puppets of Vietcong [sic] soldiers on the water - like shooting fish in a barrel or ducks in a penny arcade.

Yet his praise was not without qualifications. He took exception to the name "Skip Ordman", perhaps finding its symbolism heavy-handed (this is a guess - the review fails to elucidate the complaint). He also found that the rigid suburban shape of the pool worked against the metaphorical intentions of the script - a point with which I could only concur. Reviewers are not required to make allowances for the severe financial constraints of the producing company.

Mr McCallum's strongest reservation is more difficult to decipher and understand. Taking issue with the fact that the play's characters were all
"Le Loi! Le Loi! Do not despair!"

(Prologue, p. 2)
well-intentioned, he described the story as being told with "naive good-will and comfortable humanist optimism", the effect of which was that the "interaction between the two cultures is too benign ... to be called a clash". He even went as far as to ascribe the optimism speculatively to "middle-class earnestness" on the part of myself and Theatre South.

The question of the play's optimism is surely one of personal taste. It had always been my intention, as stated earlier in this thesis, to create a piece of theatre which would present difficult issues of war, its aftermath and cultural conflict in a way which would, without shirking those issues, be palatable to mainstream audiences comprised substantially of comfortable middle-class humanists. The optimism underlying the play was therefore entirely intentional. The characters were deliberately drawn as well-intentioned, because I wanted the audience to identify with them and realise how fine the line is between good intentions and paternalism, how closely xenophobia lurks beneath the well-meaning surface. If Skip (or any other character) had been an out-and-out bigot, the audience could simply have dismissed him as having no relevance to their own attitudes, or been encouraged to sympathise with his racism as happens in Romper Stomper.

The second review appeared in the Mercury two days later, on the Friday of the second week. Under the headline "Emotional play captures hearts, minds" Denise Everton's notice was an almost unqualified rave, describing the play as "one of the best ... to hit Wollongong recently", and exhorting readers not to miss it. Her only misgivings concerned the dialogue in the second half, in which, she felt, the "short, snappy verbal interchanges are replaced by longer monologues which are informative but dry ...". This again seems to be a matter of personal taste. My dramaturgs/supervisors, a number of actors and their agents, and many members of the audience stated the view that Phuong's confessional monologue in Act Two Scene Six was the most powerful and
Figure 8.3
“Đừng mà!”
(Act One Scene 3, p. 14)
most powerful and emotionally affecting passage in the play, especially as performed by Chin Yu.

Ms Everton's statement that "in the final scenes it is hard to imagine two university students having the sort of flowery conversation Donny and Mai have" may have been prompted by the passage in Act Two Scene Two where Mai explains the problems of cultural displacement to Donny through the symbol of a banyan tree. The speech was intended to emphasise that, while fairly Australianised, Mai is still capable of approaching a problem in a subtle, metaphorical, Vietnamese way. It is perhaps a little stilted to Australian ears, especially in the mouth of Ms Le, who never really became comfortable with its timing or its cadences. I would need to hear it from a more experienced actor before deciding to rework it or cut it altogether.

Considering Ms Le's inexperience, her performance was well-reviewed, with Ms Everton describing her as "raw but promising" while Mr McCallum stated that she "has not the experience to carry all the big scenes demanded of her but she has a natural and easy charm". The rest of the cast received more fulsome praise, with Paul Kelman - his nerves forgotten and his strong natural talent in the ascendant - singled out for special plaudits in both reviews.

Once the show had settled in on the first weekend, I felt it unnecessary to attend every performance. Normally, a director has no official responsibility beyond the opening, but given my additional interest in the show as its writer, and the fact that my DCA research required some monitoring of the audience reactions, I attended more than usual. In the end, I actually saw seven and one-half performances - exactly half the total. The reason I missed the second half of one late in the second week was because one of the puppeteers had an accident during the performance. While playing the full-sized human/puppet VC soldier who leaps on Skip's back in Act One Scene Scene Four, she hit her nose hard against the underwater shelf in the pool. Leaving the two remaining
"So this is where you learned that trick!"

(Act One Scene 5, p. 32)
puppeteers to soldier on as best they could (fortunately the most difficult puppetry happens at the opening of the play). I took her to Casualty at Wollongong Hospital. Luckily her nose was not broken, although it was badly enough bruised to give her two severe black eyes and prevent her performing for the rest of the season. With some hasty rescheduling of their commitments, the other puppeteers gallantly shouldered her burden. I was very glad to have had two teams. The stocking mask was not worn in that scene from then on.

No other major problem was encountered during the season - only the expected minor ones of occasional line lapses by actors and late, early or forgotten cues by the technical crew. The puppeteers occasionally confused the order of the puppets' entries and exits in the Prologue - a mix-up which to my chagrin occurred during the performance which was videotaped for archival purposes on Wednesday 24 May, and is thus recorded on the tape which is part of Volume 1 of this thesis document.

The season of the play comprised fifteen performances over the two further weeks which followed the opening weekend. Evening performances were given from Wednesday to Saturday, with 4.30pm matinees on Saturdays, a special "Lunchbox" performance at 11.00am on the Thursday of the second week, and Theatre South's traditional final performance at 5.30pm on the Sunday of the last weekend. After a couple of relatively poorly attended early performances (around forty people), the audience numbers built strongly to be all but sold out during the final week, with an overall average attendance for the season of eighty persons per show - sixty-four percent of available capacity. This was well above the company's expectations of fifty-five percent - a heartening result given the conventional wisdom that audiences only want escapism during tough economic times, and also given generally disappointing attendances for the company's other productions for the year. *Hearts and Minds* was the biggest box-office success of the 1992 subscription season.
"You're on a fast, is that it?"

(Act One Scene Seven, p.38)
The foyer "buzz" continued to be good, and strangers continued to seek me out to pay compliments. People from the Vietnamese community continued both to attend and to express their appreciation. Veterans also came in significant numbers, some on Ms Barta's recommendation. Most found it cathartic; a couple found it too disturbing to sit through and left at interval.

A number of the Sydney theatrical *cogniscenti* were invited to the play; they included the artistic directors of all the professional theatre companies and the Australian National Playwrights' Centre, the Director of NIDA, the editor-in-chief of Currency Press, and many others. None came. Officers of the Australia Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts did attend, however, as did a handful of freelance actors, directors and playwrights in a private capacity out of general interest. One of these, Sydney-based freelance director Peter Kingston (former Artistic Director of the Griffin Theatre Company) was sufficiently impressed to ask for a copy of the script. Not long after the season had finished, I received a telephone call from Mr Kingston's agent telling me that he was very interested in directing a production of *Hearts and Minds* if a company could be persuaded to program the play. She requested my permission to tout the play and Mr Kingston as a package to all the major theatre companies in Australia. Not having an agent already, and being an admirer of Mr Kingston's previous work, I agreed. I rapidly put together a fair copy of the final script and sent it to her.

By the time she had sent it out, however, and it had gone through the theatre companies' normal assessment procedures, it was too late for *Hearts and Minds* to be considered for any 1993 season. At the time of submitting this thesis for examination, most companies, including Melbourne Theatre Company, the Playbox Theatre Centre, the Royal Queensland Theatre Company, and the State Theatre Companies of South Australia and Western Australia, still had the play under consideration for their 1994 seasons. Playbox Theatre Centre had sent a
"But Donny! We're supposed to stay with the section."

(Act One Scene Seven, p. 43)
written response, with Artistic Director Carrillo Gantner giving a quite detailed appraisal of what he perceived to be the play's strengths and weaknesses. A copy of this letter can be found in Appendix 9.

Mr Gantner is an acknowledged expert on Asian theatre, and on theatre dealing with Australian/Asian themes. It was therefore gratifying that his assessment found these aspects to be among the strengths of *Hearts and Minds*

I admire very much what you've done. The blending of Asian with European theatre forms and the cross-cultural issues at the heart of the play are a significant development for our theatre, and I congratulate you for it. There are many things I like about the script. One is the framing of the Australian story by the Vietnamese story-telling puppet Chu Teu. The opening story of the Turtle Sword is a very good introduction to the story. I like very much the struggle that Mai has to come to terms with the upfront nature of Australian relationships and society compared with the more subtle Vietnamese ways. The story from Phuong at the end of the play is very moving. I think the use of puppets with actors is potentially very theatrical and exciting.

On the other hand the play's main weakness, according to Mr Gantner, is the directness of its narrative - a criticism disconcertingly reminiscent of those made by my dramaturg/supervisor Ron Pretty as far back as the treatment stage of script development. Mr Gantner states:

On a straight reading of the play, I must say I found the actual progression of the story a bit predictable and stilted. It seems to me that there are too many words, that the playing out of the story is too literal. To use the water metaphor, we see all the ripples on the surface, but I don't feel the power of the undercurrents. Somehow I'd like more surprise, more metaphor, more left to the imagination of the audience.

Even more disconcerting is the fact that similar misgivings were expressed by May-Brit Akerholt, the dramaturg of Sydney Theatre Company, the only company which has so far categorically stated that they are not interested in producing the play. In a letter (also reproduced in Appendix 9) to Peter Kingston's agent, Ms Akerholt, like Mr Gantner, had favourable things to say about the puppetry, the strength of the story, and the genuineness of the characters. Nonetheless, she felt that one of the play's strengths - making important issues accessible to mainstream audiences - was also potentially a deficiency.
"I should've stopped him, Sarge."

(Act One Scene Seven, p. 44)
Hearts and Minds is an accessible play, but I think, perhaps, that this may also be its weakness. At times I felt that it lacks resonance, its is all on the surface, and tends to simplify what is a rather complex argument. It does not leave room for surprises.

Three independent but so uncannily similar responses cannot be dismissed lightly. Nonetheless, it is important to note that all of them were based on a reading of the playscript rather than a viewing of the play in production. Hearts and Minds is not an easy script to comprehend fully on reading because of the necessarily long passages of stage directions concerning the puppetry, which interrupt the flow of dialogue. Readers tend to gloss over stage directions - I have been guilty of this myself when assessing for the ANPC. Moreover, with water puppetry virtually unknown in this country, even the most expert reader like Mr Gantner would have difficulty imagining the charming, almost magical qualities it brought to the production. It would certainly seem that Ms Akerholt did not fully read the directions. Had she done so, she could not have made the error of perceiving that the puppetry in the Prologue and Epilogue provide contrast to the "surreal war-scenes", where in fact those war scenes also make extensive use of puppetry.

Mr Gantner's letter even acknowledges that seeing the production may have allayed his concerns. It is significant that a director of Peter Kingston's reputation, having seen the production, had no doubts about the play's ability to affect its audiences deeply when he expressed interest in directing a further production. It is also significant that neither of the newspaper reviews found the story progression to be too predictable or literal. After seeing the play in production Mr Pretty also declared that his remaining apprehensions regarding the narrative progression seemed to have been largely unfounded. He nonetheless queried the necessity for the final scene between Donny and Mai, believing that the play should conclude on the power of the previous confessional scene between Phuong and Skip. He speculated that my dramaturgical imperative to tie up the central character's narrative may have
been the basis of Mr McCallum's imputation of naive optimism.

In any case, the time for making the major changes that would alleviate such problems with the script - if indeed they are problems - has passed. The question of greater narrative complexity is one that may inform the structure of my next play, but *Hearts and Minds* must stand or fall pretty much in its present form.

This is not to say that there would be no room for revision of parts of the script if the director of any future production could persuade me they would improve it. Nor do I claim that my own production was ideal. With better resources, a larger theatre, more time, and the benefit of hindsight, areas which might be considerably improved include the set (especially the pool), the conceptualization of the full-sized puppet figures (I would like to see them as puppets rather than miming actors), the operation of puppetry (by professional puppeteers) and the casting (with more even experience among the actors, and both Vietnamese roles played by Vietnamese-speakers).

Having fulfilled my original vision by directing the first production, I would now like to see what another director, with a better-resourced company, would make of the *Hearts and Minds*. I am optimistic that it will receive the further productions many people have told me it deserves.
Conclusions

Chapter 1 of this thesis sets out the objectives I hoped to achieve when I embarked on the *Hearts and Minds* project at the beginning of 1990. The primary objective, it will be recalled, was to explore simultaneously attitudes of both the dominant Anglo culture and the Vietnamese minority towards each other, using the intercultural dialectic as the basis of dramatic conflict, confronting mutual prejudices and stereotypes, and searching for points of contact and common ground to provide resolutions.

The simultaneous exploration of mutual attitudes is achieved in the play by the juxtaposition of the two families - one Anglo and the other Vietnamese - inadvertently brought together by the romantic attraction of their only children. All the dramatic conflict of the play - from the minor misunderstandings between Donny and Mai, to the inner struggles with suppressed guilt and pain of Skip and Phuong, to Donny's mounting animosity towards Skip, to Norma's desperate attempts to pour oil on troubled waters - has its basis in intercultural dialectic. But for the cultural differences between Donny and Mai, there would be no real conflict and hence no dramatic story.

Stereotypes of both cultures are confronted and inverted in the play. For instance, while the play does not attempt to whitewash the Vietnamese - Phuong's confessional speech to Skip makes it clear that some Vietnamese are capable of monstrous behaviour - it also shows, through the behaviour of Donny Smith, that Anglo-Australians can be just as monstrous. Nor are the Vietnamese characters any less intelligent or complex than the Anglos; indeed, Mai is depicted as being partially responsible for Donny's growth in intellectual and social maturity - a dividend which Donny repays by catalysing Mai's
self-assertion against the strictures of her mother's culture.

Counter to the usual sexual stereotyping of Vietnamese women, Donny Smith's "yellow satin" attitudes lead only to destruction and guilt, while Phuong's decision to prostitute herself is shown as the result of desperation and love for her husband and child rather than some innate moral laxity. Indeed, her intense feelings of shame concerning this period of her life demonstrate a highly developed morality. On the other hand the relationship between the young couple is based primarily on mutual respect and friendship; while sexual tension grows between them during the course of the play, it never comes to dominate.

To the best of my knowledge, the creation in *Hearts and Minds* of complex, sympathetic, non-stereotyped Vietnamese characters who are major players in the drama - not merely adjuncts to an Anglo story - is a pioneering achievement in Australian mainstream drama. All the more so because the characters are female. Previous depictions of Vietnamese in Australian plays, as discussed in Chapter 3, have either fallen (sometimes perhaps unwittingly) into stereotype or, when the characters have achieved complexity (as in Kennedy Miller's *Vietnam* mini-series) they have nevertheless remained peripheral. Noel Janeczewska's *History of Water*, which was produced after *Hearts and Minds*, did create a complex Vietnamese central character, but the style of the piece was too esoteric to be accessible to mainstream audiences.

*Hearts and Minds* also confronts the stereotype of the Typical Aussie on several fronts. The ruggedly individualistic Donny Smith, treading in the footsteps of the ANZACs, turns out under pressure to be a coward and a bully, a rapist capable of cold-blooded murder. Skip, in his youth, was an incompetent soldier; now, as he approaches middle age he is a barely adequate exponent of the consummately male profession of engineering, and as a husband and father he can neither understand his wife nor communicate meaningfully with his
9. Conclusions

son. Donny, despite his conditioned propensity for boorishness, shows a potential for sensitivity and delicacy unheard of in the Typical Aussie.

Nor is the Australian Way of Life left unchallenged. The easygoing outdoor family lifestyle of barbecue and poolside is depicted as a fragile facade; the hassle of cleaning the pool is a source of family friction, and the steaks get burnt. It is not a setting in which a Vietnamese immigrant feels immediately comfortable. On the other hand, clinging to homeland ways on the part of the immigrant is also shown to be a self-deluding facade.

While there is nothing new in the debunking of cherished Australian stereotypes, it has seldom been tried in the context of intercultural conflict. When it has, such as in Rosemary John's *Luck of the Draw*, the outcome has been bleakly pessimistic. The accomplishment of *Hearts and Minds* is that the resolution of the play's conflicts is optimistic, brought about through the establishment of points of sympathy and common ground between the protagonists. For example, although their level of commitment to university study is different, Donny and Mai at least enjoy sharing a subject, a corner of the campus, and each other's company. They also share a concern for the natural environment, although Donny's is intellectual and political while Mai's is more cultural-based and spiritual. The bond of respect, friendship and eventually love between Mai and Donny is finally strong enough to enable them to face the formidable obstacles strewn in their path. So although iconoclastic, *Hearts and Minds* is, if not unique, then at least extremely rare in offering the possibility of change, inviting Australians of all backgrounds to look beyond the outmoded myths and cultural barriers and draw strength from diversity. Whether or not reviewers find it to their taste, the optimism of the play is unabashedly intentional - fundamental to achieving its objectives.

Chapter 1 of this thesis also identified secondary objectives which flowed from the primary one. One of these was to present the story of two cultures not
only in terms of themes and characters, but also in the theatrical, presentational aspects of the play, interfacing the European-dominated values of mainstream theatre with Vietnamese theatre traditions and practices. That this objective was successfully achieved through the integration of water puppetry with a naturalistic acting style was attested to by the rapid and delighted acceptance of the puppetry by the play’s audiences, and by its favourable reception from the newspaper reviewers and from Asian theatre expert Carrillo Gantner.

The importance of the puppetry can perhaps best be gauged by considering what the play would be like without it. A similar story could probably be presented naturalistically, but without the metaphorical elements provided by the puppetry and pool, together with the captivating, magical charm of the puppets themselves, the narrative would lose its edge, the theatrical spectacle would be greatly diminished, and the balance between theme and form would be lost. As one of the puppeteers expressed it in her end-of-term paper on the project:

Puppetry as an art form ... is a means of reawakening the imagination and the child in us ... It is a means of penetrating the critical, intellectual eye and speaking straight to the heart. Puppets present archetypes in the manner of fairy tales - archetypes which embody characteristics with which we are all familiar. (Sandisson)

Australian plays endeavouring to integrate any kind of Asian theatre forms have been rare. Before Hearts and Minds, no Australian play had ever incorporated Vietnamese water puppetry. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge (corroborated by my discussions with the members of the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre), this has never previously been attempted anywhere in the world.

A further secondary objective of the project was to reflect the extent to which the Vietnamese language is spoken in the community. The dialogue of the solitary scene in which no Anglos are present - Act One Scene Three -
therefore needed to be spoken in Vietnamese. By ensuring that the scene developed strong conflict and clear physical action, it was possible to incorporate the Vietnamese dialogue without recourse to opera-style "surtitles" or other translation devices for the benefit of the non-Vietnamese-speaking audience members. In the other, brief Vietnamese-language passages, the actions and intentions of the characters were either immediately clear (such as Mai's feeding of the ducks) or were explained later (such as Phuong's reaction to the appearance of the peacocks in her pond). Chu Teu's decision to continue in English after starting in Vietnamese was acceptable because of the satirical bite which accompanies that decision.

Bilingual plays have been presented by community theatre companies such as Sidetrack (mostly in Greek and Italian) but rarely in mainstream theatres. The fact there were no adverse comments from Anglo audience members or newspaper reviewers concerning the Vietnamese dialogue, together with the appreciative comments of the Vietnamese Australians who attended the play, are testament to the success of the bilingual experiment in *Hearts and Minds*.

The final second-tier objective stated in Chapter 1 was to re-examine Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war not only in terms of its legacy for intercultural relationships within Australia, but also in terms of Australia's contemporary international relationships with its Asian neighbours. It was my aim to create something of a metaphor for the transitional nature of Australia's attitude towards Asia and Asians. This was clearly fulfilled: Skip can be seen not only as a naturalistic character but also as symbol of an Australia haunted by a past in which it participated in the neo-colonialist brutalizing of its Asian neighbours unable to face a future of increasing interdependency with those same neighbours. Phuong represents the other side of the coin: a resentful Asia suspicious of Australian overtures of friendship. Donny and Mai symbolize the
vanguard of Australians and Asians seeking closer relations despite the odds; Norma betokens the majority of Australians whose bark is far worse than their bite regarding racial and cultural difference (except, perhaps, regarding the Aboriginal Australians) and who in practice are quite tolerant once their initial fear of the new has been overcome.

Belief in this underlying tolerance of Australians and their capacity to adapt rapidly to the new challenges both of multiculturalism and of mutuality with Asia has informed my approach to this project from the outset. It may be "naive humanist optimism", but I believe that a multiculturalism based not only on respect for difference but on active intercultural curiosity and creative non-violent conflict can contribute a new understanding of what it means to be Australian. This applies as much to Anglo-Australians as it does to the immigrant minorities. That mainstream theatre audiences are ready to accept it is indicated by the popularity of *Hearts and Minds*, the most commercially successful production in Theatre South's 1992 season.

Brian Castro has suggested that there may, after all, be no such thing as an Australian mainstream. (Australian culture has, after all, always been marginal to the metropolitan cultures of Britain, Europe and America.) Multiculturalism, he asserts, is "the idealisation of pluralism. And the ideal pluralism is when everybody exists on the margins ..." (7). Or as Lolo Hubein puts it,

> what else can one be in Australia but multicultural? One doesn't have to be born overseas any more to be multicultural, it's now a matter of choice: of friends, partners, food, work and leisure pursuits. Who wants to be pure Anglo or whatever anyway? (84)

As well as continuing to produce imitations and reproductions of Euro-American theatre models, the Australian mainstream theatre would do well to look closer to home - to "open a dialogue about living here, rather than add to the litany of monologues lamenting why here is not (and never was) there" (Carter 18).

I certainly intend to continue to work in this territory. My ability to do so
will be greatly assisted by the fact that I have been awarded one of the Australia Council's inaugural Asia/Pacific Writers' Fellowships for 1993. This Fellowship, awarded on the strength of the success of *Hearts and Minds* provides a year's basic salary plus a travel allowance for research in Asia. It will enable me to write a play dealing with Australian/Filipino issues.

There is a rich source of dramatic stories inherent in the intercultural relationships of Australians with each other and with their regional neighbours. There is also an exciting array of Asian theatre forms with which Australian audiences are barely familiar. *Hearts and Minds* was only the first of what I hope will be many projects contributing to a re-orientation of Australian theatre towards a theatre of cultural diversity.


*Breaker Morant*. Australia: South Australian Film Corporation, 1980.


References Cited


Castles, Stephen; Kalantzis, Mary; Cope, Bill; and Morrisey, Michael. "Mistaken Identity." Whitlock and Carter 129-141.


Hubein, Lolo. "Neither here nor there, left nor right nor centre: Functioning as a multicultural writer in Australia." *Gunew and Longley* 81-85.


*The Odd Angry Shot*. Australia: Samson Film Services, 1979.


Figure and Acting in World Puppet Theatre. Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1977.


Appendix 1
Water Puppetry Notes from the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre

THE VIETNAMESE WATER-PUPPET ART.

Water Puppet is a branch of Vietnamese theatrical art. It has existed for a long time and been related with the water-rice civilization of the Vietnamese nation. It has proved that the inhabitants here had not only conquered water to create material wealth for their lives but also used their intelligence and creation together with water to make an unique mental food for our minds. That is: The Vietnamese Water-Puppet Art.

It was born and connected with lives in the villages, round the ponds and lakes behind the bamboos. All the people's happiness and dreams about production, hunting, life... are reflected in it.

Until the 12th century, the cultural monument " Sung Tham Dien Linh" on Long Doi mountain ( Ha Nam Ninh province ) recorded a performance of water puppets there for King Ly Nhan Tong in 1121.

That is why every year, at festivals, celebrations, the villagers have a chance to watch water puppet art.

The stage for water puppets is the "Water Imperial Palace" (a palace on the water). In the centre of a pond of lake, the performing floor is the shining water in front of the palace.

The audience stand or sit around on the bank of the lake to watch it. The actors have to keep themselves in water in the palace behind a thin curtain. They conduct the puppet activities outside.

So all the audience cannot see the actors, what they see are only the puppets moving on the water. All the tools and sticks
for the conduction of the puppets are covered by the blue water. Thus increasing the miraculous factors of the puppets moving in the secret water environment.

That is why water puppet art has created a lot of unexpectations and enjoyment for the audience. The beauty of this art is increased when it has inherited the essence of the traditional sculpture art and of red lacquered and gild painting art of Vietnamese nation. Thus making the puppets more beautiful and the ancient statues for worshipping become more beautiful and brilliant in addition to the beauty of the lakes.

The strong point of water-puppet art is that: it has exploited all the technical factors of conducting the puppets in the available water environment with simple tools to make unexpected effects in simple items like "Rearing ducks and catching foxes", "Fishing", "Frog catching", "Eight fairies", "Unicorns playing with ball".

