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PROMPT**

# MISS TANAKA

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JOHN ROMERIL

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# Miss Tanaka

*by John Romeril*

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## ***Gambling in Broome***

As a frontier town full of trading, thieving, racial mixes, booms and busts, Broome has a rich store of legends that make for colourful histories of the place.

In the heyday of the pearling industry, gambling was a well-established pastime for both crew and townspeople. Although it was strictly illegal, ways were developed to “appease” the local police and to limit the number of raids. The gambling houses were simple tin sheds containing wooden benches and tables covered in cloth. They were always full and provided meeting places for the local Asian population and the Aboriginal people who, by law, were not supposed to meet. Raids often occurred when the local police or Native Welfare Officers knew that Aboriginal people were in the gambling houses.

Mahjong, ba gao (more commonly known as “sticks”) and the local lottery called cheefah were the most popular games. There are several references to gambling in the play. Kazimoko refers to his opera glasses being one of the few possessions given to him by his mother the rest having been gambled away by his father. Indeed old Mr. Tanaka gambles away three years of his son’s labour to the