The topics that water puppets refer to are also simple and near to the lives of the people, which are limited behind the village bamboos.

It is from this simple content and from that the Vietnamese puppet art has got its persuasion and attraction ever fierce. As it bears in itself "a purely national art", "a national colouring art". So newspapers and the world opinions have highly evaluated and extolled the programme during its tours in the last few years.

Armed with the direction of inheritance and development of national art, the Vietnamese Puppet theatre has built up a national
ancient water-puppet programme which has been very successful in many years in many countries in the world.

So far the Vietnamese Puppet Theatre has successfully made up a water-puppet play for a full night, which was based on the Vietnamese national folk tale. Son Tinh, Thuy Tinh, who were highly praised in the Vietnamese Puppets' Gala in October, 1989. Its success has proved that the inheritance and development are the continuous joint and a perfection.

This explains why many countries and cultural organizations, concerts, UNMs have spared no efforts and money to invite the Vietnamese Puppet Theatre for its performance in great ceremonies or theatrical festivals. With its perfect skills and talents, the Vietnamese Puppet Theatre has fully satisfied all friends' wishes. It has consolidated the friendship and solidarity among nations as well as water-puppet exchange with peoples of the countries the water-puppet theatre has visited and performed.

"Vietnamese water-puppet theatre is the harmonious combination between water and fire". Vietnamese Water-Puppet dance is a brilliant mystery of legends which are being displayed in front of us. Vietnamese water puppet dance... is so strange that it is admirable.

"Don't miss it. Don't miss it, Vietnamese Water-Puppets"

Those are affectionate compliments and ardent encouragements from friends all over the continent for Water-Puppet art whenever the theatre visit and perform.
A FEW LINES ABOUT THE VIETNAMESE PUPPET THEATRE

The Vietnamese Puppet Theatre was founded according to the instruction of our beloved president Ho Chi Minh: "It's necessary to have a professional puppet theatre so that our children can have more joys and laughters." (3-1956)

From the first seven actors and actresses, up to now the Vietnamese Puppet Theatre has got a powerful team of actors and actresses as well as many other specialists divided into two groups of puppet art, capable of performing ground puppets, water puppets and a variety of puppet shows. It also has an enterprise of painting and sculpture and other coordinating offices necessary for various art performances of the theatre.

The Vietnamese Puppet Theatre has got over 60 performances programmes. At present, the theatre has got its regular performance programmes including ground puppets, water puppets and a variety of shows in different forms such as: assembled regular acts or tidy groups at the service of schools and children.

The programmes of the Vietnamese Puppet Theatre all have shown their intimate national colour. They have inherited and developed the essence of the traditional puppet arts of the nation. That is why they are always welcomed by the audience in the country and abroad, especially during its tours around the U.S.S.R (1979), Poland, Czechoslovakia (1980), France, Italy (1984), France (Italy, Poland (1987), Australia, Japan (1988). Whenever it came, its programmes won the whole feelings and encouraging appraise of all ages and all kinds of audience.

The Vietnamese Puppet Theatre has always been the centre of puppet art activities in Vietnam. It has taken an active part in the performance of UNIMA in Bucharest (1958), Prague (1979), Taska (1979), Warnaw (1980), Japan (1988).
The Vietnamese Puppet Theatre is one of the active members in founding the Vietnamese UNIMA (1989). Thanks to the active and effective activities, the correct way to building and developing the traditional puppet art in all mentioned festivals, the Vietnamese Puppet theatre won its deserved prizes for its programmes and actors.

Now if there is a favourable chance, I would like you to see with your own eyes the performance programmes of the Vietnamese Puppet Theatre. We are always at your service.

The Vietnamese Puppet Theatre.
Appendix 1: Water Puppetry Notes from the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre

VIETNAMESE WATER-PUPPET PERFORMANCE

PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME

"Village Stories"

1- Flag up.

The performance programme begins with the traditional flag-up of Vietnamese water-puppet art.

2- Chu Teu: The programme introducer

Teu is a stereotype character of water-puppet performance.

3- Dragon dance:

The Dragon is a religious symbol that brings fire, water as well as strength to human beings.

4- Agriculture:

Agricultural works such as ploughing, harrowing, cultivating, buffalo raising... are needed to grow water rice-plants.

5- Frog catching:

A hobby of those who live in water rice plant areas is frog-catching.

6- Unicorn dance:

This is one of the most favorite traditional dance which is often performed at mid-autumn festival each year.

7- Fairy dance:

In fairy tales, Fairies often fly to our Earth to dance on shining moon-lit surfaces of lakes.

8- Peacock dance:

The Peacock is a religious symbol that brings fun and happiness to boys and girls.

9- Lamson army force assembly:

This is a story about a peasant hero in Lamson who stood up to fight against foreign aggressors to bring peace back to the nation. One day, when he was on a boat tour, the Golden Turtle appeared and asked him to give back the sword that had been handed to him in the fight against foreign invaders.
10- **Buffalo fight**

This is one of the most attractive and funny item in village festivals at the beginning of Spring.

11- **Swimming race for duck catching**

In the village lakes, many young men are trying their best to catch swimming ducks.

12- **Rearing ducks and catching foxes**

In order to defend their flocks of ducks well, the farmers have to fight against sinister foxes that are trying to catch their ducks.

13- **Fishing**

Various kinds of fishes in the rivers, streams, and fields as well as different modes of preliminary fish catching are displayed.

14- **Unicorns play with ball**

This traditional game indicates intelligence and skillfulness.

15- **Four holly dragons**

These four holly dragons are worshipped by our people. They are symbols of a peace, happiness and prosperous life for all of us.

---

**The village tales**

They are smaller lines of people behind the village banana who were used to farming and hard labour. In spite of it they were able to sight against their enemies to protect their labour fruits. They played, danced and flew in their dreams...
Appendix 2
Script Plot Points as at June 1991

Act One*

1 Donny meets Mai to tell her of a good uni result he's got in a subject they've been studying together. He asks her out on a date. She refuses, but doesn't say why.

Act Two*

2 Donny tells Norma that he's interested in Mai. He enlists her help to broach the matter with Skip.

3. Mai tells Phuong that she's been asked out by an Australian boy. Phuong is not impressed and gives Mai a tongue-lashing about the importance of tradition.

4. Norma broaches the subject of Donny's interest in Mai to Skip. Skip is obviously disturbed but denies it to Norma. He agrees to meet Mai.

5. Alone and disturbed, Skip flashes back to a traumatic incident during the war. Norma enters in the middle of it and talks him down. She suggests they not meet Mai after all. Skip won't hear of it.

6. Donny and Mai meet. Mai apologises for her rudeness the other day. Donny repeats his request for a date. Mai explains she can't on cultural grounds. Donny, not convinced the cultural differences could be so strong, urges her at least to introduce him to her mother. Mai hesitantly agrees.

7. Mai introduces Donny to Phuong. Donny asks if he can take Mai out. Phuong refuses. Sensing that there's little left to lose, Donny tells Phuong a few home truths about life in Australia. Hurt, Phuong relents and gives permission for Mai at least to go to Donny's house to meet Skip and Norma.

8. Mai visits Donny's parents at home. Skip's drunk and obnoxious towards Mai. Mai tries to be polite, but it gets too much for her and she asks Donny to
take her home

9 Skip and Norma have a huge row about Skip’s behaviour towards Mai. Skip, still drunk, gets aggressive and hits Norma.

10 Skip tries to apologise to Norma, but she’s still too hurt and angry to listen.

11 Donny and Skip have a row about Skip’s behaviour towards Mai. Skip is remorseful but can’t express it.

12 Donny discovers that Skip has hit Norma. He promises revenge on her behalf, but Norma defends Skip, explaining that he’s become mentally unhinged. Donny’s offended that she appears to be taking Skip’s side.

13 Alone, confused and drinking, Skip flashes back to Vietnam and his involvement in an atrocity - the rape of a peasant woman. Coming out of the flashback, he expresses profound guilt and regret and wishes he could have the time over again.

14 Still hurt and angry, Donny meets Mai. He declares his love for her. Mai tries to deny that love can exist between them, but eventually admits her feelings are reciprocal. They discuss ways of continuing to see each other without their parents’ knowledge.

15 Norma seeks out Phuong to ask her to intervene and prevent further development of the relationship between Donny and Mai, in order to save Skip from insanity. Phuong is offended by the request - she doesn’t even have a husband, only a daughter. She’s not prepared to risk losing.

16 Donny and Mai meet for one of their clandestine meetings. Skip finds them together and flashes back again to the rape of the peasant woman in Vietnam. His confused mind tells him that this is his chance to have his time over again - undo the atrocity. Taking Mai to be the peasant woman, he tries to drive her away. Donny assumes he’s trying to attack Mai, so leaps to her defence. Skip goes beserk and attacks Donny, knocking him unconscious.
Act Three *

17. Thinking he's killed his own son, Skip contemplates suicide.

18. Phuong arrives in time to prevent the suicide. She brings news that Donny's going to be OK. She tells Skip she understands him, because of her own price of survival. She tells him her story of escape from Vietnam and the death of her husband. Skip mellows towards her.

19. Mai meets a fully recovered Donny, who's about to move out of home. She urges him to talk to his father and try to understand him. Donny reluctantly agrees.


* The acts divisions designated here define the narrative structure; they have nothing to do with the positioning of the interval in the final script.
ACT ONE

Prologue

A clearing in the jungle, enveloped by dark, vaguely menacing foliage. At the back of the clearing, a large, dimly lit pool of water. A single bamboo flute plays mournfully in the distance. Then a drum begins to beat, and suddenly the pool erupts in a rapid series of explosions, shrouding the jungle in smoke.

The figure of a near-naked peasant emerges from the back of the pool. This is Chu Teu, master of ceremonies for the Vietnamese water puppets. In grandiloquent style, he introduces a brief play performed by other puppets. This play tells a tale, an ancient legend of Vietnam. In the fourteenth century, the country underwent a period of internal political disunity. Taking advantage of the discord, the Ming emperors of China invaded Vietnam and established direct rule from Peking. The Vietnamese put aside their differences and joined forces under Le Loi who, with the aid of the military genius Nguyen Trai, raised the banner of national resistance and rallied the people in a liberation struggle that was to last ten years. According to legend, towards the end of the struggle a mythical sword was bequeathed to Le Loi by a turtle from beneath the waters of Hoan Kiem Lake in the centre of Hanoi. This sword made Le Loi invincible, and with it the Vietnamese leader finally forced the Chinese to withdraw. Not long afterwards, when Le Loi was boating on Hoan Kiem Lake, the turtle re-appeared and claimed back the sword.

Chu Teu reappears to conclude the puppet play by pointing out that Vietnam has had many such struggles in its history. The people have always triumphed, at great cost to the aggressors. But the cost to the Vietnamese people
has invariably been greater, and many have left in the hope of finding peace and a refuge from sorrow in other lands - even the lands of former aggressors.

**Scene One**

A quiet, serene outdoor spot in the grounds of the university. A bench seat next to a duck pond, overhung by shady trees. Mai is sitting alone on the bench, reading. She marks her page, closes the book and puts it down. Taking a bag of bread from her bag, she claps her hands. Some (puppet) ducks appear, swimming in the water. Mai throws it to the birds, taking obvious delight. A voice calls her name from offstage. She looks and waves. Donny enters, all boisterous energy and noise. The ducks disappear to a quieter part of the pond.

Donny tells Mai he's got a Distinction in his accounting exam. He can't believe it - he's never got a Distinction for anything, in two years at uni. His folks will be thrilled - especially his Dad. He attributes his success directly to the help Mai's given him, patiently guiding him through all those swot sessions here at the duck pond. He gives her a small giftwrapped package. Mai is embarrassed, but Donny insists she open it. While she struggles with the wrapping, she downplays her role in his success, insisting that no amount of help would've got him this result unless he'd had the commitment and aptitude himself. She gets the package open and takes out a cassette. Donny says he remembered her saying once she liked Midnight Oil. She admits she does, but still doesn't believe she deserves such a gift. After all, helping him helped her, too. Donny apologises for not asking sooner what her result was. She confesses to getting a High Distinction. Donny's delighted. He admits he wouldn't like to have got a better mark than she did. Not that he really thought it likely.

Donny reckons the two of them have something to celebrate, and asks Mai out for dinner. She declines, pleading that she still has more exams to come. Donny points out that it doesn't have to be tonight - they can make it after her last exam. She hesitates, and Donny confesses how much he's enjoyed their swot
sessions together - not the work, although that's been OK, but just being together. And she seems to have enjoyed it, too. And now they've done the exam, he doesn't want it just to end. He'd like to continue seeing her over the vacation.

Mai tells him she can't. Donny asks her why not. She just repeats that she can't. Donny presses her - does she have a regular boyfriend? If so, she's never mentioned him, and there's never been anyone around. Mai says there isn't any such person. Donny presses further - if she doesn't like him, she should say so. Mai says it isn't that. Donny wants to know what "it" is, then.

Mai looks at her watch, pleads being late for an appointment, picks up her bag and rushes off. A confused Donny calls after her, asking if he can at least meet her here at the pond again while they're both still at uni. But Mai doesn't answer. Peeved, Donny kicks the water and sprays it over the ducks, which have just returned. The ducks quack raucously in protest.

Scene Two

The backyard at the Ordman family home. Canopied by trees, there's a small above-ground swimming pool with a deck at the height of the edge of the pool. The ground level in front of the pool is a terrace, with some easy chairs, a banana lounge, a portable barbecue, and other patio-style furniture. Donny is standing on the deck, skimming the leaves from the pool's surface. He's distracted, not paying much attention to the job.

Norma enters with a pot of coffee. She teases Donny, telling him the leaves won't come to him. If he's not careful he'll melt in this heat. He has to move around if he's going to finish before Christmas. Donny apologises and moves to a new spot, continuing to skim without paying attention. Norma tells him to leave it and come and have coffee. She can forgive him for being a little dreamy. He has every right to be pleased with himself. She and Skip are very proud. Donny looks at her uncomprehendingly. Proud of what? Then he twigs that Norma was talking about his exam result. He makes an effort join in the conversation. to
play up to his mother's pride. But Norma's already suspicious. What could be
pre-occupying him to the extent that he could forget his wonderful result?

Donny admits there is something else on his mind. Norma hazards a guess -
perhaps it's not so much on his mind but in his heart? Donny's surprised - how
did she know? Norma admits it was a guess - but the others possibilities were less
attractive, so she tried that one first. Does he want to talk about it? Donny
reminds his mother that he's been receiving swot help from a girl in his
tutorial. Norma remembers - is she the one he's keen on? He confirms it. Norma
asserts that she must be quite a lass, to have got Donny a Distinction. What was
her name again? Something old-fashioned, like Mabel or Maisie. No - May, that
was it, wasn't it?

Donny tells her the name is Mai, not May. Nguyen Tri Mai. She's
Vietnamese. And yes, he's keen on her. How does Norma think Skip will react?
Norma doesn't reply. Donny repeats the question - how will Dad react? Norma
asks him what about her reaction? Doesn't it count for anything? Donny
apologises. He's been so concerned with how Skip would take it, he hadn't
thought about Norma's feelings.

Norma's not sure what her feelings are. She's sure Mai's a very nice girl,
but there's all the problems of mixed relationships. Prejudices from both sides.
difficulties of identity for the mixed-blood children. Donny can't believe his
mother's talking like this - he hasn't even gone on a date with Mai, and Norma's
already talking as though they're contemplating marriage. Norma concedes that
she's overstepped the mark - but she senses that Donny's never been as serious
about a girl before as he is about Mai. Donny admits this is true. Norma persists
that even for a steady relationship, there can be major problems. The cultural
differences will lead to misunderstandings. There are all sorts of obstacles to
happiness - language, background, community expectations, religion. Donny
says that one's OK - he's pretty sure she's Catholic. Norma finds that something
to be grateful for, at least. Donny argues that the other problems oughtn’t to be insurmountable. Not if he and Mai are really committed.

Norma asks whether Mai is as committed as Donny seems to be. Donny admits he’s not sure. He thought she was as keen on him as he is on her, but when he broached it, she backed away. Like she was scared. Norma’s not surprised - it reinforces her point. Donny states he’s not giving up on the strength of one setback. But it’ll help if he has his parents behind him. Norma promises to try her hardest to be supportive.

But Donny still wants to know about Skip. How will he take it? Norma admits she’s not sure. He never talks about his war experiences, as Donny knows. And he hasn’t shown any stress symptoms since early in their marriage. In fact, he’s even pooh-hoed the “troubled veteran syndrome” that occasionally makes a splash in the media. And he claims to be - is - open-minded about Asian immigration. So in theory he should take it fine - probably better than herself. But... she hesitates. Donny wants to know what the “but” is. Norma says she’s not sure. Despite what he says he feels, Skip’s always avoided anything that might make him think too closely about his time in Vietnam. Never joined the VVA, or even the RSL. Never marched on Anzac Day. Even scoffed at the "homecoming" parades in '87 and '88. Sometimes she’s had the feeling that he was protesting a little too much.

Donny asks what she thinks he should do. Bring Mai round to meet them? He’s certain that once they see how nice she is, there’ll be no worries. Norma thinks it would be a good idea if they could meet her, but not just yet. She asks Donny to give her time to broach the matter with Skip first. Donny agrees. He goes off happy. Norma calls after him that he’ll never get his father’s approval if he doesn’t finish cleaning the pool. But there’s no response - he’s gone. With a smile, Norma picks up the skimmer and resumes the job.
**Scene Three**

The home of Mai and her mother Phuong. A leafy courtyard to the rear of their town house. The courtyard has been transformed into a little piece of rural Vietnamese village - bamboo, a fish pond, a shrine. Prominent in the shrine is a photograph of a Vietnamese man in his thirties. Phuong enters, carrying a tray with a bowl of fruit, a long narrow box, and a small jar. She places this on the ground, picks up the jar and goes to the edge of the pond. She claps her hands and calls. Then she throws some fish-food into the water. The water comes alive with (puppet) fish, writhing and thrashing in rivalry for the food. She continues delightedly feeding them for a time, then tells them there's no more. The fish disappear, and she turns to the shrine. She takes the bowl of fruit and places it on the shrine's little altar, then, taking some incense sticks out of the long box, lights them and places them in the shrine. She kneels and prays.

Her silent devotions are suddenly shattered by the harsh, angry sounds of Midnight Oil. Mai enters, carrying a small portable boom box, playing at full volume. She's "grooving" to the music. She comes face to face with her astonished mother. Horrified, she hastily turns off the music. But it's too late. Furious, Phuong demands an explanation. Mai mumbles an apology, but Phuong's not listening. She gives Mai a shrill dressing down for her lack of respect for her father's memory. She's defiling his shrine. Does she want to drive his spirit away? Bring more bad luck on them for years to come? Mai again tries to apologise, explaining that she didn't realise Phuong was out there. But Phuong insists that this courtyard is no place for this kind of behaviour, anyway. It's a place to escape from such trash, not be invaded by it. She seizes the boom box from Mai, takes out the tape and reads the name on it. Spitting on it, she hurls it into the pool.

Mai watches this in horror, then bursts into tears and runs off. Phuong, scarcely able herself to believe what she's done, calls after her. But she's gone.
Distressed, Phuong goes to the shrine and picks up her husband's photo. She hugs it to herself. What has she done? It's such a burden, bringing up Mai in this strange country, on her own. Even after twelve years, she still doesn't understand the customs. The lack of order. If only he were still alive, and here...

**Scene Four**

The back yard at the Ordman home. Night time. Skip's having a quiet nightcap on the pool terrace in preparation for going to bed. Norma enters and, after beating round the bush a bit, broaches the subject that Donny seems to be getting involved in a relationship with a Vietnamese girl. Skip's immediate, instinctive reaction takes Norma by surprise. He snaps back at her that you don't get in relationships with noggie women. You buy them a Saigon tea, go out the back room, suck and fuck, fork over the scrip, and forget them. Fuck, fork, and forget - Donny knows that! He was the one drummed it into Skip. What's the stupid bastard think he's up to?

Norma's initially appalled, but then the penny drops. She goes to Skip and makes him look her in the face. She tells him she's not talking about Donny Smith, his mate. She's talking about Donny Ordman, their son. The glaze goes from Skip's eyes. He's mortified, and apologises to Norma - doesn't know what came over him. Must've been the combination of "Donny" and "Vietnamese girl" that did it. He tries to shrug it off. He was no angel in the Nam. He's never kept that a secret from Norma. Norma asks him if he's OK, and he insists he is. By way of changing the subject, he returns to her original statement. So, young Donny's got himself a Vietnamese girlfriend - is that what she said?

Norma asks him how he feels about it. Skip hums and ha's a bit. It ought to be OK, oughtn't it? Of course, there are always problems with mixed relationships. Norma tells him she's been through all that with Donny, and he seems to think he has the commitment to be able to cope. The point is, can Skip? Skip snaps back that of course he can! As long as everything else about her's all
right, and she's not some illegal immigrant using Donny to gain legal status, or something. No indication of that? Norma thinks it's hardly likely, seeing as at the moment, Donny seems keener than the girl. Also, they've known each other for some time, while Mai's been helping Donny with his accounting. This clinches Skip's attitude - any girl who can get Donny up to A-grade standard is all right in his books. When are they going to meet this miracle worker?

Norma asks again if he's sure he can handle such a meeting. Skip again insists, rather irritably, that he can. He's not one of those sooky vets who blame all their problems on the fact that they fought a war. Norma says she knows that, but she wouldn't want him to say anything like he said earlier. Again, Skip snaps at her - there won't be a repeat! It was a temporary aberration, and after all a not unreasonable one. Two of the most important blokes in his life - his best mate and his only son share the same name, because he named one in memory of the other. Is it such a big deal that he got them confused for a second? And anyway, now it's out of his system. Norma seems mollified. They can put it to Donny in the morning about inviting Mai to meet them. She suggests they go to bed. Skip agrees, but as they head towards the house, he suddenly changes his mind. He tells her to go ahead - he's not feeling that tired, so he'll stay out in the cool a bit longer. Norma exits, reminding him to leave the hall light on for Donny.

He sits back down, but immediately gets up again and begins pacing up and down in the gloom. He's clearly not so sure about himself as he told Norma. He mutters to himself about having made such a blunder - how could he be so lacking in control? Donny's got himself a nig-nog girlfriend - so what? He realises he's just done it again, and is furious with himself. He pours himself a stiff drink to calm his nerves. It makes him feel a bit better. Why should he get upset about a few memories? Doesn't Donny Smith deserve to be remembered? The best mate a bloke ever had. And a great soldier. He'd been in-country ten
months when Skip joined the Task Force as a rookie. Taught Skip all he knew. Wouldn’t have survived without him. He sits down and gulps down a large toast to Donny Smith.

The lights change. From the shadows a voice whispers urgently for him to pipe down. They’re supposed to be an ambush, not a homing beacon for the VC. Skip whispers “Sorry, Donny” and crouches, silent. A masked figure dressed in jungle greens, giggle hat and carrying a rifle emerges from the shadows and wriggles over to him. (This is Donny Smith, played by the same actor as plays Donny Ordman). Donny taps Skip on the shoulder and points to the pool. Watch the rice paddy! At the far side, a black-pyjama-clad figure (puppet) creeps stealthily out of the shadows, carrying a rifle. Skip looks questioningly at him. He nods. Skip raises his “rifle” (the pool skimmer). Donny stops him, gesturing to wait. The VC figure moves forward. Then as Skip begins to lose patience, another VC emerges from the shadows. Both move forward together. No others join them. Skip raises his rifle. Donny does the same. They fire. Loud repeated shots ring out (live fireworks) and the VC seems to jerk and dance before collapsing into the water and disappearing.

Skip’s elated. He starts cheering. Donny shuts him up quick smart. Just because he’s killed a nog on his first contact doesn’t mean he’s invincible. The night belongs to Charlie, and he better remember that. Besides, they haven’t finished the job. They’ve got to search the bodies, take back any ID for Intelligence. And confirm the body count. Skip’s suddenly scared again. They’ve got to wade across the paddy and look for bodies in the water? Not wade, says Donny. They’ll go round by the dyke. Stick to the shadows. They move off.

They arrive at the other side of the pool. Donny tells Skip to go in and look, while he covers him. Skip hesitates, then slides into the pool, searching. He’s sure this was where they were. And how could they have missed? Hang on. He can feel something with his foot. Suddenly, a VC soldier (masked actor) bursts
out of the water, hands grasping at Skips throat, stifling his scream. He struggles with the VC. Locked together, they thrash about, revolving slowly. Donny shoots. The VC jerks, lets go Skip's throat, and disappears under the water. Skip stands in the water, gibbering.

The lights change and Donny vanishes. Norma enters, asking what's going on? She heard a scream and... She sees Skip standing in the pool, holding the skimmer, shaking and gibbering. She calls to him. Slowly he comes to his senses. She asks him if he was dreaming. He tells her it was sort of like a dream - or a nightmare. But he didn't think he'd gone to sleep. It was like he was there, back in the Nam. He hasn't had nightmares about the war for years. And never like this. And then suddenly here he is, standing fully clothed in the pool with Norma asking him what's going on.

Norma apologises for having brought up the subject of Donny's girlfriend. But Skip won't have that - surely that wouldn't have that effect? Norma asks what else? Maybe they better not meet Mai just yet. After all, it may not work out between Donny and her. But Skip says that's ridiculous. Even if he does have a bit of a problem - which he doesn't admit - he shouldn't transfer it to his son. He has to work it out himself. Like he said before, get it out of his system. Maybe he already has - whatever it was that happened tonight. Norma mustn't tell Donny. He makes her promise. She agrees, with obvious misgivings.

**Scene Five**

The university duck pond. Mai enters and sits at the bench, rather despondent. She claps her hands, takes out her bag of bread and feeds the ducks. She tells them she envies the simplicity of their lives. Then she takes out a book and tries to read, but can't give it any attention. Donny enters and calls her name. She leaps up, pleased to see him.

Donny begins to apologise for having been so pushy last time they met. He puts it down to exuberance brought on by his good result. Mai tells him she's the
one who has to apologise - her behaviour was unpardonably rude. She had no right to treat him like that. Donny suggests that, seeing as they both think they were in the wrong, they should start again as if it never happened. Mai assents.

Donny tells her his offer still stands - he'd like to take her out. She gets defensive again - she's already told him it's not possible. He reckons she could at least tell him why. She's not sure he'll understand, but hesitatingly, she tells him about her mother's protectiveness. She won't even let her go out alone with Vietnamese boys, let alone anyone outside their community.

Donny tells her she's not alone - the initial reaction of his own parents was somewhat hostile. He was particularly worried about his father - he confesses to Mai that he hasn't been game to tell her before that his father's a Vietnam veteran. Mai's taken aback - how did he react? Donny assures her that he's open-minded and very cool about his war experiences. All the same, he was a bit concerned, given that he hasn't had much to do directly with Vietnamese people for twenty years. He admits he hasn't actually talked to his Dad about how he feels, but he worked on his Mum and she talked it through with his Dad. And the upshot is, they've conceded that there's no real reason why he shouldn't go out with her. His Dad must feel pretty OK about it, because they've even gone as far as expressing a desire to meet Mai. How about that?

Mai's still very resistant. Her mother will be sure to forbid it. Donny reckons she has to assert herself, like he did with his folks. After all, going to his place to meet his parents isn't exactly a risky date, is it? How could her mother object? Mai tells him her mother objects to everything. Donny can't possibly understand. Even if he was a Vietnamese boy, she wouldn't let Mai go out with him unless she met him first.

Donny senses he's pushing a bit hard, so he changes the subject. He asks her what she thought of the tape. There's a pause, in which Mai doesn't answer. When Donny repeats the question, Mai suddenly turns to him and tells him she
wants him to come to her home and meet her mother. The astonished Donny instantly agrees - anything to help the process along. When should he come? Mai grabs him by the arm and marches him off. No time like the present.

**Scene Six**

The courtyard at the Nguyen home. Phuong is tending the shrine and garden. Mai enters with Donny. She's initially taken aback when Mai introduces him as a fellow student, but she soon finds her manners again, and offers Donny tea. Mai says she'll get it, and exits before Phuong can object or Donny can decline. The two are left awkwardly together.

Donny looks admiringly round the courtyard. It's like stepping into another world, he reckons. Is this what gardens are like in Vietnam? Phuong replies that all Vietnam is a garden. Or was, in her youth. Not like Australia. A pause. Donny focusses on the shrine. He noticed another one inside the house as he came through. What are they for? Phuong explains that they're for the spirits of departed loved ones. This one, in particular, is dedicated to her late husband. Donny asks if that means they're like memorials. Phuong says they're something like that. Donny asks - why the bowl of fruit? Phuong replies that it's for her husband's spirit, so it won't go hungry and think they're ungrateful. Donny's confused - he thought he'd heard Mai say they were Catholic. Are they? Phuong says yes. Donny says he doesn't understand. Phuong again says yes.

Mai returns with a tray with teapot and small Vietnamese teacups. Donny starts to tell Mai that he doesn't drink tea, but she signals vehemently for him to shut up. Phuong pours the tea. They drink in embarrassed silence. Then to make conversation, Donny tells Mai they were discussing the courtyard. Donny thinks it's very pleasant. Tranquil. Another awkward silence, in which they drink more tea. Donny finds his cup replenished as soon as he's emptied it.

To avoid drinking more, he looks around for another topic of conversation. Focussing on the pond, he notices for the first time that there are fish in it. He
remarks on them, and Mai tells him they're her mother's pride. Phuong demurs - every house in rural Vietnam has a fish pond. But Mai insists that this isn't just any fish pond, and Donny agrees. He's begun to notice how large and beautiful the fish are beneath the surface. Mai asks her mother to show Donny how they dance when she feeds them. Phuong tries to decline, but Donny joins in the request. Phuong gives in and fetches her feed bucket.

Phuong calls and claps her hands, and the fish come and do their dance. Donny realises this is where Mai got her own knack for calling the ducks. He laughs joyously as he's splashed by the vigour of the fish dance, and Mai joins in. Even Phuong can't help but be infected by his delight. The tension has eased a little by the time Phuong finishes the performance.

She puts the feed bucket back, telling Donny that the fish will now return to their indolent drifting round the bottom of the pool. Donny watches them go, still fascinated. Then his attention is caught by something else on the pool floor. Reaching in, he pulls out the Midnight Oil cassette. He recognises it. He looks questioningly at Mai. She, in turn, looks at her mother. Phuong smiles and asks if he'd like more tea.

Angry, Donny declines the tea. But he wants to know how the cassette he gave Mai in thanks for her help with his studies ended up at the bottom of the fish pool. Phuong merely smiles. But Donny reckons he can put two and two together. He tells Phuong she can't wall in Mai forever, building her little bit of Vietnam and pretending that the rest of the world outside doesn't exist. Whether Phuong likes it or not, Mai's growing up as an Australian, mixing with Australian people, absorbing Australian customs. And it's not all football, meat pies and Holdens. There's cultural stuff, like the Oils. She ought to try listening and understanding before she chucks them to the fish.

Mai tries to intervene as Donny gets increasingly heated, but he's not listening. There's another thing - Australian dating customs. Mai ought to be
allowed out, with whomever she pleases. She's a grown woman, after all. Old enough to vote to help choose governments, but not, it seems, to choose her own friends and social activities. He would've very much liked to have taken her out, but he guesses there's not much chance of that now. Still, maybe by saying his piece he's made it possible for some other bloke to have a chance.

He goes to leave. But Phuong calls to stop him. She struggles with herself for a moment, looking at the photo of her husband on the shrine. Then she asks Mai if she really wishes to go out with Donny. Mai hesitates, then nods. She asks Donny where he would take her. Donny tells her their first date would be a barbecue at his home. With his parents. Phuong hesitates again, then tells Mai that if this is what she truly wants, then so be it.

Donny's over the moon. He tells Mai he'll pick her up Sunday evening. And she should bring her bathers for a swim. He exits in high spirits. Mai breathes a sigh of relief. Then Phuong tells her that next weekend, she'll organise a nice Vietnamese boy to take her out.

Scene Seven

The back yard at the Ordmans' home. Night. Mai is sitting with Donny's family around the patio table. They're finishing the barbecue meal. A long, uncomfortable silence, punctuated only by the sounds of eating. Skip swigs strongly from a can of beer. There are several empty cans already on the table in front of him. He belches. Norma and Donny give him dirty looks. Mai looks at her plate. Skip excuses himself.

Norma offers Mai more salad. She declines. Skip offers her more meat. She declines this, also. Skip remembers that Buddhists don't eat meat at certain times. Is that the problem? Donny tells his father that Mai's Catholic. Skip then asks Mai if it's not her religion, what is it? It can't be the quality - they're eating the best scotch fillet. Mai tells him she's simply had enough. Skip tells her they've got some of those instant microwave noodle dishes inside - would she prefer
that? Donny remonstrates with him, but he says he's just trying to make the girl feel at home. Mai tells them she never eats much. Skip reckons this must be why there's so little of her. Lack of protein. Understandable, back in Vietnam. But now she's in Australia? Well, he's not going to let it go to waste. He goes to the barbecue and helps himself to another steak. Anybody else? Norma and Donny decline. Skip gets another can from an esky while he's there. He sits back down and takes a big guzzle. Then he hoists into the steak.

Norma observes that she can't understand how anyone can eat much in this heat. Mai politely concurs. Skip concurs - it's not just the lack of protein. It's the constant heat. Lethal combination. Donny asks him what he's talking about. Skip says he's talking about the Nigels. No wonder they're all so small. Donny asks what a Nigel is. Norma rapidly intervenes to suggest that, seeing as it's so hot, why don't they cool off in the pool? Donny thinks this is a good idea. Skip tells them to go ahead - he doesn't mind finishing his meal alone.

Norma offers to get Mai a towel and show her where she can change. Mai hesitates then says she'd rather not swim tonight, thank you. Donny urges her to change her mind - it'll do them all good to cool down a bit. But Mai, though embarrassed, insists. Norma tries to send signals to Donny not to press it, but Skip chimes in, asking Mai what her trouble is now. He thought Vietnamese must be born with webbed feet - there's so much water in their country. Isn't their humble above-ground pool good enough for her? Mai tries to reply, but Skip's not listening. He's going on about how Donny turns his nose up at it these days, though it was good enough when he was a lad. Now he prefers the surf! Won't even clean the thing unless you hound him. Well, it's still good enough for Skip Ordman! He starts taking off his clothes. Mai's showing signs of being upset. She suggests perhaps it'd be better if she went home. Donny tries to talk her out of it and wants to have it out with Skip. But Norma agrees that it would be best if Donny took Mai home. She tells Mai that Skip's not always like. And
she tells Donny to leave it to her to deal with his father.

Skip, meanwhile, has stripped to his shorts and climbed on the deck. Norma calls out to say that Mai's leaving. Mai calls good-bye. Skip asks whether she won't change her mind and join him - it's not exactly the back beach at Vung Tau, but he'd've thought it was a big improvement on the average rice paddy, and a bit more hygienic than your village pond. Donny's getting angry and looking for confrontation with Skip, but Norma restrains him, bundling him off with Mai, telling her it was nice to meet her. The three of them exit as Skip jumps into the pool. He surfaces, still talking - the best swim in Nam is a bomb crater, after a storm. Just the right depth, and full of fresh rainwater. No leeches, either. He yells for Norma.

Norma enters. Skip tells her to pass him his can of beer. Norma tells him he's had enough - more than enough. Skip tells her not to start, too. Now will she give him his beer, or is he going to have to get it himself? He starts to get out of the pool. Norma pleads with him not to drink any more, but he goes and gets his can. He grabs the beer and heads back for the pool.

But Norma wants to have it out. That "nog sheila" is a friend of Donny's, and deserves to be treated with respect, despite their reservations. There's no need to treat her like dirt. Skip's astounded - that girl sat there all night, carping and criticising, and Norma reckons he's to blame? Norma tells him she wasn't carping or criticising, but Skip points out the way she turned her nose up at the food. And she must have seen the way she gave Skip the leery eye every time he took a drink. And then to top it all off, she refused to put a toe in their swimming pool.

Norma tries to tell him she was just shy - who wouldn't be, the way Skip was behaving? But Skip reckons that's bullshit - he knows these Viet women. He's seen them up close - close enough to read the hatred in their eyes. They hate us whites. He told Donny that, but he wouldn't listen. Norma's surprised -
when did he talk to Donny? Skip says it was that day near Hoa Long, of course. That day Norma realises Skip's speaking about Donny Smith again. Gently, she asks Skip what he told Donny.

The lights change as Skip speaks. He told Donny to leave the Viet sheila alone. She's just transplanting rice - nothing suspicious about that. As he speaks, a Vietnamese peasant woman (puppet) appears at the far side of the pool, bending and working the "paddy". But Donny wouldn't listen. It's a free-fire zone, he reckoned. She shouldn't be here. She should be in the strategic hamlet, with the rest of the villagers. Anyone unauthorised in a free-fire zone is automatically considered to be VC. Skip asks if that means they should just shoot her? As Skip speaks, Donny Smith appears - unseen, of course, by Norma. Skip continues to speak to her, while Donny acts out the memory which he's relating.

Donny confirms that they should indeed blow her away. But Skip's in favour of leaving her alone. She's just a peasant working her land. They're supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of the locals. They'll hardly do that by shooting innocent peasants. Donny says OK, they'll go see how innocent she is. He disappears, and so does the puppet peasant, as Skip continues to relate how they moved towards her through the trees along the paddy dyke. When they emerged again where they thought she should be, she was no longer there.

(Donny reappears upstage, on the deck.) Skip was relieved, but then Donny spied her again - she'd just gone to get more seedlings. As he speaks, the woman reappears, this time as a masked actor. Donny approaches her and demands to see her papers. When she looks up, Donny remarks that she's not some old crone, but a good-looking young woman. That's even more suspicious - when did they ever see young women working in the fields? He demands again to see her papers. The frightened woman doesn't understand. She shakes her head, explaining in Vietnamese that she's trying to feed her family. Donny says if she won't hand over the papers, they're going to have to search her. Won't that be a
pleasure? With his rifle jammed against the woman's head, he starts to grope her body and pulls her clothes undone. Skip yells to Donny, telling him he shouldn't do this. But Donny calls back to him not to be a sook. Fuck and forget, mate - don't even have to fork for this one. Skip calls again to stop. Donny's distracted enough to look over his shoulder. The woman takes the opportunity to break away and scramble desperately away through the "paddy" and disappear upstage. Donny curses Skip and wades off after her. Skip calls repeatedly for him not to do it. But Skip says he took no notice...

There's a pause. The lights change. Norma goes and sits next to Skip. cuddles him. Skip tells her he should have stopped him. Should have grabbed him, punched him, anything to stop Donny from doing that. Because of what happened after... Norma soothes him, gently tells him it's all right, not to worry, it all happened a long time ago. Another pause.

Then Norma suggests that maybe Skip should get some help. Skip asks her what she means. She points out that there are people - specialists - who can help people work these things out. Skip's immediately on the defensive - so now Norma thinks he should see a shrink! Norma says not a psychiatrist, but some kind of therapist. There are counselling services for veterans. Skip angrily denies that he's one of those crazy vets. Norma suggests that perhaps they should ask Donny to ease off with Mai for a bit. But Skip forbids her to do this as well. There's nothing wrong with him that he can't handle himself. Norma tells him to look at himself and ask himself if that's really true. Look at the way he's been behaving. Is it normal? Skip repeats that he can deal with it. With or without Norma's support. Norma says she's trying to support him, but there are limitations. That's why she wants him to see a specialist.

Skip tells her to shut up. She pleads. If he won't see a specialist, will he at least talk to Father Monahan? Skip's anger grows. Priests! Worse than bloody shrinks! They absolve everything but solve nothing. Women might get some
comfort from that. But some sins - some things men do - should never be forgiven. She tells him that's arrogant. Putting himself above -

He lashes out and hits her hard in the face. She falls. He tells her he has to deal with it himself, can't she see? Scared, Norma exits to the house. Skip goes on ranting, and the lights change. He should have dealt with it back then. He'd give anything to be able to turn the clock back, stop Donny doing...

A woman's cries can be heard from upstage. Donny Smith's voice tells her keep still, you bitch. But there's more sounds of struggling, and the woman enters wading through the water with Donny in pursuit, cursing. He grabs the woman, tries to pull her pants down. Skip stands transfixed, watching. Donny yells at him to come and hold her. Skip climbs on the deck, then hesitates. No, he says. It's not right... More struggle. Donny calls more urgently for Skip's help to hold her still. The sooner he does, the sooner he'll be finished and Skip can have his turn. He wants a turn doesn't he? Skip hesitates, then moves up towards them. The lights go to black. In the darkness the woman screams.

ACT TWO

Scene One

The Ordman back yard. Morning. The barbecue debris has been cleared away. Norma, in dressing gown and dark glasses, sits at the table, drinking coffee and trying to read the newspaper. Skip enters, dressed for work. He stops when he sees Norma. He goes over to her and reaches out to touch her. She stands and moves away. He starts to speak to her, but she interrupts, telling him she'll get his breakfast. She exits to the house.

Skip watches her go, then slumps down at the table. He holds his head. Norma comes back out with a bowl of cereal and coffee. She slams it down in front of him. Skip grabs her hand. She spits at him not to touch her. He lets go. He says he's sorry. She doesn't answer. He wants to know what more he can do? She reminds him she's already told him what she thinks he can do. He tells her
she doesn't understand. He can't do that. Then, says Norma, there's nothing more to be said. Skip's about to pursue the matter further when Donny enters.

He berates Skip for his behaviour the previous evening. Norma tries to interrupt, but Donny tells her he's going to have it out. He would've woken Skip up and had it out when he got home last night, except he knew his father was too pissed for it to sink in. Norma retreats to the poolside and listens.

Donny asks his father what the hell he thinks he's up to? Why does he have it in for Mai? Talk about prejudice - he'd obviously made up his mind to humiliate her, and boy did he succeed! The self-professed tolerant, open-minded child of the sixties reveals the redneck lurking under the surface! Mai was devastated - wouldn't talk all the way home in the car, wouldn't talk about it when they got there. If Skip's set out to make sure Mai never comes near the Ordman household again, he's done a pretty good job. But not good enough. He thinks he's got one more chance, and he's not going to risk it. Skip can kick him out of home, if he likes, but he's going to go on seeing Mai. That's if he doesn't move out of his own accord.

Skip listens to all this in silence. When Donny finishes, the silence continues. Donny demands he make some response. Skip's response is to get up and announce it's time he was getting to work. He exits. Donny goes to follow him, accusing him of being gutless. But Norma calls him back, telling him to leave his father alone. Donny shifts his anger to her. She saw the way he behaved last night. Surely she can't stick up for... He trails off as he notices behind the dark glasses. He asks her what's wrong with her eye. She says nothing, but he knows that's bullshit. He reaches out and takes off the glasses, revealing her black eye. He's dumfounded - did Skip do this to her? Norma hesitates, and Donny tells her not to give any of that "walked into a door" crap. It was Skip, wasn't it. And it's all because of Mai. Norma tells Donny to try to understand. Donny says he understands, all right. He'll murder the bastard!
Norma tells him he mustn't talk like that. Skip's not a well man. They have to try to help him. Donny's skeptical - all that's wrong is that he's showing his true racist colours. Why should she want to help anyone who gives her a shiner like that? She tells Donny it's because she loves Skip. Donny wouldn't understand - how could he know what it means to love like that? Despite what he's done, she's determined not to lose Skip. If she deserts him now, he might be lost forever. If she sticks by him, she thinks she can help him come back of his own accord. But Donny still doesn't believe it. It's not Skip that needs help but Norma - help in keeping clear of Skip! And she can tell Skip from him, if he comes anywhere near her again, he'll find he's got a real fight on his hands. Norma tells Donny that reciprocal violence won't achieve anything. If he really wants to help, he could cool it with Mai for a while.

This suggestion only incenses Donny further. He should give up Mai, just because his father can't handle it? Well it's Skip's problem. And Norma's, if she's set on making it so, as she seems to be. But it's not Donny's. They have no right to lay that trip on him. He storms out, leaving a very distressed Norma.

**Scene Two**

The university duck pond. Mai arrives and sits on the bench, disconsolate. The ducks come over expectantly - she doesn't even clap. First she ignores them. Then she notices them and tells them she has nothing for them. They persist. She shoos them away. Donny calls from offstage. Mai looks, then gets up to leave in the opposite direction. Donny calls for her to wait. She does so. Donny enters. He wants to talk. To apologise for the other night and... She interrupts. She has one more exam to study for. This is her quiet spot at the university. Can't he leave her alone? Donny reminds her it used to be *their* spot. It has special associations for him. And he thought it had for her, too. Because they shared it. Mai tells him it's no use. Can't he see? It doesn't matter what they feel for each other - the world is set against it. Donny seizes on this - then Mai does feel
something for him! She says that even if that were true, it's better to stop now, while it still won't hurt too much. The longer they go on, the more painful it'll be when they have to make the break. The inevitable break...

Donny insists that it's not inevitable. Just because they've had opposition from their parents doesn't mean the whole world's against them. And even their parents - well, Mai's mother was persuaded to let her go out. Norma would be on side if it weren't for Skip. And as far as Donny's concerned, Skip can like it or lump it. Something his Mum said struck him. She was talking about how she loved her Dad so much she'd do anything not to lose him, but that he, Donny, couldn't be expected to understand love like that. But she's wrong. He does understand. And he doesn't want to lose Mai.

Mai is moved by the passion of Donny's declaration, but she asks how he can feel that way, when they hardly know each other? It's not just their parents or the rest of the world. It's themselves. They come from different cultures - there are a thousand obstacles to understanding. Donny says it hasn't stopped them getting this far, has it? Mai says she's not sure. "This far" isn't very far, and look what's happened already. Donny says that's other people, not them. But Mai insists it's them, too. Donny asks if there's something he's done.

Mai admits she feels uneasy with Donny's approach. Like when he came round to her home and persuaded her mother to let her go out. Donny asks what was wrong with that - it worked, didn't it? Mai tells him sure, he embarrassed her mother into capitulating once, but what did that really achieve? Did it make her more accepting of Donny or other Australians? Did it make her feel more secure about her daughter's welfare? Did it make it easier for Mai to communicate with her in the long run?

Donny has no answers. Mai tells him that her mother's culture - which is hers, too - is like an old, exotic tree. It doesn't necessarily transplant easily to new soil. For a while, it may ail, and look out of place with its new environment.
But eventually it may put down new roots. Wise gardeners will take cuttings and graft them with local stock. And eventually there may come a time when it's no longer thought to be exotic. But this all takes patience and gentle nurturing. It can't be rushed. It won't be accelerated by bullying.

Donny apologises. He's an arrogant oaf. No wonder she's been a bit standoffish with him. But he'll try to be a wise gardener, if she'll teach him. He's a good learner. She knows that - especially when she's teaching him. When she talks like she did about the trees and stuff - no wonder he's fallen in love with her. And if she feels anything at all for him, isn't it worth one more try?

Mai is clearly wavering. Donny reminds her he still owes her a swim. Mai admits she has a confession to make. She can't swim. Donny's astounded. Mai tells him very few Vietnamese can, despite all the water in their country. She wishes she could. There was once a time when if only she could have swum, she might have. But she clams up. Donny offers her a deal. She teaches him about wise gardening, and he'll teach her to swim. Mai hesitates, then agrees.

**Scene Three**

The Ordman backyard. Dusk. Skip enters, calling out for Norma. No reply. He goes back off stage and calls again. Still no reply. He returns with a bottle of booze and a glass, and an old shoes box. He pours himself a drink, muttering to himself, wondering where she is. Not even a note. No dinner in the oven. Probably off seeing the bloody priest. Telling tales about him, no doubt. Asking God to sort out the mess. She doesn't understand - God has nothing to do with it. What happened, happened during war.

He opens the shoebox and takes out some photos. He inspects them, still talking. War is when God despairs of men and leaves them to their own devices for a while. War is the absence of God. Absence Without Leave. He takes out his dogtag and puts it on. If God had been around, Donny would never have taken that woman. If God had been on watch, he would have helped Skip stop Donny...
before it went that far. Would’ve stopped Donny joining in. And there wouldn’t have been the consequences. Donny might still be alive...

The lights change. Donny emerges from the gloom upstage, wading through the water, dragging the whimpering, dishevelled Vietnamese woman. He dumps her on the edge of the pool, asking Skip if it wasn’t much better than a visit to a bar in Saigon. Nothing like the thrill of the chase, a bit of a struggle. He could never do it twice in quick succession if the girl was willing. Does Skip want to go again? Skip, nervous, says no - they should get out of here. What are they going to do with the girl? Donny reckons the answer to that’s obvious. He tells Skip to shoot her. Skip tells Donny they can’t do that, but Donny wants to know why not? She was alone in a free fire zone. Unfriendly by definition. She knows the consequences. One more to the body count. They’ll be heroes.

Skip argues that she’s probably just trying to work her land. He’d do the same if he’d been herded into one of those concentration camps they call “strategic hamlets”. Donny’s derisive of all this, but if Skip won’t do it, he will. He aims point blank at the woman. She screams for mercy. Skip lunges at Donny and pushes the rifle out of the way just as he shoots. The shot misses the woman. Donny tries to fend Skip off, cursing his stupidity, trying to aim again at the woman. Skip persists. Locked in close struggle, they thrash around in the water. The woman slowly crawls out of the water towards her seedling basket. Reaching it, she puts her hand inside. Unseen by the fighting men, she pulls out a pistol. She aims it at the men, and shoots. The bullet hits Donny. He arches, then slumps into the water, leaving Skip holding his rifle. The woman takes aim at Skip. With a scream, Skip swings the weapon round and empties the magazine into her. Then he hurls the rifle away and thrashes over to Donny, lying face up in the water. He drags him to the edge of the pool and hauls him out.

He talks to Donny, cradling his head, telling him not to die. To his relief, Donny coughs and splutters, and opens his eyes. Skip tells him he’ll be all right
Appendix 2: Script Treatment

- He'll get him comfortable and radio for a dust-off. But Donny's not interested - he looks accusingly at Skip and, with difficulty, splutters out that she was VC all along. Skip acknowledges she probably was, but before he can say more, Donny spasms and dies. Skip shakes him, pleading with him not to be dead. What will Skip do without him? Donny always had all the answers, but Skip needs more answers. OK she was VC, but does that make it right, what they did? He shakes Donny Smith's lifeless body. Where are his answers now? He wants answers!

The lights change back. Skip is alone on the edge of the pool. There are no answers. Staggering over to the shoebox, he rips off his dogtag and hurls it in the box. He stuffs the photos back in and slams the lid on. If only the bloody war would stay in the bloody box. If only he'd stopped Donny before he went for the girl. If only he could have that moment over again...

*Scene Four*

The courtyard at the Nguyen home. Phuong enters with Norma. Phuong carries a tea tray, and proceeds to pour the ritual cups. Norma starts to make pleasantries about the garden, but Phuong wants to get straight to the point. Why has Norma come?

Norma tells her she's come to find out what Phuong's attitude is to the growing relationship between Donny and Mai. At first, Phuong doesn't want to discuss it - she can't see how it's any of Norma's business. But Norma won't accept that - surely the welfare of their only children is a matter of mutual concern? Thus pressed, Phuong admits she's not in favour of the relationship. Norma is relieved to learn this, as it makes her next request much easier. She tells Phuong that she, too, is against the relationship, and asks her to use any influence she can, not only to prevent it from developing further, but to move it back from the point it's already reached.

Phuong is not impressed with this request. What she demands or asks of Mai is a matter between herself and her daughter only. She's not about to have
her parental policies dictated by a virtual stranger. Norma's surprised by her un-cooperativeness. Didn't Phuong just admit she's against the relationship? Doesn't she agree it would be in everyone's best interests if Donny and Mai were actively discouraged from seeing each other? Phuong counters with her own question - if Norma believes it's so easy for Phuong to influence her daughter, why doesn't she simply do the same thing with her son? Why pass the buck to her? Why not simply forbid him to see her?

Norma tells Phuong she's tried - she's asked him to hold back. But in their case it's complicated by Donny's father. She tells Phuong that Skip was a soldier in the war in her country and describes his increasingly erratic behaviour since he learnt of Donny's interest in Mai. She knows something's troubling him deeply - something about the war - but he won't let her close enough to find out what or to help. She's afraid he's losing his mind. Hence her dilemma - if she tries to forbid Donny from seeing Mai, she runs the risk of turning him against her and driving him away. If she lets the relationship run its course, she might lose Skip forever. That's why she thought perhaps if Phuong could work on Mai, if they put pressure from both sides...

Phuong interrupts angrily. What would Norma know about losing a husband? At least hers is still alive, and has been while her child has been growing up. Norma's had all the advantages of raising her son in a familiar environment, with a supportive partner and all the networks and shared assumptions. Whereas Phuong has seen her compatriots tear each other apart, and her beloved country violated by parasites from Washington and Paris and Canberra and Moscow and Beijing - anywhere but Saigon or Hue or even Hanoi - who cared nothing for Vietnam except as a convenient ground for ideological point-scoring. And then, having sated their war lust, they threw her country aside, leaving it so scarred, shamed and self-hating that many of its people uprooted and transplanted to a new culture, where all is strange and none of the
old traditions apply. The same new cultures that helped violate her own! And
many died in the process of transplanting - her husband was one of them.
Norma has no right to talk to her about losing a husband - Phuong's lost a
husband, a country, a culture, all her family except Mai. Mai's all she's got left.
And now Norma's asking her to drive Mai away as well, leaving her with
nothing! Well she's not prepared to do that. She may not approve of Mai's choice,
but it's not so important that she'll risk losing Mai.

Norma apologises for appearing selfish, but feels that surely Phuong
understands her fears - not in spite of her own experiences, but because of
them. They seem to have quite a lot in common. But Phuong will have none of
that. To her they have nothing in common. She's tired of fighting other
people's battles. Norma can deal with her own problems. She tells Norma to
leave. Norma tries to talk, but Phuong screams at her to go. Norma does so.

Phuong is weeping. She goes to the shrine, picks up her husband's photo
and looks at it intently. What should she do, she asks it. Then she puts it back
and automatically, not thinking what she's doing, she takes the fish-feed
bucket to the pool edge and claps her hands. The fish come. She throws feed. The
fish leap and splash, as always. But as she watches through her tears, the fish
metamorphose into a pair of peacocks, which dance a brief, stately dance with
each other. Phuong watches, transfixed. She looks questioningly to her
husband's shrine. When she looks back, the peacocks have again become fish.

**Scene Five**

The Ordman backyard, daytime. Donny enters with Mai. Mai's nervous -
she's worried that Donny's parents will find them there and cause more
problems. But Donny's confident that his father will be at work. There's a small
chance that his mum might come home, but he's less worried about her. If she
does, it'll be a chance for her and Mai to get to know each other without Skip
round. Mai's clearly still not convinced, so Donny offers to take her to ther uni
pool, but Mai feels she'd be too embarrassed - she might be seen by people she knows. Donny suspects she's looking for an excuse not to have the lesson at all, but Mai denies this. But she admits to being nervous about going in the water.

Donny tells her not to worry - he'll be gentle and patient. And it's a good learning pool - private, and not too deep. He asks her if she wants to go inside to change, but she has her costume on under her clothes, as he suggested. She turns her back on him and modestly takes off her clothes. Donny, too, strips down to swimming shorts. When she turns back to him, he's momentarily breath taken by her compact beauty - and says so, blurting it out passionately. Mai's immediately embarrassed and apprehensive - she grabs her blouse to recover her modesty. Donny apologises for being so forthright. She also apologises - all her upbringing tells her she shouldn't be alone with a man in a state of undress. Donny assures her his intentions are honorable - her modesty is one of the things he admires about her. But she has to trust him if he's going to teach her to swim. Including letting him touch her. Can she cope with that? She says she'll try.

They climb on the deck. Donny suggests Mai hops in the pool. She sits down on the pool's edge, dangling her feet in the water. But she doesn't go any further. Sensing her apprehension, Donny jumps in and stands in front of her, demonstrating how easy it will be for her to stand up safely. He takes her hands and pulls her gently. She resists, torn between fear of the water and desire to conquer it. Donny pulls more firmly, pulling her into the pool. She screams and thrashes. Donny firmly places her hands on the side of the pool, talking gently, reassuringly, all the while. She calms down, gets more control. Donny tells her to keep holding onto the edge, but to move away to arms length. She does. Now he encourages her to immerse her head under the water. She tries, but gets no further than her face before pulling out in fear and trying to scramble out onto the deck. Donny grabs her and pulls her back into the water, still talking.
gently. He asks her to try again. She can hold onto him if she can. She does so. This time, she puts her face fully in, with Donny holding the back of her head for reassurance. But she panics and surfaces with a scream, thrashing wildly. Donny grabs her, trying to calm her, but she's in a blind panic and only finds him more threatening. She struggles violently, screaming.

Skip enters, unseen by Donny or Mai. He stares at the struggling couple in the water, the woman screaming "no" in Vietnamese. (Donny and Mai are in exactly the same relative positions as Donny Smith and the peasant woman in the rape scene in A1 S7). The lights change. Skip galvanises. He yells to Donny to stop. But Donny can't hear him over Mai's cries. Skip runs to the poolside, screaming for Donny to stop before it's too late. He doesn't realise what the consequences are, he has to stop while there's still a chance. He grabs Mai and tries to pull her out of the pool. Now aware of his father's presence and angered by what he sees as his interference. Donny screams back at his father to stay out of what's not his business. Skip yells back that it's for Donny's own good, a chance to save his life, to have his time over again. Donny tells him to get stuffed, and tries to go to Mai. But Skip pushes him back and hits him, then jumps into the pool with him. Donny comes back at him, but Skip, demented, hits him again, yelling to keep away from the woman. She's certain death! He keeps pushing Donny away, hitting him. Mai by this time is screaming at Skip to stop hitting Donny. But Skip keeps hitting him. Norma enters. She screams at Skip to stop. Mai throws herself on him, trying to pin his arms. Donny falls unconscious. Skip hurls Mai into the water. Norma throws herself onto the deck, trying to pull Donny out before Skip can attack him again.

The lights change. Skip becomes aware of the scene in front of him, Donny face down in the water. Norma on the deck struggling desperately to pull him out. Mai still in the water helping her, her own fears forgotten. He's horrified. He moves to help with Donny, trying to explain that he was trying to
save him. But Norma screams at him to keep away. She and Mai heave Donny onto the deck. Norma begins pumping the water out of his lungs, asking Mai to call an ambulance. Mai drags herself out of the pool and exits to the house. Skip surveys the scene in an anguished daze. What has he done?

**Scene Six**

The Ordman backyard. Skip enters alone, with his shoebox, as well as a bottle of booze. He removes the lid and slowly takes out the contents - photos, dogtag, service medals, miniatures - and places them on the table. examining each intently as he does so. The last item is a bowie knife. He removes it from its scabbard. Raising the booze bottle in salute to an old war photo of himself, he takes a big swig then places the knife blade against the inside of his wrist, steeling himself to make the cut. Phuong enters and, seeing him, gasps. Startled Skip drops the knife. He scrambles and picks it up again, brandishing it in Phuong's direction. He asks her why she won't leave him alone. Aren't the ghosts satisfied? He's killed his son. Now it's his own turn. Can't the bloody ghosts at least let him do this final deed in peace?

Phuong interrupts to tell him she's not a ghost. She explains that she's Mai's mother. Mai telephoned from the hospital to tell her what happened. And he hasn't killed his son. Donny's going to be all right. He desperately wants to believe her, but he's still mistrustful. She's one of them - the ghosts - and this is just a trick to prolong his torment. She suggests he phones the hospital to confirm it. But how can he face speaking to Norma?

Phuong goes towards him. He warns her not to come too close, and threatens with the knife. She stops, but reaches out her hand, inviting him to touch, to know she's real, flesh and blood. He hesitates, then slowly reaches out and touches her. She repeats that Donny's OK. Skip breaks down weeping with relief. Phuong takes his knife. Shaking, she staggers to a chair.

Skip begins to get himself under control. He asks Phuong why she came -
what she wants. Phuong's response is that she wants to understand. Skip laughs bitterly through his tears. This is the last place to come for understanding - he can't help as he doesn't understand anything himself. He thought he had it sorted out, but he was only kidding himself. Phuong suggests that's a pretty good common starting point. Skip grunts skeptically.

She remarks on the photos on the table. He lunges in front of her and sweeps them all together, bundling them into the shoebox, telling them they're nothing to do with her. She suggests they are to do with her - they're pictures of her country. He denies this. But aren't they pictures of Vietnam, she asks? The war, he says. She reminds him that Vietnam was a country long before it was a war. But she, too, knew Vietnam as a war - the French, the Americans... it was so all her life. It went on being so even after she left. She, too, is haunted by Vietnam - the war and the country.

Skip asks her what she means. She describes how they had actually waited in hope for the victory of the North, because anything would be better than the corruption and chaos that went before. They were tired of the killing, the fear. But after 1975, things did not get better for her family. They were persecuted for helping the Southern war effort, though her husband was only a school teacher. The subject he taught was English, which automatically meant he must have been a collaborator. They were sent to a so-called New Economic Zone - virtually a re-education concentration camp. They started plotting to escape, go to another country. They spent all their cash reserves - what they had managed to avoid being confiscated by the State - on bribing a leaky boat out of a corrupt official. They lived for months in fear of being caught in their preparations. Then the night finally came to leave.

The lights change. As she continues to speak, the scene she describes is played out by puppets on the pool. She doesn't look at them, nor does Skip. It was a misty night on the delta, she says. (Mist rises from the pool.) Trembling in
fear, they boarded their boat with other families that had contributed to its purchase. The women and children boarded first, the men supervising and keeping lookout. (A puppet boat with women and children appears in the mist.) Suddenly shouting broke out in the distance. (It does so.) The men scrambled to push the boat off and climb aboard. But the boat was already drifting and the men had to wade out through deepening water. (The boat moves further into the pool.) Then shots rang out. (They do so.) The men were calling to them on the boat when they were mown down. They were screaming (it can be heard) but couldn't be seen from the boat, which was now drifting further into the mist. (The boat disappears.) On the boat, they waited in an agony of anticipation for the men to arrive and climb aboard. Suddenly, the mists parted and a single man became visible, struggling to swim to the boat. Her husband! (A masked figure appears in the pool, swimming.) But he was wounded and floundering. And no-one on the boat could swim to his rescue. They had to watch as his efforts became feebler and feebler (they do so) until finally he disappeared under the water and didn't rise again. (It does so) Phuong screams. She tells how she had to restrain Mai, who was only eight, from diving overboard to try to rescue him. She wasn't prepared to lose them both. But she and Mai have had to live every day since in the knowledge that they survived at the price of her husband's life. The guilt... From then on, Mai was terrified of water. The lights change back.

Skip knows how she feels. The guilt. Things that happened. He survived at the price of his best friend's life. And when he came back, nobody in Australia wanted to know. He thought he'd been fighting for them, but they wouldn't share the guilt. They blamed him. Nobody understood what it was like over there. Phuong points out that she knew what it was like - some of it, anyway. Even if it was from a different angle. Skip acknowledges this.

Phuong also thinks she understands how he felt when he got back. She felt the same way after she left. Detached. In a limbo. Day after day on an open
boat surrounded by the water, trying to land in Malaysia but being put back to sea. Mai in a constant state of terror from the water. Finally joining thousands of others on a tiny island off the Malaysian coast, still surrounded by water. An unreal artificial microcosm of the world. Waiting for months in this primitive, makeshift island camp while officials "processed" them. Practising their English - their best hope of being accepted to America or Australia. Mixed feelings about being rejected by America. Mixed feelings about being accepted by Australia. Arrival in Australia. Aliens... Nobody interested in who they were, where they'd come from, what they'd been through. Trying desperately to play the role of Australian, but all the time knowing their origins were written on their faces. Suppressing their past. Locking it away in a courtyard...

Or a shoebox, says Skip. He thought he'd been successful, too - had it licked. Till this business with Donny and Mai. Then it all came flooding back. What's to be done about Donny and Mai? Phuong tells him she's come to the conclusion that there's nothing to be done - they'll decide it for themselves. Skip is surprised that she would be so supportive of the relationship. But Phuong tells him it doesn't mean she supports it - only recognises that it's out of her control. She tells him of the vision she had of the dancing peacocks in her fishpond. explaining that in Vietnamese tradition, dancing peacocks are a symbol of happy young love. Phuong interprets it as a sign - their own generation may have fought each other, but there is hope in the next generation.

Skip's intrigued by this. Her courtyard must be quite a place. Phuong tells him both Donny and Norma admired it, but she believes it would mean much more to Skip. Why doesn't he come and drink tea there sometime? Skip's unsure - he's having enough trouble coping with what's in his own shoebox, without extra reminders. But he'll think about it. Phuong asks again if he'll show her what's in the shoebox. He hesitates, then takes it and opens it.

But before he removes any of the contents. Norma arrives with Mai - the
latter surprised to find her mother here. Skip asks about Donny, but Norma finds it hard to believe he’s interested. Skip’s anguish— he didn’t mean to do what he did. He’s desperate to know that Donny’s going to be all right. Phuong urges Norma not to be too hard on Skip. Norma relents and tells Skip he’s OK. He’s being kept in hospital overnight for observation, just as a precaution. All being well, he’ll be discharged in the morning. Skip’s delighted, but Norma’s still angry Donny’s refusing to come home. He mightn’t have done any permanent harm to his son, but he’s destroyed the family. Is that something to feel delighted about?

Skip breaks down weeping. He didn’t mean it. He wasn’t himself. Is there no way he can undo what he’s done?

**Scene Seven**

The university duck pond. Donny’s at the bench, alone. He’s restless and fidgety. Mai enters. Donny’s relieved to see her, and thanks her for coming. Mai asks if he’s all right, and he replies that he’s fine. She asks what he’s planning to do. He figures he’ll stay with a mate or something for a few days while her sorts out a room in a shared house or something. Mai observes that he’s still determined not to go home, then. He confirms this is definitely the case—how could he, after what’s happened?

Mai points out that Donny may not know the full story. Donny wants to know what she means. Mai tells him she, for example, was part of what happened, too. She had been too ashamed to tell Donny of her phobia about water, stemming from her father’s death. It seems the sight of her struggling with Donny in the pool triggered something in Skip. So if she hadn’t been struggling… But there’s even more than that. What Skip did in the pool was such a shock to Mai that, in her attempts to drag Skip away from him, she forgot to be afraid. So the incident seems to have cured her of her phobia. It’s an ill wind…

Donny remains skeptical. It wasn’t just what happened in the pool. Skip
had already hit Norma. He would’ve found a pretext to lash out at Donny sooner or later. He can’t blame Mai, and she shouldn’t blame herself. Mai tells him she’s not taking the blame, just pointing out that it’s more complex than he seems willing to believe. Donny reckons so what? He still can’t feel safe round his father any more, no matter how complex it all is. Mai suggests that if he won’t go home to live, he should at least have a talk with Skip. Try to understand. Donny says maybe he doesn’t want to understand. Mai asks him how he can say he wants to understand her, yet not his own father. Donny relents. OK, he’ll talk to his father sometime. She suggests maybe instead he should listen.

Mai signals offstage. Skip enters, with Norma. Donny’s angry with her, thinking he’s been set up. He goes to leave. But Mai pleads with him to stay — for her sake, if not for his. He stays, and so does his anger.

Skip tells Donny he’s sorry. He didn’t mean any of it — he’s horrified at the thought of what might have happened. He admits now that his mind has been playing up on him, and he’s agreed to go and get some help. Counselling — a shrink if necessary. But his heart’s always been in the right place. He loves Donny. And Norma. He doesn’t wish them any harm.

Donny reckons it’s a bit late to be saying that. How can he believe him? Norma interrupts to say that she does. She reminds Donny that she said if she stuck by Skip, he’d get well again. She thinks he’s on the road to recovery. But she doesn’t want the family to break up. Skip pleads with him not to let that happen. He understands Donny probably wants to punish him, but why hurt his mother too?

Donny points out that he might want to move out of home anyway. He’s old enough to look after himself, and many of his university contemporaries have done so. Norma agrees it may well be time for that — she realises he doesn’t have to live with them for the family still to feel like a family. But she’d like to think he was moving to a new life, not running away from the old one.
Appendix 2: Script Treatment

Donny says he'll think about it. Skip asks if that's all? What else do they have to do to persuade him. How much more grovelling? Norma interrupts him. He realises he's been aggro again, and apologises. It's going to take time - time to get better, time to come to terms with having people like Mai and her mother as neighbours, time to exorcise all the demons of the war. But he'll give it a go.

Mai points out that it may take time for Donny, too. But she's sure he'll try. Donny agrees. Norma signals to Skip that it's time to go. They do so. Donny's still peeved with Mai for inviting his father. Mai apologises, but points out that Donny had asked her to teach him about gardening. He has to begin by acknowledging that there may be weeds in his own patch. This hits home, and his anger with her melts. He hugs her, telling her he's very lucky she came into his life.

Embarrassed by the hug, she pulls out a bag of stale bread. Time to feed the ducks. Donny expresses mock anger that they won't come when he claps, but will when she does. She tells him he mustn't be doing it right. He tries. She corrects him. He tries. She corrects again. He tries again. The ducks come. Delighted, Donny flings the bread to them. Mais is equally delighted. She reminds him of his promise to teach her to swim. Donny grins. It's a deal.

Epilogue

Chu Teu enters again. He invites the audience to look kindly on this friendship between old and new Australians. May they be blessed by the holy dragons with peace, happiness and prosperity.

He gestures, and a pair of dragons emerge from the pool, spitting fire. They dance around each other, plunging in and out of the water with increasing frenzy. Flute and percussion music grows to a crescendo. Then, abruptly, the music stops and the puppets vanish. End of play.
Appendix 4
Backstories of the Major Characters

FRANCIS "SKIP" ORDMAN

Skip grew up in the small central western town of Narromine, where his father, Frank Ordman, was the very popular local police sergeant, and his housewife mother, Patricia (Trish) was an active participant in community organisations like the CWA and the Catholic church. From an early age Skip idolised his father, who had been twice decorated for bravery as an infantryman during WW2, and who remained very much a "man's man". Frank Sr. was determined to bring his son up in his own image, and spent much of his leisure time taking him shooting and fishing, and encouraging him in sport.

As a boy Skip was also devoted - in the undemonstrative, protecting way of his father - to his mother and his younger sister Sue. Free-and-easy, outdoorsy and competent, he was a popular enough lad at Narromine Primary and in the local Scout troop, but never made really close friends - perhaps his father fulfilled that need in him. Even when, at the age of 12, he was sent to boarding school at St Stanislaus College in Bathurst, he was close enough to spend most weekends at home with his Dad. He was a popular member of a group of solid mates at St Stanislaus, but again there was nobody who measured up to his Dad. He had above-average grades, and was in demand for sporting teams.

Just after Skip's fifteenth birthday, his father attended a minor accident at night on the Mitchell Highway - a jack-knifed semi-trailer. The driver of another semi-trailer, carrying petrol, failed to see the first and slammed into the wreckage. Along with a constable and both truck drivers, Frank Ordman was incinerated in the ensuing inferno. Skip was devastated, and went into a decline. He ceased studying, lost interest in sport, and got involved with the rabble elements in the school, soon becoming their leader. Minor delinquencies
with this group escalated. He was asked to leave the school. Trish Ordman talked Marist Brothers Orange into taking him in, but he was again expelled after only six months. At the end of his tenth year, he failed the School Certificate. A distraught Trish pleaded with him to repeat the year at Narromine High, but Skip wasn’t interested. He went to work in the surrounding bush - roustabout for the shearers, jackeroo, bounty-hunter on rabbits and foxes. As with his last year at school, he was unable to stick at any job for very long. He also had a couple of minor brushes with the law - each time, the esteem his father had held in the police came to his rescue and he was let off with a caution.

As soon as he turned eighteen he volunteered for conscription into national army service, hoping to follow in his father’s glorious footsteps. When she found out, Trish pulled all the Country Party strings she could to get him exempted on rural hardship grounds, but to no avail. Skip was determined, and soon was off to infantry training. He thrived on it, finding the hierarchical discipline of Army life something of a substitute for the authority his father had held over him. With his bush background he excelled at the physical demands of the footsoldier’s job. Towards the end of 1969, three months after his nineteenth birthday, he was posted as a reinforcement to C Company, 2nd Battalion, 6 RAR at the Australian Task Force base, Nui Dat, in Phuoc Tuy Province of South Vietnam.

After briefings and some cursory further training for local conditions, he went on his first patrol only eleven days after arriving in-country. During the patrol while mopping up after a successful night ambush, he was attacked hand-to-hand by a wounded VC soldier and would have been killed if it had not been for Donny Smith, another soldier in his section. This established a bond of mateship between Skip and Donny, with Skip finding in Donny - two years older and a regular soldier halfway through his second tour of the Nam - a father-substitute of heroic proportions. For the next six months, Skip clung to
Donny not just round camp and on patrol but also during their brief leave periods in Vung Tau and Saigon. From Donny and to a lesser extent from a more longstanding mate of Donny's - Roy "the Boy" Winters - Skip learnt the survival lessons of Vietnam from guerrillas to girlie-bars. Then, near the end of a ten day longrange patrol around the Long Hai mountains, Roy the Boy succumbed to a punji trap. Maddened by weariness, grief and frustration, Donny Smith decided to wreak vengeance on a peasant woman planting rice in a prohibited zone. With Skip's help, he raped the woman, then urged Skip to follow suit. Reluctantly Skip did so. When afterwards Donny was about to shoot the woman, Skip intervened. During the ensuing argument the woman produced a knife and stabbed Donny. Seeing this about to happen, Skip shot at the woman but instead killed Donny. Skip then killed the woman. Donny, dying, urged Skip to save his own life rather than waste time getting a dust-off. Skip was thus doubly in Donny Smith's debt.

Skip took Donny's death very hard and after psychological assessment was re-assigned to light duties at the Task Force base rather than frontline patrols. This suited an increasingly disillusioned Skip just fine. Demobbed at the end of his year's tour, he took advantage of Repatriation assistance to go back to school at Tech to complete his HSC. He did quite well in these classes - especially the traditional male specialties of maths and science - and his teachers tried to persuade him to go on to university to do engineering. But he was very impecunious and desperate to start earning a living, so he applied instead for a job with BHP with the intention of continuing technical engineering studies at night school. He got the job and moved to Wollongong. Meanwhile, he was also becoming aware of the groundswell of opinion against the war, most of which was supported by his own first-hand experience. Jim Cairns and Gough Whitlam represented hope - new potential father-figures, perhaps - and against his background but in line with his new career, he joined the Labor Party.
Norma Geddes was working as a secretary/book-keeper at Wollongong Technical College when he met her. Never having had so much as a steady girlfriend before - male bonding had always taken precedence - he fell head over heels for her. A brief courtship culminated in their marriage the day the Whitlam government was swept into power. With help from Norma's grandmother they scraped together a deposit for a fibro cottage in Fairy Meadow, taking out a War Service Loan to pay it off. Norma's intention to continue working at Tech came apart when Catholic methods of birth control proved unreliable. Skip however settled down as a non-smoking, rarely drinking, extremely solicitous husband. When the child was born a boy, he insisted he be called Donald - which was immediately shortened to Donny (He had previously told Norma about Donny Smith but not the details of his death).

As Donny grew, Skip did his best to be the kind of mate to his son that his own father had been. While still young Donny responded enthusiastically, but during his teen years he asserted his independence and moved away from Skip. He was also always closer to his mother than Skip had ever been to his. Skip could not understand why Donny and he no longer were close mates, and tended to blame Norma. He was especially irritated by Donny's sensitivity to teasing, which was one of Skip's main forms of communicating affection to other males. Skip still has no really close friends other than Norma. He has had little time for his mother since their row over his volunteering for conscription, and he seldom sees his sister who married and has built her own life in Narromine.

As he's got older, Skip has risen to the position of works foreman - a position from which he is unlikely to rise further because his qualifications do not come from a university, and because he is quite an active stirrer in the union. He claims not to resent this, but was nonetheless thrilled when Donny scraped together enough HSC marks to get into university. He was not, however, especially thrilled about Donny's choice of course in Biology. He also finds
Appendix 4. Backstories of the Major Characters

Donny's lack of application at uni extremely irritating; having missed out on such a chance himself, he can't understand why Donny doesn't make the absolute best of it. Now at 42, Skip is reasonably content and proud of his achievements as a provider (they own their home outright, and have extended it landscaped it and installed a small swimming pool) and as a father and husband. He shares Norma's disappointment their incapacity to have more children. He remains tight-lipped about the war, and scornful of the "professional veterans" who can't cope with their past. He's always refused to join the RSL march on ANZAC Day, or go in the Vietnam Veterans' Homecoming Parades. He protests rather too much.

NORMA ORDMAN (nee GEDDES)

Norma was born in 1951 in the southern Sydney suburb of Carlton. Her father owned and operated a small printing company, while her mother combined being a housewife with helping out in the business. Norma had two siblings - an older sister Jenny and a younger brother Paul - with whom she was very close especially as all three were rather neglected because the marginal nature of the family business demanded much of the parents' time. They were also very close to their maternal grandmother, who lived nearby and took much of the parenting role.

Norma's life was fairly typical of a lower-middle-class suburban baby-boomer. She attended school at Carlton Primary, and was active in the church social groups. She was quite a good swimmer, consistently winning the local club championships in freestyle. She continued to swim competitively into her high school years, nursing vague and dreamy Olympic ambitions. The nuns at St Josephs Girls High, Kogarah, however, had different ambitions for her, recognizing a quick intelligence and academic aptitude. She was urged to study towards a university entrance, although channelled towards the humanities and prospects in one of the caring professions. She accepted this and worked hard.
taking encouragement when, at the end of her own year ten, her sister gained a Commonwealth Scholarship and was accepted into Arts at Sydney University.

The following year, however, her mother was killed in a car accident. Norma was not unduly upset about this, having had little love from her mother, but it was to have a profound effect on her life. Unable to continue the business without his wife, Norma's father decided that she should quit school and help in the firm. Norma did this, but continued to struggle with night school trying to get her HSC in the hope that one day the uni dream would come good.

Despite Norma's careful book-keeping and her father's desperate struggles to cut costs, the business lost way. Instant printing technology was eating into the small independent offset business. When an offer came from someone wanting to buy him out and convert the business into a "Snap" franchise, he took the money and quietly retired. Norma was left without a job, still without her HSC and carrying a grudge against her father for stifling her ambitions then dumping her without even consulting her.

Her efficiency soon gained her a job at the local technical college, however, and then not long after, feeling the need to put distance between herself and her father, she applied for a better position at Wollongong Tech. She got the job and moved into a small flat in North Wollongong. Not long after, she met Skip. He was everything her father wasn't - easygoing, adventurous with an endearing streak of the larrikin, forward-looking, politically active and carrying a small air of mystery concerning his Vietnam experience. She was swept off her feet - but not into his bed. It may have been the era of free love, but Norma was a strong Catholic who had saved her virginity for marriage. The nuptials were rapidly arranged, however, and the couple's mutual ardour soon found satisfaction. Too much, perhaps - within months, Norma was pregnant.

The pregnancy proved difficult, with a bout of septicemia that saw Norma hospitalised in the seventh month. The labour was difficult and her son was a
forceps delivery. She was too exhausted to object to Skip's insistence on naming the child Donny - even if she'd wanted to which she didn't. She was also concerned with her own internal systems which her obstetrician clearly had doubts. Finally, she learned that she would be unable to have more children without risking her own death. With great reluctance and after lengthy agonizing and prayer, she and Skip agreed she should have a hysterectomy. Afterwards she put it behind her and devoted herself to raising Donny.

Soon after Donny started high school at Edmund Rice, Norma's beloved grandmother died. It was a big blow, and she took some time to recover from it. As a means of getting her out of herself, Skip suggested that she look for a job. She did so and was employed by Telecom as a switchboard operator. As the switches became mechanised, she moved into clerical office work and was soon promoted to supervisor, a part-time position which suits her to a tee, considering her active role in the church. She remains a firm believer, attending Mass every Sunday. It worries her that Donny seems to be growing up only a nominal Catholic and blames this on the influence of his lapsed father. This is one of the few major points of contention between herself and Skip. Otherwise, she's proud of her son - his good looks and athletic build, his intelligence, his interest in swimming, and the larrikin streak that reminds her so much of Skip. She is bothered, however, by the rift that has occurred in recent years between Skip and Donny - especially because it hurts Skip so much. When he compares it with his own relationship with his father, she points out that his father was dead by the time Skip was Donny's age, so who knows what the relationship would have been. Skip refuses to believe he could ever have rubbed up against his father the way Donny does with him.

The biggest disappointment in her life is not having been able to have more children. Her Catholic upbringing engenders a sense of failure in this regard. She looks forward to being a grandmother one day, although she would...
never intentionally let that slip to Donny. She loves both the men in her life, but is puzzled that these days she has to spend a lot of time mediating the squabbles between the two. She admires Donny's guts in sticking up for himself against Skip, but also thinks he's a bit thin-skinned about it. She occasionally nostalgia for the good old days when Skip and Donny seemed to be best of mates.

**DONALD "DONNY" ORDMAN**

At twenty, Donny is a good-looking, athletic young man in his prime. He has lived all his life in Wollongong. He likes to visit Sydney regularly, but has no wish to live there, preferring the easier pace of Wollongong and its ready access to the beach and the bush—two things which are quite important to him. His life so far has been pleasantly untraumatic. The worst thing to have happened so far was the death of his Nanna (Norma's grandmother) just after he started high school. He took on the trappings of adulthood from an early age, as many sole children do because adults are their only role models. Nonetheless, he also had a fantasy friend called Gray for two years before he started primary school and made real friends. His best mate at primary, Tim Wood, also went on to Edmund Rice and they have remained firm friends ever since, despite the fact that Tim's father—another steelworker—was transferred to Newcastle in Tim's final year of school, so they now live more than two hundred kilometers apart.

Donny has always got on very well with his mother, and used to get on well with his father. However, in recent years he has found his father's teasing and narrowness of outlook increasingly tiresome, and life in his parents' home stifling. He often spends time pondering ways to raise enough money to move out of home into a flat or shared house with his mates. So far, he hasn't been able to figure out a way of doing it without making too many lifestyle sacrifices.

He was an above average student at school, though his report cards always suggested he was working below his potential. His problem—which has continued into his university work—is lack of motivation. He drifted into doing
Biology at Wollongong University because it was his best subject at school, and he enjoys the field trips gathering specimens in the bush or snorkling round the rocks in the harbour. He really only went to uni at all because his parents - especially his father - put the pressure on. He does only enough study to scrape through getting Credits in subjects he likes and bare Passes in those he doesn't. He was heading for possible failure in Economics until Mai came to his rescue.

Donny's interest in Biology naturally inclines him to be an environmentalist though his commitment is more hedonistic than spiritual - natural environments should be protected because that's where he has a good time. He wasn't quite eighteen at the last federal election, but at the next one will probably vote Green. He certainly won't vote Liberal, and is not interested specially to Labor particularly as Skip's so dyed-in-the-wool. He's a member of Greenpeace and the Wilderness Society, but is not passionate enough to chain himself to a uranium shipment or the top of a tree in a logging forest. Donny is not really passionate about anything - until Mai enters his life. Before Mai, Donny had a string of temporary girlfriends, one of whom - a "steady" during his last year at high school and first at university, also became his sexual partner. He thought he was in love with her for a while, but eventually had to concede that the attraction was almost entirely sexual - otherwise, they had little in common. It was while he was extricating himself from that relationship that he first started to study with Mai - his choice of her to approach for study help was subconsciously partly because he thought it unlikely that he would become romantically involved with an Asian girl.

Donny's hobbies all relate to his pleasures in life - that is, they comprise swimming, bushwalking, and fishing. As with everything else, he has no great passion for any of them. He likes music - even learned the guitar for a couple of years at Edmund Rice and dreamed briefly of being a rock star - and has particular inclination towards socially committed groups like Midnight Oil.
Peter Garret is a definite hero. Bob Brown would be, too, except that Donny's still Catholic enough to feel very uneasy about gays. He enjoys his summer vacation job as swimming pool attendant - indeed, he's quite proud of his swimming prowess and his ability to teach others. He's not specially proud of his health and fitness as they come naturally to him because of his outdoors interests. He rides a bike to university each day.

As much as he thinks about his future, he sees his career as a hands-on sort of scientist, possibly a ranger with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Certainly not a boffin in a lab somewhere. He expects he'll marry some day and have children although right now he has no great liking for kids. He's in no special hurry to settle down. Worry about the future when it happens.

**NGUYEN AU PHUONG**

Phuong was born in 1950 in the Mekong Delta village of Ba Tri in Tien Giang Province south-west of Saigon not far from the Cambodian border. Her village was a large market village which prospered from the local rice, banana and pineapple-growing industries as well as from fishing. Producing a considerable surplus of produce, the village also supported a sizeable middle class, to which Phuong's family belonged. Her father was a school teacher, her mother a housewife who did part-time dressmaking on a commercial basis. Ba Tri was not a major centre of conflict in either the Viet Minh struggle against the French, or later in the American war. Phuong's family had therefore been relatively untouched by it all, getting on with their lives.

Phuong attended primary school in Ba Tri and high school in My Tho, and worked in the postal service in Ba Tri after leaving high school at age 16. It was there that she met Nguyen Chi Lat, a gentle man who spoke with the strange accent of the North, from whence his family had moved along with two million other Catholics after the Geneva agreement of 1954. Lat was just completing his apprenticeship as a barber. Their parents approved the relationship and they...
were married in 1970. Lat set up his shop in the front room of the large (by Vietnamese standards) house he and Phuong now shared with Lat’s parents and sole surviving grandmother. His new business was boosted considerably by his landing a contract with the ARVN to cut soldiers’ hair. Phuong soon became pregnant and gave up her paid job. In 1972 Mai was born.

By that stage, the Americans were pulling out and the government in the South beginning to fall apart under hyper-inflation, the weight of corruption and the lack of the artificial economic bolstering of the American war effort. Lat and Phuong looked forward to a communist victory, believing that anything would be better than what was there. Less than three years after Mai’s birth, the North finally achieved victory and began to restructure the South. Local Viet Cong cadres suddenly became the new village administrators, many of them with long-term scores to settle. Lat was singled out as a bourgeois running dog and lackey of the ARVN. It also did not help that his family, like so many Catholics, had moved to the South from the North to avoid living under Communism. Lat was singled out for “re-education”, which meant being sent with his family to a “New Economic Zone” and made to work as a peasant and undergo classes in correct political thinking. Their family home and personal possessions were confiscated. With other families, they built what was effectively a concentration camp in Long An Province, in swampy country on the border of the Plain of Reeds. Then they were set to digging canals in an effort to reclaim some of the swamp for pineapple farming. When the first crop failed because of the high salt levels in the soil, bananas were planted. They, too, failed. Meanwhile, the people were succumbing to the effects of malnutrition, along with malaria and other tropical ailments which were endemic in the area. Despite Phuong’s sacrifices in favour of her daughter, Mai became sick with a chronic stomach illness.

In desperation, Phuong started to look for a means of escape. She heard
that others were getting hold of boats to go to Thailand and Malaysia and started to make discreet enquiries. She was hampered by not being able to tell Lat, who was succumbing to the brainwashing and beginning to sound like a Communist. Hearing about a corrupt party official who was organising a boat, she went to him and offered all her money and some jewels she had managed to hide when the family property was confiscated. The official said it wasn’t enough. Phuong, young, attractive and desperate, offered him the only other thing she had to offer - her body. The official found this to his liking and strung her along about the availability of the boat so as to be able to have his way with her as often as he pleased. She felt terribly guilty and ashamed but Mai was wasting away and she was determined not to let her die.

Eventually the boat was available. Phuong still didn’t fully trust Lat not to betray them so she delayed telling him until they were actually at the rendezvous on the night of the escape. When Lat realised what was happening, he ran off to call the police. Phuong wasn’t going to waste all her effort and shame and lose perhaps her only chance of saving Mai, so she decided to go. Lat came back with the police but then changed his mind and came after the boat. In doing so, he was gunned down by the police. Phuong watched it happen, helpless, unable to swim.

After the trauma of the escape, the voyage to Malaysia was relatively uneventful, the only problems being overcrowding and seasickness. They did not encounter pirates and their captain actually knew how to navigate - a rare skill in the boat exodus from Vietnam. Instead of heading due west like most, he headed south across the Gulf of Thailand directly to the refugee camp on the island of Pulau Bidong off the Malaysian coast. This camp had been operating under sufferance from the Malaysian government for over a year and so was well established. Primitive and crowded, it was bliss for Phuong and Mai after the hardships of Long An. Despite their grief at the death of Lat, both improved.
in health during the months they spent awaiting processing for migration.

Phuong knew that most refugees applied for America. Shrewdly, therefore, she applied for Australia in the hope that there would be a shorter waiting list and less stringent criteria. It was a ploy that worked. Within three months she and Mai were heading for Australia. On arrival, Phuong made contact with a distant relative in Marrickville who had migrated before 1975. This relative gave her a cool reception, but did give her a job in his grocery shop. Phuong was initially grateful, but soon discovered he was paying her slave wages on which she could not afford to keep herself and Mai. She looked around for other work. Her previous experience in a post office came to her rescue: she got a job in the parcels room of the Wollongong Mail Centre. She moved with Mai to a tiny flat in Central Wollongong and restarted her life.

A few years later she was allocated a town house in Gwynneville by the Housing Commission. She and Mai have lived there ever since. Phuong has turned its tiny rear courtyard into a monument to Lat - whose memory she has built up to that of a demigod on account of the shame and guilt she still feels about her behaviour and his death - and to a fantasy of Vietnam as a corrupted earthly paradise. She doesn't like Australia very much - is puzzled by what she sees as its moral laxity and hedonism, and finds its dry landscape harsh and ugly - and pines for Vietnam. She tries to bring Mai up according to strict Vietnamese rural custom - the way she thinks Lat would approve - and resents Mai's Australian-ness while still being proud of her academic achievements and recognizing the opportunities available to her.

She has never shared the full story of her escape with anyone, not even Mai. The guilt is like an albatross round her neck - too much even to admit to God in the privacy of the confessional. She has, however, talked it over in her mind with Lat - argued it back and forth, and finally made some kind of peace with his spirit. But it's not the same as unburdening herself to a living person.
She would dearly love to have a close woman friend with whom to unburden herself, but her sense of shame prevents her becoming close to any of the women in the Vietnamese community, whom she feels would not understand her past actions. Yet despite her hidebound attitudes, Phuong is a kind and loving mother. Her strong will is balanced by gentleness and a sense of humour that her experiences have dimmed but not extinguished.

**NGUYEN TRI MAI**

Mai was born in Ba Tri in 1972. The sheltered, relatively prosperous years of her early life were shattered when, in 1976, she and her family were moved to the camp near Long An. Her memories of the following period are mostly the vague ones of early childhood, which is just as well because it was characterized by poverty and misery, and her own increasing illness. Her strongest memory of this period - one which eclipses almost all others - is that of the death of her father, which she witnessed. For a long time after the event, she continued to have nightmares reliving the event and rekindling her sense of helplessness and anger at not being able to help him, to swim to him and prevent him drowning. It took her a long time to understand why Phuong and the others on the boat made no effort to help Lat at the time, and why Phuong had held her so strongly to prevent her from following Lat's fate. But even that memory has faded, its only lingering manifestation being an abiding fear of immersion in deep water, which is always accompanied by a sense of being called by her father's spirit to join him in the depths.

Mai arrived in Australia just after her eighth birthday. At that stage she had almost no formal education, the pedagogy in the Long An camp having been pretty rudimentary and heavily larded with communist indoctrination. She had, however, begun to learn English in the refugee camp on Pulau Bidong, and had taken to it very easily. By the time she arrived in Australia, she already spoke better English than her mother.
The first year after arrival were beset by their lack of permanent accommodation and other settling-in problems. Mai's schooling remained intermittent and disrupted until after the move to Wollongong, and even there she attended two primary schools, one in North Wollongong and the other in Gwynneville. Despite this, Mai thrived in her new environment. Poor though she and her mother were, they were infinitely better off than they had been in the later times in Vietnam and at least as prosperous as they had been while Lat was still alive. Mai quickly made friends at school firstly with other Vietnamese children then, as her English grew to be fluent and colloquial, with children from other backgrounds including Anglos. However, while her mother was happy enough for her to socialize with Vietnamese children, she tried to restrict Mai's social access to Anglo kids as much as possible, fearing that Mai would be tainted with their hedonism and disrespectfulness. Mai quickly developed a kind of dual personality - friendly, reasonably outgoing though studious at school, meek and demure at home and in Vietnamese company. Only with a few Vietnamese friends in the same predicament did she relax the two into a complete picture.

Like many immigrant children, Mai did not take the benefits of free education for granted. Her combination of intelligence and application meant that she did well at school, soon catching and then surpassing her contemporaries in most subjects. By the time she finished primary school she was dux and remained in the top two or three all through high school. She was especially good at mathematics, and began in the last two years to set her sights on a career in the financial sector. She had minor second thoughts after the stock market crashed in 1987, but reasoned that there were still opportunities for people to get things right after so many had got it wrong. When she was offered a stipendiary scholarship to study economics at Wollongong University, the die was cast.
The freedom of university was at first quite disturbing to her, because the restrictiveness at home did not change commensurately. She found herself for the first time being challenged to think about other things than work and study and becoming aware of the range of lifestyle options available to her. When Donny sat next to her one day in an Economics lecture and got talking to her over coffee afterwards, she was immediately drawn to his easygoing charm and his wideranging views about matters on which she had scarcely pondered, especially the environment. When he confessed his dislike for Economics - a subject he was taking in an effort to understand whether capitalism and environmental sustainability could possibly co-exist - she offered to help him study and was pleased when he accepted.

Over the next six months they met weekly in a quiet outdoor corner of the campus with Mai patiently explaining the intricacies to a bemused Donny. She suppressed her growing attraction to his charm, his vigour and enthusiasm for life. His boyish vulnerability also appealed to the nurturer in her. This was the first time she had ever thought seriously of a male in terms other than as acquaintances or fellow students although several boys had tried to interest her previously. She found it disturbing that Donny was capturing her interest without actually trying.

Since starting university, Mai has increasingly felt the strictures of her mother's application of Vietnamese custom in ruling their lives. She has great love for her mother and respect for her belief in traditional custom, but has begun to question its relevance in Australia. She has begun to hate the duplicity of her own life. With the advent of Donny in her life, a sense of rebelliousness has grown to the point where it only needs a small catalyst for it to develop into a full-blown revolution.
Appendix 5  
Sample Scene:  
Blank Verse Trial

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

_The backyard of the Ordman family home. A small swimming pool and patio, with a table and chairs. Early evening. DONNY’s skimming leaves from the pool, while SKIP tinkers with a portable electric fan._

SKIP  It helps to move. The leaves won’t come to you.

DONNY  Eh? What?

SKIP  You’ve skimmed that patch so thoroughly already no leaf will ever dare fall there again. So what about the rest?

DONNY  Oh. Yeah. You’re right.

_He moves along the deck. NORMA enters with a pot of coffee._

SKIP  No, really. it’s OK. The only problem is that we wouldn’t mind it done by Christmas. Three weeks - you reckon you can manage? Donny?

NORMA  No use. He hasn’t heard a word. He’s been like this for days.

SKIP  A daze - exactly. If this is what a good exam result does to him. think I liked it better when he just scraped through.

NORMA  Oh, Skip. go easy, please. It’s not just his results. There’s something more that’s bothering him.

SKIP  You reckon?

NORMA  Yes, I’m certain. So give him a break. Let me talk to him - I’ll see if I can find what’s eating him. Your sarcasm’ll only get his back up.

SKIP  My sarcasm?

NORMA  That’s right.

SKIP  What you call sarcasm.
the blokes at work all laugh their heads off at
What’s more, you know it always goes down well
at party meetings.

NORMA

Then use it there tonight!
Not here - we’re not a Labor Party branch,
or a subsidiary of BHP

SKIP

OK. You’re right. I’m sorry. It just gugs me
when Donny treats me like I don’t exist
It gets my back up, see?

NORMA

I understand.
Leave him to me. I’ll talk to him. More coffee?

SKIP

No thanks. Oh. shit. is that the time? I better
skedaddle, or they’ll start the bloody meeting
without me and my sarcasm.

NORMA

How boring!
And all your practice here on Donny - wasted!

SKIP

Who’s being sarky now?

NORMA

It must be catching.
Go on, get going

SKIP

Don’t wait up.

NORMA

Take care.

SKIP

I will. don’t worry. See you later, Donny!

DONNY

Eh? What?

SKIP

See you tomorrow.

DONNY

Righto, Dad.

SKIP

To NORMA. See what I mean? I hope you can get through.

He exits. Pause.

NORMA

Donny?

DONNY

Uhuh?

NORMA

Come have a cup of coffee.

DONNY

No thanks.

NORMA

Yes please! Come on, while it’s still hot.
A hit of caffeine might be just the thing
to jolt you out of dreamland.

DONNY

Am I that bad?
"Am I that bad?" he asks! Well, put it this way: at least six times these last two days your Dad's asked you to mow the lawn. And have you done it?

He didn't, did he? When?

I rest my case

DONNY joins NORMA at the table.

Oh, Gawd, that's all I need. Just when I'd got into his good books, first time in my life. I blow it straight away on something silly. I better go and do it now.

Sit down!

You said -

I'm teasing you. Look, don't you worry. You're still in Skip's good books. No doubt about it. And not just for the first time, either. Really. I don't know what it is between you two. He's very proud of you. We both are. Surely you realise that.

I guess

It stands to reason. You've every right to be a little dreamy - exam results like yours. You've worked so hard, such long, long hours this session. You deserve it. Although I must admit it's worried me.

What's worried you?

Your workload. All that study. You never seem to have much time for fun. It isn't right. A young man of your age - you should be surfing with your mates sometimes, and chasing pretty girls, and things like that.

Oh, Mum.

It's true. I reckon it's unhealthy. A strapping lad like you without a girlfriend.

Who says I don't?

Eh? Does that mean you do?

It might.

Oh, well! No wonder you've been dreamy! Who is she? Do I know her?

No, you don't.
although I've talked about her on and off. Remember how I told you I'd been sharing some study sessions with a fellow student.

NORMA The one that helped you get the good result? Is she the one?

DONNY That's right.

NORMA She must be special to get you so fired up about your work. What was her name again? I think you told me, something old-fashioned. Mabel, was it? Maisie? No, wait a minute. I remember: May, as in May Gibbs!

DONNY Not quite. Her name is Mai. Nguyen Tri Mai. She's Asian, Vietnamese.

NORMA Oh, right. I see. From Vietnam. An Asian. That's interesting. Mai, you say— not May. And here's me thinking it was only poor pronunciation. Are you sure she's Asian?

DONNY What do you mean? Of course I'm sure. It's not the sort of thing you easily mistake. She's short— petite— with long, straight, jet black hair and almond eyes.

NORMA Sounds... pretty.

DONNY Yeah, I think so—but more than that. She's well. She's really nice. I'm sure you'll think so, too, but as for Dad.

NORMA How do you think he'll feel?

DONNY What makes you say that?

NORMA I'll like her. Are my likes and dislikes as patently predictable as that?

DONNY Well, no, not really, but I figured Dad would be the one most likely to have problems, because of—well, his background. Guess I sort of assumed you'd feel OK about it. Sorry. How do you feel?

NORMA I... really, I don't know. I'm sure this Mai's a very pleasant girl. But Donny, you must know there's always problems with mixed relationships.

DONNY What kind of problems?

NORMA Well, prejudice to start with. On both sides.
And problems of identity for children
with mingled blood

DONNY Oh, Mum, for crying out loud!
Listen to what you're saying! Mai and I
haven't been out together yet, but you're
already talking wedding bells and babies!

NORMA I'm sorry. Yes, I overstepped the mark.
It's just, I sense you've never been so serious
about a girl

DONNY So what?

NORMA There'll still be problems
even if you decide just to go steady

DONNY Such as?

NORMA The cultural differences, for instance -
they're bound to lead to deep misunderstandings.
All sorts of obstacles to happiness,
like language, background, family expectations,
religion -

DONNY Well you needn't worry there -
I'm pretty sure she's Catholic

NORMA Pretty sure?

DONNY We haven't talked about it, but she wears
a cross on a gold chain around her neck.

NORMA That's something, I suppose

DONNY Look, Mum. I know
there's likely to be problems. Do you think
I haven't thought about it long and hard?
These last few days I've thought of nothing else.
But nothing should be insurmountable
as long as Mai and me are both committed.

NORMA And are you?

I think

NORMA And Mai? How's she feel?

DONNY I'm not sure.
I thought she seemed quite keen on me, until
I asked her for a date. She went all funny,
like she was scared.

NORMA That may be to her credit.

DONNY How come?
NORMA  It prob'ly means she well aware of all the pitfalls we were just discussing.

DONNY  Yeah, well you needn't think I'm giving up because on one small setback. Like you said, she's special, Mum. No other girl I've met has made me feel the way she does.

NORMA  I see.

DONNY  Sounds like you're gone a million. I just hope my only son's not heading for the letdown to end all letdowns. Please, be careful, Donny.

NORMA  I will. No need to fret. But all the same, if I am going to push this thing with Mai I'd like to think I had the full support of you and Dad. So back to my first question: how do you think he'll feel?

NORMA  There's no real reason why he should feel any more misgivings than I do. As you know, he never talks much about his war experience in Vietnam. Even when I first met him, not long after he finished national service, he was tight-lipped. He's never joined the VVA, or marched on ANZAC Day, or even the Homecomings. refused to join the RSL because he reckoned the top brass were racist bigots. He's far more tolerant of immigrants than most people. And yet...

DONNY  And yet?

NORMA  Something that happened to him over there?

NORMA  Maybe. I'm only guessing. Intuition. Sometimes I think he tries too hard to keep it bottled up tight inside. I wish he'd talk about it all. It's one big part of him. I feel I hardly know, despite the fact that we've been married over twenty years.

DONNY  So what should I do? I'd like you to meet Mai. Both of you. Could we ask her here for dinner? That is, if she'll go out with me at all.

NORMA  Well, yes. But please, tread softly with your father. Or maybe I should broach it with him first. What do you think?

DONNY  I reckon you're an angel; you've no idea what a relief it is. I'll ask Mai for a barbie at the weekend.
OK? D'you think you'll talk to him by then?

NORMA I s'pose.

DONNY You beauty!

NORMA But on one condition.

DONNY Name it!

NORMA Finish cleaning the pool tonight. You never know - a pool still full of leaves might just bring out the racist in your Dad.

DONNY See what you mean. I'll make the damn thing sparkle.

*Blackout*
ACT ONE SCENE TWO

The backyard of the Ordman family home. A small swimming pool and patio, with a table and chairs. Early evening. DONNY's skimming leaves from the pool. SKIP tinkers with a portable electric fan.

SKIP It helps if you move. The leaves won't come to you.

DONNY Eh? What?

SKIP You've skimmed that patch of water so many times, no leaf will ever dare fall there again. What about the rest?

DONNY moves along the deck. NORMA enters with a pot of coffee.

SKIP Wouldn't mind it all done by Christmas. Think you can manage the rest in three weeks? Donny? To NORMA Not at this rate, apparently.

NORMA He's been like this for days.

SKIP A daze - exactly. If this is what one good uni result does to him, I think I preferred it when he just scraped through.

NORMA Skip, go easy, please. It's not just his results. Something else is bothering him.

SKIP Yeah?

NORMA Give him a break. Let me talk to him - see if I can find what's eating him. Your sarcasm just gets his back up.

SKIP What's wrong with my sarcasm? The blokes at work all laugh their heads off at it. And it always goes down well at party meetings.

NORMA Then save it for tonight! We're not the Labor Party, or a subsidiary of BHP.

SKIP Well it bugs me when Donny treats me like I don't exist. Gets my back up.

NORMA I said I'll talk to him. More coffee?

SKIP No thanks. Shit. Is that the time? I better skedaddle, or they'll start the bloody meeting without me and my sarcasm.

NORMA How boring! All your practise on Donny wasted!
Who's being sarky now?

Must be catching. Go on, get going.

Don't wait up. See you later. Donny. Ground control to Donny Ordman!

Eh? What?

See you in the morning.

Righto, Dad!

To Norma. Hope you can get through. Good luck.

He exits Pause

Donny?

Mm?

Come have a cup of coffee.

No thanks.

That's not an offer. It's an order! Come on, while it's still hot. I want to talk to you. And a hit of caffeine might be just the thing to jolt you out of dreamland.

That bad, am I?

It's OK. You've earned the right to be a bit dreamy - all those long hours you've been working. Though I must admit it's worried me.

What?

All that study. You never seem to have any time for fun. Not right. A young man of your age - you should be going surfing with your mates and taking girls out and stuff. You used to, all the time.

And you used to hound me for not studying enough.

I know, but still. It's a matter of... balance. Something unhealthy about it. A strapping lad like you, nose stuck in books all the time. No time for girls.

Who says I don't?

Does that mean you do?

I might.

Yeah? Who?

You might even say, one of the reasons I've been sort of absent-minded the last few days is 'cause of her.
Really! Who is she? Do I know her?

No you don't. I've talked about her on and off. But remember I told you I'd been studying with one of my fellow students?

The one that helped you get that result? Is she the one?

Yup

She must be all right then. I like her already. What was her name again? Something old-fashioned, wasn't it? Mabel? Maisie? Hang on, don't tell me... May. As in May Gibbs?

Not quite. Her name is Mai. Emm ay eye. Pronounced Mai.

Unusual. Foreign, is it?

Vietnamese.

Pause

Ah.

Her full name's Nguyen Tri Mai. They put the surname first.

And here's me thinking it was only poor pronunciation. Are you sure?

What of?

She's... she's one of them?

It's not the sort of thing you easily mistake.

I mean, does she look... Asian.

She's short - petite, I suppose you'd call it - with long, straight, jet black hair and almond eyes.

Pretty, I suppose.

Well I think so. But more than that, she's, well, she's really nice. You'll think so, too, when you meet her.

Will I?

'Course you will. You're OK. It's Dad I'm worried about.

What makes you think I'll like her? Are my likes and dislikes as predictable as that?

Well, no, not really, but you know what I mean.

No. Tell me.

You're so straight and easy-going. You take people as you find them.
NORMA  And your father doesn’t?

DONNY  You know what he’s like.

NORMA  Yes. He’s a fine man.

DONNY  I’m not saying he’s not. But he’s always so picky and... and finicky. Never satisfied with anything you do. Always expecting more. I’m a constant source of disappointment to him. Even this result for Economics.

NORMA  He was thrilled!

DONNY  Funny way of showing it. “Next time you might get a High Distinction. eh?” I thought for once I might be in his good books.

NORMA  You are. It’s just, well, there are things he missed out on in his own life. Like a uni education and that. Sometimes I think he feels your don’t appreciate the chances you’ve had. Opportunities he never got, cause the war got in the way.

DONNY  Yeah, well that’s why I figured Dad would be the one to have problems about Mai. ’Cause of his war. S’pose I sort of assumed it wouldn’t bother you. Sorry. Does it?

NORMA  I... I don’t know. I’m sure she’s a very pleasant girl. But Donny, you know there’s always problems with mixed relationships.

DONNY  Such as?

NORMA  Well, prejudice, to start with. On both sides. And problems of identity for children of mixed race.

DONNY  Mum. listen to yourself! Mai and I haven’t been out together yet, and you’re already thinking wedding bells and babies!

NORMA  Sorry. Yes. I did overstep the mark. But there’s all sorts of problems even if you go steady.

DONNY  Like?

NORMA  Well, cultural differences - they’re bound to lead to misunderstandings. All sorts of obstacles to happiness. Like language, background, family expectations, religion -

DONNY  No worries there - I’m pretty sure she’s Catholic.

NORMA  Pretty sure?

DONNY  We haven’t talked about it, but she wears a cross on a gold chain around her neck.

NORMA  That’s something. I s’pose.

DONNY  Mum. I know there’s likely to be problems. Do you think I haven’t thought about it? Hardly thought of anything else the last few days. But no problem should be insurmountable as long as we’re both
committed

NORMA Are you?

DONNY Reckon I am.

NORMA How does Mai feel?

DONNY Well that's another problem.

NORMA You mean you might've put me through all this for nothing?

DONNY I thought she seemed quite keen on me, till I asked her for a date. She acted really weird, like she was scared or something.

NORMA Maybe that's to her credit.

DONNY How come?

NORMA Maybe she's aware of all the pitfalls we were talking about

DONNY Yeah well I'm not giving up because of one small setback.

NORMA Live to fight another day, huh?

DONNY You bet. Many more days, for her.

NORMA Sounds like you're gone a million. Please be careful, Donny.

DONNY No worries. Mum. I will. Can I count on your support?

NORMA I'm always here. I only hope it's not just to pick up the pieces.

DONNY And Dad?

NORMA There's no obvious reason why he should feel any different than me. But I wouldn't want you to hold me to it.

DONNY He never talks much about his time in Vietnam.

NORMA Tight-lipped even when I first met him. Not long after he got demobbed. He's not the sort to wear it on his sleeve. Hasn't joined the Veteran's Association. Didn't go in the homecoming. Never marched on Anzac Day.

DONNY Never even joined the RSL.

NORMA No. They weren't too welcoming to the Vietnam boys in the early days.

DONNY So how does he feel about Vietnamese in Australia?

NORMA We've ever discussed it, specifically. But generally, he's very tolerant about immigration - much more than me. I'd say. And yet...

DONNY And yet? Go on.
NORMA I don't know how to say it. I'm only guessing - intuition, you might say. But sometimes I think he tries too hard to keep his Vietnam bit bottled up tight inside. I wish he'd talk more about it. It's this big part of him I hardly know, even after twenty-odd years of marriage.

DONNY So what should I do?

NORMA Tread softly, that's all. Maybe I should broach it with him first. What do you think?

DONNY You're an angel, Mum. I was hoping you'd say that.

NORMA It might help if he could meet the girl. If we both could. It's much harder to be prejudiced about a real person.

DONNY Sounds good to me. What about a barbie at the weekend? Think you'll talk to Dad by then?

NORMA Probably.

DONNY You beauty!

NORMA On one condition.

DONNY Anything.

NORMA You finish cleaning the pool tonight.

DONNY Aww.

NORMA A pool full of leaves might just be enough to bring out the prejudice in your father.

DONNY See what you mean. Consider it done.

Blackout.

ACT ONE SCENE SEVEN

The back yard at the Ordman's. Night. MAI and PHUONG sit with DONNY, SKIP and NORMA round the patio table, eating the barbecue meal. There are several empty beer cans in front of SKIP. A long pause, punctuated only by the sounds of eating.

NORMA Well, there! That's better. To MAI. We don't always eat this late. Your Mum's to blame - she's such a fund of stories!

PHUONG Your story. I also like.

SKIP You like a story? Here's another - a Cinderella story, about a bloke who throws a barbecue for his son's friend and her mother, then gets left, all on his Pat Malone, to wield his magic with the fork and tongs while his son and wife and guests hang around inside in the
kitchen, telling stories!

NORMA Skip. I'm sorry. The time just... got away.

SKIP Tell me about it.

NORMA We're all together now.

SKIP Whoopee.

NORMA More salad, Mrs Nguyen?

PHUONG Please, no.

SKIP That means yes or no, you reckon, Donny?

NORMA It obviously means no. To MAI. What about you? More salad?

MAI No thank you.

SKIP More meat then? Plenty there. Another juicy steak?

MAI I've had enough, thanks.

SKIP But you've hardly eaten! The best scotch fillet, too. Pity to waste it. Not overcooked, is it?

MAI No. it's nice but -

SKIP Bloody miracle, considering the time I had to cook it. So what's up? You're on a fast, is that it? Buddhists, are you? Got some instant noodles in the pantry, if that's more to your taste.

NORMA Skip - that's enough

SKIP Just trying to make the guests feel comfortable.

PHUONG Catholic, we are.

DONNY I told you that.

NORMA So are we.

SKIP Speak for yourself. She's Catholic. Me - I'm lapsed. But it's not Friday night, so what's your beef with beef? Ha! Get it?

DONNY Give it a rest, Dad.

SKIP Shut up. No sense of humour. No appetite. That's probably why you're so small - no decent protein while you're growing up.

He goes to the barbecue and helps himself to more steak.

DONNY Whispered to NORMA. For pity's sake, do something, Mum!

NORMA Yes, all right!


MAI  No thanks

DONNY  Me neither

PHUONG declines with a smile.

SKIP  Thought so.

He heads for the house

You don't mind if I indulge?

NORMA  Skip please...

But he's gone.

I'm sorry about this. It's not normal - specially this drinking, is it. Donny? It's not because we left him on his own - maybe that didn't help but he's been at it all afternoon. Which was the main reason I kept you in the kitchen. I don't know what's got into him. I'm sorry.

MAI  It's OK, Mrs Ordman

DONNY  No it's not!

SKIP  Off Norma?!

NORMA  Coming!

SKIP  Still off! Where's the cold beer gone?

NORMA  Excuse me, please. Exiting. I think you've drunk it all.

DONNY  You don't have to put up with this. He's getting worse. Why don't you just leave?

MAI  That would be rude

DONNY  What's he being? Polite?

PHUONG  Something upset. I think your father. Is us? We offend?

DONNY  No! It's not you. He's just set out to ruin this little party, in the hope that Mai and I'll decide our friendship is... pointless.

PHUONG  Maybe he right.

DONNY  But don't you see? That's what he wants. If you say that, it means it's working. He's winning. The bigger the catastrophe tonight, the better, as far as he's concerned. But maybe if we call the evening quits right now, we might still salvage some faint hope.

NORMA returns with a bowl. SKIP follows, carrying a bottle of Scotch.

NORMA Sorry about that. Now, how about dessert? There's fruit salad.

SKIP Yeah, go right ahead. Don't mind me - I can eat my steak alone.

MAI I think -

SKIP Thank goodness no-one wanted beer. We're out of cold ones. Can you imagine it? But good old Johnnie Walker to the rescue! Anyone care to join me? No, of course not. We eat and drink and live and die alone.

DONNY What's that supposed to mean?

NORMA To DONNY: Don't take the bait.

DONNY To MAI, sotto voce: I warned you, didn't I? Go now, before it really is too late.

MAI I'm sorry, Mrs Ordman, but I think we'll pass on the desert, if you don't mind. We'd best be going home.

NORMA Oh, really?

SKIP Why? The night's still young! This bottle's nearly full - unlike yourselves who've hardly let a morsel pass your lips. Besides, I haven't got to know you yet - wasn't asked to join the kitchen minstrel show. Stay and enjoy yourselves!

MAI No, please, we're tired. It's been a long week, what with my exams, and now this heat. An early night -

SKIP The heat? How could the heat bother a Nigel?

NORMA Skip!

PHUONG Who is Nigel, please?

SKIP It's always hot in old Nogeria, isn't it. So hot, it's hard to breath. Sometimes, bit like this tonight. But who am I to argue? If you're hot, salvation's at hand - the swimming pool! You did bring your bathers.

MAI We didn't know...

DONNY I didn't even tell them we have a pool.

SKIP You wouldn't! Still, no worries. Norma can lend you hers - she's got some spares.

NORMA They wouldn't fit.

SKIP Then come in in your undies. In the buff, if you like - won't bother me.

MAI No thanks. But don't let us stop you, please. We're going anyway.

SKIP You disappoint me. I thought you lot had webs between your toes. All that bloody water where you come from. Isn't our little pool good enough?
MAI

It's not -

SKIP

Ha! You admit it! At least you're honest. Unlike my son, who claims to like this pool - and so he should, he learned to swim in it - but he prefers the council pool: even the beach. All that piss and pollution.

DONNY

Dad -

SKIP

He'll run a mile before he'll swim in here - won't even clean the thing unless you hound him - belly-aches he can't swim laps in it. Too small! Well it's still big enough for Skip Ordman!

SKIP begins taking off his clothes.

NORMA

To MAI and PHUONG. I think you're right. It's better that you go. I'm sorry it's turned out like this. I wanted so much for us to like each other

SKIP

Sure you won't change your mind? Can't be tempted?

PHUONG

To DONNY. Please, you call a taxi.

DONNY

No. I'll run you home. To NORMA. Where are your keys?

NORMA

In my purse inside.

MAI

To DONNY. You think your MUM will be OK alone? I mean .

NORMA

It's all right, Mai. I understand. Thank you, but I'll be fine.

DONNY exits to get the keys. SKIP's still struggling out of his clothes.

SKIP

I know it's not the back beach at Vung Tau, but I would've thought it's more hygenic than a village pond. Beats your average rice paddy.

NORMA

Try not to write us off because of this. We must arrange another get-together. I'd love to hear more of your stories.

DONNY

Returning. Let's go

PHUONG

Good-bye.

MAI

I'm glad we met you, Mrs Ordman.

They exit. NORMA sees them out.

SKIP

'Course, as I remember it, the best place in the Nam to have a swim was a new bomb crater, just after a storm - just the right depth, and full of fresh, cool rain, No leeches, either.

SKIP is now down to his shorts. He eases himself into the pool.

Jeez, it was good Norma! Norma! Where's that bloody -

NORMA

Returning. What?
Pass us the grog.

Oh, sure! Why not? Get even more pissed and see how much more damage you can do!

Just give it to me, will you? Or do I have to get it?

He starts to get out of the pool.

Please Skip You've had enough. No more -

Get stuffed!

Yes that's right! Get aggro! Take it out on me! Not enough to turn your son against you by behaving like a pig towards his guests?

SKIP grabs the bottle.

A pig?!

All those insults!

You stand there - you - accusing me of insults? What d'you call leaving a bloke out here to grapple with the barbie, while you get off on bloody fairy tales in the kitchen?

Don't give me that. You could've come and joined us.

And let the bloody meat burn? Oh, yeah, you'd've liked that! I wouldn't've been welcome, would I? I've organised enough boycotts in my time to know one when I see one.

Hoh? The paranoia!

Yeah? Then explain how come these guests, when finally you all did consent to join me, ate bugger all of what I'd cooked for them?

Small appetities, the heat. God, I don't know. We had some nibbles in the kitchen.

Nice try, Norma. but it doesn't wash. The old cold shoulder. pure and simple. I know these noggie sheilas. Seen them close-up. Close enough to see behind the smiles, and all the bowing, scraping, and false politeness. I've seen the layers peeled back - I've known what's left, naked contempt and hate. They loathe us whites!

The green light slowly returns around SKIP.

I saw it in her eyes - that piece of Donny's - the malice... spite... the animosity - makes my blood run cold to think of it.

How can you say that?

That's what Donny said - I tried to warn him, but he wouldn't listen.

Donny? When did you speak to him?
Notes:

Appendix 6. Sample Scenes

First Draft of Script

---

**SKIP**

Today, of course! When he first saw the woman near Ap Bac.

**NORMA**

*Sotto voce* Oh, no! Dear God, not again. Skip -

**SKIP**

I tried to stop him, Sarge. He was my mate. But we'd been nine days forward of the wire, with contacts and fire-fights every day. No sleep. Living on cold C-rats. Then Roy-the-boy fell in a trap, got skewered on punji stakes, right through his guts. Poor bastard - he screamed non-stop till the dust-off chopper came. That screaming must've really got to Donny. 'cause something kind of... stretched in him. He changed. His eyes - maybe that was where I saw it first - in his eyes. Maybe it was only mirrored in the woman's.

*Pause*

**NORMA**

Want to tell me what happened?

**SKIP**

She must've come out after we'd all passed - all except Donny. He was tail-end charlie. He signalled us to stop, but the other blokes mustn't've seen - the J was getting thick just at that point. They just kept going...

*During this speech, the green light has extended around the pool. A (puppet) peasant woman enters, transplanting rice. DONNY SMITH also enters behind SKIP, doesn't join in the action directly this time, but speaks all his lines from the same position. NORMA keeps quiet and listens.*

**DONNY S**

Suspicious

**SKIP**

Just some old black-toothed mama-san working her patch. What's suspicious about that?

**DONNY S**

Shouldn't be here. Should be in the hamlet with the others.

**SKIP**

You know how much notice they take of that.

**DONNY S**

Free-fire zone, mate. Orders. We assume she's VC.

*He raise his rifle to take aim at the woman.*

**SKIP**

But what if she's not? We're supposed to win their hearts and minds, for Christ's sake! Can't just shoot her in cold blood.

**DONNY S**

All right. Let's go check her out.

**SKIP**

Leave her alone. Catch the others while we can.

**DONNY S**

You catch them. I'm taking a closer look.

*DONNY'S heads into the 'jungle'.*

**SKIP**

But Donny! We're supposed to stay with the section. Donny?

*There's no reply. He's gone. The peasant women also disappears. The green light shrinks to just round SKIP.*

Why did he do that? Why risk it - a short-timer? All he had left was...
thirteen and a wakey. But off he goes, and so do I. Sure it was wrong, but what else could I do? He saved my life, Sarge, on my first patrol, back when I was just eleven days in-country. He taught me all I know - I couldn’t leave him.

*The green light again extends to the pool. The peasant woman again appears, this time as a human-sized puppet. SKIP remains where he has been from the outset of this sequence. DONNY’S approaches the WOMAN. She looks up.*

**DONNY S** Well, well! Not an old black-toothed mama-san at all.

*The WOMAN stops work, watching DONNY’S warily.*

**WOMAN** I don’t understand.

**DONNY S** See what I mean? Suspicious. Since when do young potato peelers work the paddies?

**SKIP** What we going to do?

**DONNY S** To the WOMAN Where’s your ID? Papers? Shit, how do you say it in Nog?

**SKIP** Tay can cook.

**DONNY S** Good lad. To the WOMAN Tay can cook!

**WOMAN** The can cuoc? *Shaking her head fearfully. I don’t have it with me. Pointing. I left it in the village. Hoa Long. Please, I’m only trying to feed my family.*

**DONNY S** If you don’t hand them over, we got to search you. You know that, don’t you?

**WOMAN** Please I don’t understand

**DONNY S** Which, in your case, will almost be a pleasure!

*He lunges into the shallow water, groping at her body. The WOMAN screams.*

**DONNY S** Shut up!

**SKIP** Donny, what the hell...?

**DONNY S** What’s it look like, mate? Fuck and forget! Don’t even have to fork with this one!

**SKIP** No! You can’t!

**DONNY S** Why the hell not?

**SKIP** It... it isn’t right.
DONNY S Don't be a sook. Free-fire zone. No ID. She's fair game, mate. Asking for it.

*The WOMAN seizes the chance provided by his momentary distraction. She breaks free and scrambles away to disappear upstage.*

Jesus. Ordman! Don't just stand there - help me catch her.

*He exits after her upstage. The green light again shrinks to just on SKIP.*

SKIP God. Donny! Stop! Leave her alone! Please. Donny...

*Pause*

The stupid bastard took no notice.

*He's on the verge of tears.*

I should've stopped him. Sarge. I should've grabbed him, or knocked him out, or threatened him, or something. I could've done it, if I'd had the nous, and then, maybe what happened wouldn't... and... and Donny... my mate Donny would be still... alive...

*He breaks down weeping. NORMA goes and puts her arms around him.*

NORMA It's all right. Skip

SKIP It's not all right! I failed him. Sarge!

NORMA Not Sarge. It's Norma. Skip. I'm here. OK?

*The green light fades.*

SKIP Norma? Where's the Sarge. I was telling him...

*He looks around.*

Oh God!

NORMA Another one of those dreams, Skip.

SKIP Oh, Jesus Christ!

NORMA Must be what you've been building up to all day. Pity you had to take it out on the guests. Do you have any idea...?

SKIP I'm sorry.

NORMA Still, now they've gone it's probably best to get it all off your chest.

SKIP You want to hear the rest?

NORMA Somebody should. if it's bothering you that much. But I don't think I'm the one...
Appendix 6: Sample Scenes - First Draft of Script

**SKIP** Why not? You said it'd be good for me to spill my guts.

**NORMA** But you need help, Skip. proper help - the kind I'm not qualified to give. There's specialists trained to help you sort this out.

**SKIP** A shrink?

**NORMA** Not necessarily. But someone -

**SKIP** You think I'm nuts!

**NORMA** I didn't say that! Therapy, or counselling - they run a special service for Vietnam veterans.

**SKIP** No way! You're not going to tar me with the same brush as all those so-called troubled bloody veterans who try to claim that every... sneeze or fart's a symptom of post-trauma stress disorder. There's nothing wrong with me that I can't handle on my own... with your support.

**NORMA** But I don't know how to support you. And at what cost? Not just to me, but Donny. Skip. It isn't fair to him. Any more of what you did tonight, and he'll turn against you. Maybe for good. Get help!

**SKIP** I'll deal with it myself, I said! With or without support from you and Donny. I will not go and see a fucking shrink!

**NORMA** Then what about Father Monahan? I'm sure -

**SKIP** A priest? A priest?! They're worse than bloody shrinks - absolving everything but solving nothing! That mumbo-jumbo might comfort a woman, but there are some sins... men commit, that should never be forgiven or forgotten

**NORMA** Skip. that's very arrogant.

**SKIP** Oh shut up!

**NORMA** To put yourself above God's absolution and forgiveness...

**SKIP** Shut up!!

**NORMA** A priest does more than that - they're counsellors. They listen, give advice.

**SKIP** I said. shut up!

*He strikes her hard in the face. She falls.*

**NORMA** Aaagh!

**SKIP** Do you hear me now? I need to face this myself alone! It's between me and Donny. Me, Donny and the woman. No-one else. A free-fire zone. the man said. Understand? Anyone trying to interfere gets wasted!

*NORMA bursts out weeping and exits. clutching her face. The green light is back in full. The sound of NORMA's retreating sobs is echoed*
from upstage, where the puppet WOMAN appears still trying to escape DONNY SMITH.

DONNY Keep fucking still. Bugger it!

He lunges at her, grabs her from behind and turns her round.

Got you. you bitch!

He pushes her down on the edge of the pool. SKIP goes towards them.

WOMAN No please. I am a married woman.

SKIP Donny...

DONNY To the WOMAN I said keep still!

He slaps her hard across the face. She screams, but only struggles harder.

SKIP Jesus mate!

DONNY To SKIP Don't just bloody stand there! Give us a hand!

SKIP Eh?

DONNY Help me, will you? Hold her for me. Keep the yellow bitch still.

SKIP But

DONNY Come on, for Chrissakes! The sooner you help, the sooner I'll be finished and you'll get your turn.

SKIP My turn?

DONNY You do want a bloody turn, don't you?

SKIP hesitates then moves towards them Blackout. In the darkness, the WOMAN screams.
Appendix 7
Scene Samples:
Second Draft of Script

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

A suburban backyard - the Orman family home A small pool with a
deck, a table and some chairs. Early evening. DONNY's skimming
leaves from the pool. SKIP tinkers with a portable electric fan.

SKIP It helps if you move. The leaves won't come to you.
DONNY Eh? What?
SKIP You've skimmed that patch of water so many times, no leaf will ever
dare fall there again. What about the rest?

DONNY moves along the deck, NORMA enters with a pot of coffee.
SKIP Wouldn't mind it all done by Christmas. Think you can manage?
DONNY? To NORMA Apparently not
NORMA Coffee's up, Donny
DONNY Righto. Mum
NORMA He's been like this for days
SKIP A daze - exactly. If this is what one good uni result does to him, I
think I preferred it when he just scraped through.
NORMA Skip, go easy, please
SKIP's hand slips and barks a knuckle. DONNY comes for his coffee.
NORMA

SKIP Damn!
NORMA You all right?
SKIP Yeah. Bloody thing. Circuitry's all crammed up close. Not designed for
mending
DONNY Throw away society!
NORMA Fifteen years, we've had it
SKIP Hmph!
DONNY You won't need it tonight.
You heard the forecast?

Let me take it to work tomorrow. See if one of the technicians can fix it.

If I can’t. neither can a bloody telephone repairman.

But they’re used to fiddly wiring.

No, Mum. He’s right. How could he face himself if he can’t fix a loose connection in the switchbox of a fan? The shame!

What? Shit! Agh! Jesus, Donny, d’you have to natter while I’m working?

Sorry! Can I breath?

Eh?

DONNY and NORMA drink their coffee. SKIP continues to struggle

Bugger!

Look Skip. this is crazy. working yourself into a state to satisfy some cock-eyed engineer’s sense of pride. Let’s get a new one.

Can’t do that. can we Donny? Think of the environment!

Better to fix it.

Don’t want to single-handedly responsible for the end of civilisation. do we?

Pause DONNY puts down his coffee and goes back to skimming

Look. Skip. this is crazy, working yourself into a state to satisfy some cock-eyed engineer’s sense of pride. Let’s get a new one.

Can’t do that, can we Donny? Think of the environment!

Better to fix it.

Don’t want to single-handedly responsible for the end of civilisation, do we?

Pause DONNY puts down his coffee and goes back to skimming

Give him a break. Your sarcasm just gets his back up.

Mine! What about his? That crack about facing myself?

You’ve had more practice.

’Cause it’s useful. Putting upstart managers in their place. Or right-wing branch secretaries.

Then save it for tonight! Donny’s not the Labor Party, or part of the firm.

Well he bugs me. If he’s not being sarky, it’s like I don’t exist.

I’ll talk to him. More coffee?

No thanks. Shit, is that the time? I better skedaddle, or they’ll start the bloody meeting without me and my sarcasm.

And all your practise on Donny wasted!

Who’s being sarky now?
NORMA Must be catching. Go on, get going.

SKIP Don't wait up. And leave the fan. OK. I'll fix it tomorrow. Calling. See you later, Donny. To NORMA. See? To DONNY. Ground control to Donny Ordman.

DONNY Eh? What?

SKIP See you in the morning.

DONNY Yeah. OK.

SKIP To NORMA, referring to DONNY. Hope you can get through. Good luck. He exits. Pause.

NORMA Donny?

DONNY Mm?

NORMA Come finish your coffee.

DONNY No thanks.

NORMA That's not an offer, it's an order! Come on, while it's still hot. I want to talk to you and a hit of caffeine might be just the thing to jolt you out of dreamland.

DONNY That bad, am I?

NORMA It's OK. You've earned the right to be a bit dreamy - all those long hours you've been working. Though I must admit it's worried me.

DONNY What?

NORMA All that study. You never seem to have any time for fun. Not right. A young man of your age - you should be going surfing with your mates and taking girls out and stuff. You used to, all the time.

DONNY And you used to hound me for not studying enough.

NORMA I know, but still. It's a matter of... balance. Something unhealthy about it. A strapping lad like you, no time for girls.

DONNY Who says I don't?

NORMA Does that mean you do?

DONNY I might.

NORMA Yeah? No wonder you've been so dreamy. Do I know her?

DONNY No you don't. I've talked about her on and off, but remember I told you I'd been studying with one of my fellow students?

NORMA The one that helped you get that result? Is she the one?
DONNY: Yep.

NORMA: She must be all right then. I like her already. What was her name again? Something old-fashioned, wasn't it? Mabel? Maisie? Hang on, don't tell me... May. Like May Gibbs?

DONNY: Not quite. Her name is Mai. Em-may-ay eye. Pronounced Mai.

NORMA: Unusual. Foreign, is it?

DONNY: Vietnamese.

NORMA: Ah.

DONNY: Her full name's Nguyen Tri Mai. They put the surname first.

NORMA: And here's me thinking it was poor pronunciation. Are you sure?

DONNY: What of?

NORMA: She's... she's one of them?

DONNY: It's not the sort of thing you easily mistake.

NORMA: I mean does she look... Asian.

DONNY: She's short, with straight jet black hair and almond eyes.

NORMA: Pretty. I suppose.

DONNY: Well I think so. But more than that, she's, well, she's really nice. You'll think so, too, when you meet her.

NORMA: Will I?

DONNY: 'Course you will. It's Dad I'm worried about.

NORMA: What makes you think I'll like her? Are my likes and dislikes as predictable as that?

DONNY: Well, no, not really, but you know what I mean.

NORMA: No. Tell me.

DONNY: You're so straight and easy-going. You take people as you find them. I sort of assumed it wouldn't bother you. Sorry. Does it?

NORMA: I... I'm sure she's a very pleasant girl. But Donny, you know there's always problems with mixed relationships.

DONNY: Such as?

NORMA: Well, prejudice, to start with. On both sides. And problems of identity for children of mixed race.

DONNY: Mum, listen to yourself! Mai and I haven't been out together yet. and
you're already thinking wedding bells and babies!

NORMA Sorry. But there's all sorts of problems even if you go steady.

DONNY Like?

NORMA Well, cultural differences - they're bound to lead to misunderstandings. All sorts of obstacles: like language, background, family expectations, religion -

DONNY No worries there - I'm pretty sure she's Catholic.

NORMA Pretty sure?

DONNY She wears a cross on a chain round her neck.

NORMA That's something, I s'pose.

DONNY Mum, I know there's likely to be problems. Do you think I haven't thought about it? But we can overcome them if we're determined.

NORMA Are you?

DONNY Reckon I am.

NORMA How does Mai feel?

DONNY Well, that's another problem.

NORMA You mean you might've put me through all this for nothing?

DONNY I thought she seemed quite keen on me till I asked her for a date. She acted really weird. Like she was scared or something.

NORMA Maybe that's to her credit.

DONNY How come?

NORMA Maybe she's aware of the pitfalls.

DONNY Yeah, well I'm not giving up because of one small setback.

NORMA Live to fight another day. huh?

DONNY You bet.

NORMA Sounds like you're gone a million. Be careful, Donny. Please.

DONNY No worries, Mum.

NORMA I'm always here. You know that.

DONNY And Dad?

NORMA Why should he feel any different than me?

DONNY You know.
NORMA Yes. I suppose so.

DONNY So what should I do?

NORMA Maybe I should broach it with him first

DONNY I hoped you'd say that.

Blackout.

ACT ONE SCENE SEVEN

The back yard at the Ordmans'. Night. MAI and PHUONG sit with DONNY, SKIP and NORMA round the patio table, eating the barbecue meal. There are several empty beer cans in front of SKIP. A long pause, punctuated only by the sounds of eating.

NORMA Well, there! That's better. To MAI. We don't always eat this late. Your Mum's to blame - she's such a fund of stories!

PHUONG Your story. I also like.

SKIP You like a story? Here's another - a Cinderella story, about a bloke who throws a barbecue for his son's friend and her mother, then gets left, all on his Pat Malone, to wield his magic with the fork and tongs while his son and wife and guests hang around inside in the kitchen telling stories!

NORMA Skip. I'm sorry. The time just... got away.

SKIP Tell me about it.

NORMA We're all together now.

SKIP Whoopee.

NORMA More salad, Mrs Nguyen?

PHUONG Please, no.

SKIP That mean yes or no d'you reckon, Donny?

DONNY It obviously means no.

NORMA To MAI. What about you? More salad?

MAI No thank you.

SKIP More meat then? Plenty there. Another juicy steak?

MAI I've had enough, thanks.

SKIP But you've hardly eaten! The best scotch fillet, too. Pity to waste it. Not overcooked, is it?
No, it's nice, but -

Bloody miracle, considering the time I had to cook it. So what's up? You're on a fast, is that it? To DONNY: Didn't tell me your friends were Buddhists.

Skip - that's enough.

Catholic, we are.

I told you that.

So are we.

Speak for yourself. She's Catholic. Me - I'm lapsed. But it's not Friday night, so what's your beef with beef? Ha! Get it?

Give it a rest, Dad.

Shut up

*He goes to the barbecue and helps himself to more steak.*

Whispered, to NORMA: For pity's sake, do something, Mum!

Yes all right!


Dad!

Just trying to make our guests feel comfortable. Well?

No thanks

Me neither.

*PHUONG declines with a smile.*

Thought so.

*He heads for the house.*

You don't mind if I indulge?

Skip, please...

But he's gone.

I'm sorry about this. It's not normal - specially this drinking, is it. Donny? I don't know what's got into him. I'm sorry.

It's OK, Mrs Ordman.

No it's not!


Appendix 7. Scene Samples - Second Draft of Script

SKIP Off. Norma?!

NORMA Coming!

SKIP Still off. Where's the cold beer gone?

NORMA Excuse me, please. Exiting. I think you've drunk it all.

DONNY You don't have to put up with this. He's getting worse. Why don't you just leave?

MAI That would be rude.

DONNY What's he being? Polite?

PHUONG Something upset. I think, your father. Is us? We offend?

DONNY No! It's not you. It's me he's after, as usual. He wants to come between me and Mai.

PHUONG Maybe he right.

DONNY To Mai. If we call the evening quits right now, we still might salvage some hope.

NORMA returns with a bowl. SKIP follows, carrying a tumbler full of scotch, and the bottle.

NORMA Sorry about that. Now, how about dessert? There's fresh fruit salad.

SKIP Yeah. go right ahead. Don't mind me - I can eat my steak alone.

MAI I think -

SKIP Thank goodness no-one wanted beer. We're out of cold ones. Can you imagine it? But good old Johnnie Walker to the rescue! Anyone care to join me? No, of course not. We eat and drink and live and die alone.

DONNY What's that supposed to mean?

NORMA To Donny. Don't take the bait.

DONNY To Mai. sotto voce. I warned you, didn't I? Go now.

SKIP Speak up, boy. You're being rude to Mrs Thong here.

MAI I'm sorry, Mrs Ordman, but I think we'll pass on the desert, if you don't mind. We'd best be going home.

NORMA Oh, really?

SKIP Why? The night's still young! I haven't got to know you yet - wasn't asked to join the kitchen minstrel show. Stay and enjoy yourselves!

MAI No, please. we're tired. It's been a long week, what with my exams, and now this heat. An early night -
SKIP  The heat, bother a Nigel?
NORMA  Skip!
PHUONG  Who is Nigel, please?
SKIP  It's always hot in old Nogeria, isn't it? So hot, it's hard to breath, sometimes. Bit like this tonight. But who am I to argue? If you're hot, salvation's at hand - the swimming pool! You did bring your bathers.
MAI  We didn't know...
DONNY  I didn't even tell them we have a pool.
SKIP  You wouldn't! Still, no worries. Norma can lend you some.
NORMA  They wouldn't fit.
SKIP  Then come in in your undies. In the buff, if you like - won't bother me.
MAI  No thanks. But don't let us stop you, please. We're going anyway.
SKIP  You disappoint me. Isn't our little pool good enough?
MAI  It's not...
SKIP  At least you're honest. Unlike my son who claims to like this pool - and so he should - he learned to swim in it - but really he prefers the council pool even the beach.
DONNY  Dad -
SKIP  He'll run a mile before he'll swim in here - won't even clean the thing unless you hound him - belly-aches he can't swim laps in it. Too small! Well it's still big enough for Skip Ordman!

SKIP climbs onto the deck and begins taking off his clothes.

NORMA  To MAI and PHUONG. You're right. It's better that you go. I'm sorry it's turned out like this. I wanted so much for us to like each other.

SKIP  Sure you won't change your mind? Can't be tempted?
PHUONG  To DONNY. Please, you call a taxi.
DONNY  No. I'll run you home. To NORMA. Where are your keys?
NORMA  In my purse, inside.

DONNY exits to get the keys. SKIP's still struggling out of his clothes.

SKIP  I know it's not the back beach at Vung Tau, but it's cool. Hygenic, too. long as Donny's been doing his job.

NORMA  We must arrange another get-together. I'd love to hear more of your stories.
DONNY  Returning. Let's go

PHUONG Good-bye.

MAI I'm glad we met you, Mrs Ordmann.

They exit. NORMA sees them out.

SKIP 'Course, as I remember it, the best place in the Nam to have a swim
was a new bomb crater, just after a storm - just the right depth, and
full of fresh, cool rain. No leeches, either.

SKIP is now down to his shorts. He eases himself into the pool.

Jeez, it was good. Norma! Norma! Where's that bloody -

NORMA  Returning. What?!

SKIP Pass us the grog.

NORMA Oh sure! Why not? Total yourself and see how much more damage
you can do!

SKIP Just give it to me will you? Or do I have to get it?

He starts to get out of the pool.

NORMA Please Skip. You've had enough. No more -

SKIP Get stuffed!

NORMA Yes that's right! Get aggro! Take it out on me! Not enough to turn
your son against you by behaving like a pig towards his guests?

SKIP grabs the bottle.

SKIP A pig?!

NORMA All those insults!

SKIP You stand there - you - accusing me of insults? What d'you call
leaving a bloke out here to grapple with the barbie, while you get off
on bloody fairy tales in the kitchen?

NORMA Don't give me that. You could've come and joined us.

SKIP And let the bloody meat burn? Oh, yeah, you'd've liked that! I've
organised enough boycotts in my time to know one when I see one.

NORMA Hoh! The paranoia!

SKIP Yeah? Then explain how come these guests, when finally you all did
consent to join me, ate bugger all of what I'd cooked for them?

NORMA Small appetites, the heat, God. I don't know... We had some nibbles in
the kitchen.
Nice try, Norma, but it doesn't wash. The old cold shoulder, pure and simple. I know these noggie sheilas. Seen them close-up. Close enough to see behind the smiles, and all the bowing, scraping, and false politeness. I've seen the layers peeled back - I've know what's left, naked contempt and hate. They loathe us whites!

*The green light slowly returns around SKIP.*

I saw it in her eyes - that piece of Donny's - the malice... spite... the animosity - makes my blood run cold to think of it.

**NORMA** How can you say that?

**SKIP** That's what Donny said - I tried to warn him, but he wouldn't listen.

**NORMA** Donny? When did you speak to him?

**SKIP** Today, of course! When he first saw the woman near Ap Bac.

**NORMA** *Sotto voce* Oh, no! Dear God, not again, Skip -

**SKIP** I tried to stop him, Sarge. He was my mate. But we'd been nine days forward of the wire, with contacts and fire-fights every day. No sleep. Living on cold C-rats. Then Roy-the-boy fell in a trap, got skewered on punji stakes right through his guts. Poor bastard - he screamed non-stop till the dust-off chopper came. That screaming must've really got to Donny, cause something kind of... stretched in him. He changed. His eyes - maybe that was where I saw it first - in his eyes. Maybe it was only mirrored in the woman's

*Pause*

**NORMA** You going to tell me what happened?

**SKIP** She must've come out after we'd all passed - all except Donny. He was tail-end charlie. He signalled us to stop, but the other blokes mustn't've seen - the J was getting thick just at that point. They must've kept going...

*During this speech, the green light has extended around the pool. A (puppet) peasant woman enters, transplanting rice. DONNY SMITH also enters behind SKIP, who doesn't move, but speaks all his lines from the same position. NORMA keeps quiet and listens.*

**DONNY S** Suspicious.

**SKIP** Just some old black-toothed mama-san working her patch. What's suspicious about that?

**DONNY S** Shouldn't be here. Should be in the hamlet with the others.

**SKIP** You know how much notice they take of that.

**DONNY S** Free-fire zone, mate. Orders. We assume she's VC.

*He raise his rifle to take aim at the woman.*
SKIP But what if she’s not? Can’t just shoot her in cold blood. We’re supposed to win their hearts and minds for Christ’s sake!

DONNY S All right. Let’s go check her out.

SKIP Leave her alone. Catch the others while we can.

DONNY S You catch them. I’m taking a closer look.

DONNY’S heads into the “jungle”.

SKIP But Donny! We’re supposed to stay with the section. Donny?

There’s no reply. He’s gone. The peasant women also disappear. The green light shrinks to just round SKIP.

Why did he do that? Why risk it - a short-timer? All he had left was thirteen and a wakey. But off he goes. and so do I. Sure it was wrong. but what else could I do? He saved my life. Sarge, on my first patrol, back when I was just eleven days in-country. He taught me all I know - I couldn’t leave him.

The green light again extends to the pool. The peasant woman again appears this time as a human-sized puppet. SKIP remains where he has been from the outset of this sequence. DONNY S approaches the WOMAN. She looks up.

DONNY S Well, well! Not an old black-toothed mama-san at all.

The WOMAN stops work, watching DONNY S warily.

A sister-san! Not bad looking. either.

WOMAN I don’t understand.

DONNY S See what I mean? Suspicious. Since when do young potato peelers work the paddies?

SKIP What we going to do?

DONNY S To the WOMAN. Where’s your ID? Papers? Shit. how do you say it in Nog?

SKIP Tay can cook.

DONNY S Good lad. To the WOMAN. Tay can cook.

WOMAN The can cuoc? Shaking her head fearfully. I don’t have it with me. Pointing. I left it in the village. Ap Bac. Please. I’m only trying to feed my family.

DONNY S If you don’t hand them over, we got to search you. You know that, don’t you?

WOMAN Please. I don’t understand.
DONNY S Which, in your case, will almost be a pleasure!

*He lunges into the shallow water, pulling at her clothes. The WOMAN screams*

DONNY S Shut up!

SKIP Donny, what the hell? 

DONNY S What's it look like, mate? Fuck and forget! Don't even have to fork with this one!

SKIP No! You can't!

DONNY S Why the hell not? 

SKIP It... it isn't right. 

DONNY S Don't be a sook. Free-fire zone. No ID. She's fair game, mate. Asking for it.

*The WOMAN seizes the chance provided by his momentary distraction. She breaks free and scrambles away to disappear upstage*

Jesus Ordman! Don't just stand there - help me catch her. 

*He exits after her upstage. The green light again shrinks to just on SKIP*

SKIP God. Donny! Stop! Leave her alone! Please Donny...

*Pause*

The stupid bastard took no notice. 

He's on the verge of tears.

I should've stopped him. Sarge. I should've grabbed him, or knocked him out, or threatened him, or something. I could've done it. if I'd had the nous and then. maybe what happened wouldn't... and... and Donny... my mate Donny would be still... alive....

He breaks down weeping.

NORMA It's all right, Skip.

SKIP It's not all right! I failed him, Sarge!

NORMA Not Sarge. It's Norma, Skip. I'm here, OK?

*The green light fades*

SKIP Norma? Where's the Sarge. I was telling him....

*He looks around.*

Oh God!
Another one of those dreams, Skip.

Oh, Jesus Christ!

Pause

Why didn't you tell me?

Tell you what?

That you weren't comfortable about them coming?

I didn't know. Didn't realise what it was.

You must've had an inkling. Hitting the grog like that. Were you at it even before they got here?

I had a few while I was getting the barbie ready. Yes.

A few! Why didn't you come and talk to me?

I thought it'd make it easier. Could handle it myself.

Hmph!

I'm talking about it now. Aren't I?

Bit late for that now. The damage is done.

You want me to talk about it, or don't you?

You should talk to someone. But it's gone beyond my reach.

What do you mean? Jesus! Make up your mind!

You need help. Skip. Proper help - the kind I'm not qualified to give. There's specialists trained to help you sort this out.

A shrink?

Not necessarily.

You think I'm nuts!

I didn't say that! Therapy, or counselling - they run a special service for Vietnam veterans.

No way! You're not going to tar me with the same brush as all those so-called troubled bloody veterans who try to claim that every... sneeze or fart's a symptom of post-trauma stress disorder. There's nothing wrong with me that I can't handle on my own... with your support.

But I don't know how to support you. And at what cost? Not just to me, but Donny. Skip. It isn't fair to him. Any more of what you did tonight, and he'll turn against you. Maybe for good. Get help!
I'll deal with it myself, I said! With or without support from you and Donny, I will not go and see a fucking shrink!

Then what about Father Monahan? I'm sure...

A priest? A priest?! They're worse than bloody shrinks - absolving everything but solving nothing! That mumbo-jumbo might comfort a woman, but there are some sins... some crimes... men commit, that should never be forgiven or forgotten.

Skip, be careful

Oh, shut up!

To put yourself above God's absolution and forgiveness...

Shut up!!

A priest does more than that - they're counsellors. They listen, give advice

I said, shut up!

He strikes her hard in the face. She falls

Aaagh!

Do you hear me now? I need to face this thing myself, alone! It's between me and Donny. Me, Donny and the woman. No-one else. A free-fire zone, the man said. Understand? Anyone trying to interfere gets wasted!

NORMA bursts out weeping and exits still clutching her face. The green light is back in full. The sound of NORMA's retreating sobs is echoed from upstage, where the puppet WOMAN appears, still trying to escape.

Keep fucking still, bugger it!

He lunges at her, grabs her from behind and turns her round.

Got you, you bitch!

He pushes her down on the edge of the pool. SKIP goes towards them.

No, please. I am a married woman.

DONNY covers her struggling body with his, fumbling with his pants.

Donny...

To the WOMAN. I said keep still!

He slaps her hard across the face. She screams, but struggles harder.

Jesus, mate!
DONNY  To SKIP  Don't just bloody stand there! Give us a hand!

SKIP  Eh?

DONNY  Help me will you? Hold her for me. Keep the yellow bitch still.

SKIP  But

DONNY  Come on for Chrissakes! The sooner you help, the sooner I'll be finished and you'll get your turn.

SKIP  My turn?

DONNY  You do want a bloody turn, don't you?

SKIP  No!

DONNY  Bullshit! Now move it will you?

  SKIP hesitates then moves towards them. Blackout. In the darkness, the WOMAN screams.
Appendix 8  
Program and Publicity Material

Hearts and Minds  
By Peter Copeman

Peter Copeman - Playwright and Director

Peter Copeman's twelve years professional theatre experience include positions as Artistic Director of Iika Jika Theatre (Melbourne) and founding Director of the State Theatre Company of the Northern Territory. He has written scripts for both mainstage and community theatre. Recent commissions include MANDY'S COMING; OUT (NSW Arts Council) and ON WITH THE SHOW (NIDA Company, now being developed with the ANU). Already holding a NIDA Diploma in Directing and an MA (Dramatic Literature) from Canada, he is currently working towards a Doctor of Creative Arts degree at the University of Wollongong - HEARTS AND MINDS is his major DCA project. He is a member of the National Management Committee of the Australian Writers Guild, and founding chairperson of the Guild's NSW State Committee.

Michael Coe - Designer

Michael is resident Production Manager, actor and designer at Theatre South. He has a long association with the company, designing such shows as 'An Alley Filled With Cats', 'Rabbits', 'Shout Across The River', 'Wallflowering', 'Five Times Dizzy' and 'Daylight Savings'.

Paul Davison - Lighting Designer

Paul worked as an electrician before commencing his Bachelor of Creative Arts at Wollongong University which he completed in 1980. He has since taken up the position of Technical Officer at the School of Creative Arts and just become resident Lighting Designer at Theatre South. His lighting designs include 'Vinegar Tom', 'After Dinner', 'Wallflowering', 'Five Times Dizzy'. His other designs include lighting The Doug Anthony All Stars, Monika and the Silence and various rock bands as well as cabaret work.

THEATRE SOUTH

Artistic Director  
Faye Montgomery
Associate Director  
Michael Coe
Production Manager  
Scott Davis
Administration  
Lynne Gwynen
Stage Management  
Ruth McCrae
Graphic/Scenic Artist  
Sally Riley
Production  
Tim Moore
Wardrobe Co-Ordinator  
Ruth McCrae
Theatre Staff  
Enid Sherwin
Lunchbox Co-Ordinator  
Paul Davison

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Nick Concas (Chair), Prof Ken McKinnon, Ken Baumler, Helen Aylward, Enid Sherwin (secretary), Amanda Field, Ren Koo, Des Davis, Jan Keith, Michael Coe, Wanda Baker, John Scyzuk, Prof Michael Goffikin, Prof Barry Conyngham.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Theatre South would like to thank the following for their assistance:

ILLAWARRA ELECTRICITY  
ILLAWARRA CREDIT UNION  
THEATRE SOUTH ESPECIALLY THANKS U.F.I. POOLS FOR THEIR GENEROSITY IN THE LENDING OF THE SWIMMING POOL

COMING SOON TO THE BRIDGE

CONJUGAL RITES By Roger Hall JUNE 5TH TO 21ST
With Robert Coleby and Christine Amor

Genevieve and Barry have arrived at their 21st wedding anniversary. "We could be together for another 21 years!" he blurts in horror. "Married for 21 years", she says, "they should give us a break!"
To be Australian is to be part of a multicultural society. To be Australian is also, increasingly, to see oneself as part of Asia. Our colonial ties with Europe and America are diminishing, and being replaced by closer relations with our regional neighbours. Yet only a generation ago, we were involved in a long, dirty, confused war in our own region, The Vietnam War. A colonial war in which we sided with the colonisers - and lost. A war that divided us against ourselves. A war from which the casualties continue - many of our returned soldiers still disorientated and traumatised; Indochina still in political turmoil after decades of dislocation, deprivation, and even genocide. Millions have fled this chaos as refugees; some of them here have landed in our midst. Asian Australians - another factor in our complex multicultural equation.

HEARTS AND MINDS is an attempt to come to terms with this complexity, exploring cross-cultural relationships in contemporary Australia, in the context of the legacy of colonialism. This is reflected theatrically by mixing European actor-based forms with traditional Vietnamese puppetry.

There is an exciting array of Asian theatre forms and traditions with which Australian theatre audiences are barely familiar. There is also a rich source of potential dramatic stories inherent in the cross-cultural interactions of Australians with each other, and with our regional neighbours. Our stages should reflect our transnational outlook as a nation. I hope HEARTS AND MINDS will be one of many such projects.

Peter Copeman

Personal Acknowledgements

The School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong - especially Ron Perry, Tran yu Phuong Lai and the members of the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre in Hanoi, Neil Manton and Gillian Walker from the Cultural Relations Branch, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Graham Alliband and the staff of the Australian Embassy in Hanoi, Tran Tran and Nguyen Manh Hung, my guides and interpreters in Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, The Vietnam Veterans' Association, The Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service, especially Zozeo Barta, Tran Thi Trong, Do Hanh Thoong, and other members of the Vietnamese community in Marrickville.

The Play

To be Australian is to be part of a multicultural society. To be Australian is also, increasingly, to see oneself as part of Asia. Our colonial ties with Europe and America are diminishing, and being replaced by closer relations with our regional neighbours.

Yet only a generation ago, we were involved in a long, dirty, confused war in our own region, The Vietnam War. A colonial war in which we sided with the colonisers - and lost. A war that divided us against ourselves. A war from which the casualties continue - many of our returned soldiers still disorientated and traumatised; Indochina still in political turmoil after decades of dislocation, deprivation, and even genocide. Millions have fled this chaos as refugees; some of them here have landed in our midst. Asian Australians - another factor in our complex multicultural equation.

HEARTS AND MINDS is an attempt to come to terms with this complexity, exploring cross-cultural relationships in contemporary Australia, in the context of the legacy of colonialism. This is reflected theatrically by mixing European actor-based forms with traditional Vietnamese puppetry.

The 'lotus' water puppets are a thousand-year-old popular art form unique to Vietnam, derivative of its water-rice culture. Traditionally they are performed in the open air, using a pond as the stage, and depicting comic scenes from village life or moral tales from Vietnamese history and mythology.

There is an exciting array of Asian theatre forms and traditions with which Australian theatre audiences are barely familiar. There is also a rich source of potential dramatic stories inherent in the cross-cultural interactions of Australians with each other, and with our regional neighbours. Our stages should reflect our transnational outlook as a nation. I hope HEARTS AND MINDS will be one of many such projects.

Peter Copeman

Personal Acknowledgements

The School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong - especially Ron Perry, Tran yu Phuong Lai and the members of the Vietnamese National Puppet Theatre in Hanoi, Neil Manton and Gillian Walker from the Cultural Relations Branch, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Graham Alliband and the staff of the Australian Embassy in Hanoi, Tran Tran and Nguyen Manh Hung, my guides and interpreters in Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, The Vietnam Veterans' Association, The Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service, especially Zozeo Barta, Tran Thi Trong, Do Hanh Thoong, and other members of the Vietnamese community in Marrickville.

The Cast

(in order of appearance)

Nguyen Tri Mai  
Huong Le

Donny Ordman  
Paul Kelman

Skip Ordman  
Terry Brady

Norma Ordman  
Lainie Grugan

Nguyen Au Phuong  
Chin Yu

Donny Smith  
Paul Kelman

Puppeteers

Kathy Bleakley, Fernando Segura, Louise Manner, Samantha Johnston, Julieanne Sandison, Charlene Fein.

Note: The puppeteers also assisted with the decoration and finishing of the puppets.

Production

Peter Copeman  
Director

Michael Coe  
Designer

Ron Pretty & Des Davis  
Lighting Designer

Paul Davison  
Sound Designer

Vanessa Hutchins  
Stage Manager

Ruth McCrae  
Ass Stage Manager

Elizabeth Prange  
Translator

Viet Do  
Head of Construction

Michael Godbee  
Construction

Gavin Carboni  
1st Years (SCA)

JJ Hazelton  
2nd Years (SCA)

Tim Moore  
3rd Years (SCA)

Peter Copeman  
Puppet Construction

Kathy Bleakley, Edd Goodfellow, Jamie Halliday, Viveka Kangas, Berrie McMahon, Denise Thomas

Dick Taylor  
Tech advice/supervision (puppets)

Dale Woodward  
Consultant (puppets)

Lainie Grugan  
Chin Yu

Paul Kelman  
Huong Le
Peter puts multicultural issues onto 'main stage'

W RITER Peter Copeman is delving into the hearts and minds of multicultural Australians with his tough, debut mainstream play premiering at the Bridge Theatre.

Hearts and Minds is a gritty look at a cross-cultural relationship in which latent prejudices unexpectedly explode.

Designed neither as war propaganda nor a vehicle to preach, but as a way of dealing with the guilt most people feel about the fiasco that was the Vietnam War, Hearts and Minds is also, predominantly, a love story.

When 20-year-old Donny Ordman brings his Vietnamese girlfriend home to meet his family, his war veteran father is forced to reassess his values and personal views.

In multicultural Australia, the subject is both relevant and topical.

'Ve are a multicultural society but our stages reflect that as much as is the reality in society,' Peter said.

Multicultural plays are usually regarded as fringe theatre, not mainstream, but I want to bring it onto the main stage and make it mainstream.

'Everyone agrees this is the sort of play we should be able to see.

An unusual facet of Hearts and Minds is the use of Vietnamese water puppetry, a unique 1000-year-old traditional theatrical form whose secrets are closely guarded and only passed from father to son.

Peter was first introduced to the spectacle in 1988 at the Adelaide Festival and last year spent 10 days of his research trip to Vietnam learning some of the secrets from the National Puppet Company in Hanoi.

The rest of his trip was spent travelling through the country learning about the nation's culture and people, feeling the atmosphere and putting the geography in perspective.

To complete his research, Peter spoke to Vietnam veterans, counsellors and members of Sydney's Vietnamese community.

While the play, which is also his Creative Arts-Doctorate, took a relatively short period to write, the idea has been brewing for years.

'I grew up in a multicultural situation in Brisbane with Europeans of various kinds so I was always very interested in cross-cultural things and my background in theatre was the same,' he said.

'The idea for the play came from a number of things. I had my own baggage from the Vietnam War. My older brother was called up and there were fights in the family about whether he would go and fight or go underground.

'My family was torn apart by the issue so while I was a bit young to be a part of it, I do know about it.

'Then, when I was living in Darwin in the late 1980s, I was asked to run writing workshops on the theme of the Vietnam War, not like the play but the idea came through that.

'I didn't want to write purely about the war but about contemporary Australia in the context that the Vietnamese come here and we fight a war with them. I'm not preaching in this play, I'm not bandying any message over anyone's head but it is tough and it is dealing with big issues.

'We've got enormous baggage on both sides from the war and some of what we see is fairly common. Mostly this is a play of great hope.

Peter Copeman displays some of the Vietnamese water puppets used in his multicultural play, Hearts and Minds.
New play links two cultures

By TEENA FILIPPI

Theatre South has broken new ground with a blend of thousand-year-old Vietnamese tradition and contemporary set design for its latest production Hearts and Minds.

Written and directed by Sydney playwright Peter Copeman, the play unfolds around a swimming pool, a major logistical challenge to the creative talents of both Mr Copeman and set designer Michael Coe.

"Thankfully we've been able to rehearse on the completed set from the very beginning," Mr Copeman said.

"The pool is an integral part of the play, it is the set for much of the action and the tool by which I have linked the traditions of water puppetry from Vietnam with the lifestyle of suburban Australia to bring out the play's cultural themes."

Hearts and Minds tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who despite his horrific experiences during action, believes the war left him unscathed in a moral and emotional sense.

His security, and more importantly his racial attitudes, are tested when his son develops a relationship with a Vietnamese Australian, thrusting the family into conflict through each individual's differing cultural values.

Skip, the veteran played by Sydney actor Terry Brady, relives his war years as the relationship between son Donny, played by Paul Kelman and Mai, acted by Theatre South newcomer Hung Lee, develops.

The production also stars Chin Yu as Phuong, Ma's mother, and Lainie Grugan as Skip's wife, Norma.

"It tests people's levels of tolerance, their abilities to forgive and their potential to hope. Ideally it shows the value and enrichment that comes with multiculturalism in our society."

Mr Copeman, currently studying for his Doctorate in Creative Arts at Wollongong University, is a graduate of the NIDA director's course and the founding director of the Northern Territory State Theatre Company.

He was a writer for the television series Prisoner and a director of the Jika Jika Theatre in Melbourne.

Hearts and Minds opens on May 8 and runs until May 24. Performances are 8.15 pm on May 8, 9, then Wednesday to Saturday, May 13 to 16 and Wednesday to Sunday May 20 to 24 at 8.15 pm with weekend matinees at 4.30 pm.

Bookings at the theatre.

THE ADVERTISER, Wednesday, May 6, 1992 —
Huong juggles clash of cultures in a role close to home

New play focuses on migration

By PAUL POWER

For 17-year-old Huong Le, many of the issues explored in Theatre South’s latest production, Hearts and Minds, are close to home.

The young star of Peter Copeman’s play at the Bridge Theatre, Coniston, is in the middle of her own clash of Australian and Asian cultures.

Since arriving from Vietnam with her refugee family 15 years ago, she — like so many young migrants — has juggled the demands of life in an Australian schoolyard with the cultural and family life of her Vietnamese migrant community.

Probably the greatest pressure, Huong believes, is the pressure within migrant families to succeed.

“They expect a lot more of their kids because they’ve actually picked themselves up and left their country for something better,” Huong says.

“They want their kids to achieve more in life, to achieve what they didn’t.”

While Huong’s only memories of Vietnam are from a trip with her family in 1990, her parents are unlikely to forget their home country and the war which divided it for 20 years. Huong’s father served with the South Vietnamese Army and spent a year as a prisoner of communist North Vietnam.

While playwright Peter Copeman hopes the play promises some thought about cross-cultural relationships, the ramifications of the Vietnam War and Australia’s relationship with Asia, he hopes audiences will see it primarily as “a ripping good yarn”.

“It points tentatively towards hopeful tolerance of each other within a multicultural mix, without being in any way preachy,” Peter says.

“It is basically a story about two families who have their own particular types of cultural baggage and who are brought together by circumstances, the circumstances being a romantic interest.”

The modern comedy about a married couple celebrating their 21st wedding anniversary then having the kids will star well-known actors Robert Calby and Christine Amor.

Its season at Theatre South goes until June 21, when it will tour to Sydney and Canberra.
Schoolgirl actress is a natural

Huong Le finds acting easy. The Vietnamese beauty made her stage debut in Hearts And Minds at Theatre South only last week but has already received offers of film and television work.

Huong was screen tested for a role in Channel 10’s popular soap E Street last Friday as well as a Korean movie for SBS Television.

She said her biggest concern was trying to juggle performances with her HSC studies.

The 17-year-old Oak Flats High School student entered the theatre scene quite by accident, and she admits it is a far cry from the poverty she escaped with her family when they fled Vietnam 15 years ago.

“Playing this role is one way of helping more Australians realise that even though refugees come from vastly different cultures where poverty is everywhere, it is not surprising that many find it hard to adjust to life in Australia. Hearts And Minds, written by Sydney playwright Peter Copeman, focuses on the developing relationship between Huong’s character Nguyen Trong Mai (a Vietnamese refugee) and Australian Donny Ordman, played by Flying Doctors star Paul Kelman.

“Nguyen is very conservative and when she feels her relationship with Donny developing, she backs off for fear their parents won’t approve,” Huong explained.

“She really wants to do the right thing and is super-conscious of the race issue. Donny’s father is a Vietnam War veteran and there are a lot of problems.

“Huong won the part of Nguyen after hearing of the audition through the Ethnic Society.

“I’ve never done any acting but it feels natural and I love it,” she said.

“The other cast members are all professionals and they’ve helped me a great deal.” Eventually Huong said she would like to win roles beyond racially-oriented plays.

“Where I was born, people really lived in crowded grass huts.”

“Of course people are naturally going to cast me in Asian roles, but ultimately I would love to do character roles where race is not an issue,” she said.

“Everything has happened so quickly, though. I think I’ll just deal with this play first before making any big plans — acting is such an unstable profession!”

Huong has already pledged her allegiance to live theatre. Despite the television offers she feels the stage is where she will be happiest.

“I love the stage where you can feel the audience and see their reaction immediately.”

Huong Le, who fled Vietnam 15 years ago, is now playing a refugee on stage.
Shelly Moore and Mark Peterson of Oak Flats at the opening night of Hearts and Minds at Theatre South.

LEFT:
Hearts and Minds stars Paul Kelman, Lainie Grugan and Terry Brady on opening night.
Appendix 9
Letters of Appraisal from Carrillo Gantner and May-Brit Akerholt

26 August 1992

Mr. Peter Copeman,
4 Nicholson Street,
TEMPE. N.S.W. 2044.

Dear Peter,

HEARTS AND MINDS

I was sitting on one copy of your script which I had acknowledged in early June, and the other day I was given a second copy. My mind is blank, however, as to who gave me the second one. In any case I've read it and am returning one copy to you.

I admire very much what you've done. The blending of Asian with European theatre forms and the cross-cultural issues at the heart of the play are a significant development for our theatre, and I congratulate you for this. There are many things I like about the script. One is the framing of the Australian story by the Vietnamese story-telling puppet Chu Teu. The opening story of the Turtle Sword is a very good introduction to the story. I like very much the struggle that Mai has to come to terms with the upfront nature of Australian relationships and society compared with the more subtle Vietnamese ways. The story from Phuong at the end of the play is very moving. I think the use of puppets with actors is potentially very theatrical and exciting. We did the same with the production of CHO CHO SAN here some years ago. Overall your intentions are most admirable.

I've very sorry I didn't see the original production at Theatre South. On a straight reading of the play, I must say that I found the actual progression of the story a bit predictable and stilted. It seems to me that there are too many words, that the playing out of the story is too literal. To use the water metaphor, we see all the ripples on the surface, but I don't feel the power of the undercurrents. Somehow I'd like more surprise, more metaphor, more left to the imagination of the audience. If I'd seen the production, perhaps I would not be so concerned about this.
Had I seen the show, I would have also been clearer about the solution to the technical difficulties posed by the swimming pool/duck pond. The staging requirements are in fact quite complex as written, but obviously the success of the production indicates that all these problems can be resolved satisfactorily.

Our 1993 season is already settled. Indeed it has been for a couple of months, and we're well on the way to the brochure now. HEARTS AND MINDS obviously is not in that season, but I really appreciate the opportunity to have read it, and, despite the criticisms I've made, I admire your achievement. I hope you will continue to write in the territory of Asian/Australian issues. It's very fertile ground, as our recent production of SEX DIARY OF AN INFIDEL by Michael Gurr indicates. We'd certainly be interested to read further work by you.

I'm returning one copy of the script to you now. If you don't mind I would like to keep the other script in my own library. As I say, it's part of an important change of focus in our playwriting, and I would like to keep this one in my collection of Australian plays on Asian related themes. If this is not acceptable please let me know, and I will of course return the other copy to you.

Sincerely,

CARRILLO GANTNER,
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR.

Dictated by Carrillo and signed in his absence interstate.
Nellie Flannery
Robyn Gardiner Management
397 Riley Street,
SURRY HILLS NSW 2010

October 1st, 1992

Dear Nellie,

Thank you for sending me Peter Copeman’s play *Hearts and Minds*. I am sorry that the Sydney Theatre Company can’t offer him a production of it. Hereby, I’m returning both drafts of the play to you.

*Hearts and Minds* is a good play with a strong story reflecting important issues in today’s society. Although I have some reservations about the puppets that frame the play’s main action, they do give the piece an authentic colour, becoming an interesting contrast to the surreal war-scenes and the reality of the present.

*Hearts and Minds* is an accessible play, but I think, perhaps, that this may also be its weakness. At times I felt that it lacks resonance, it is all on the surface, and tends to simplify what is a rather complex argument. It does not leave room for surprises. However, while I think the play lacks a certain sophistication, it makes up for it to a degree in heartfelt compassion and warm and genuine characters.

I wish Peter Copeman luck with the play’s future!

Kind regards,

May-Britt Akerholt
Dramaturg

PS Congratulations to Peter on his Literature Board Grant!

Encl.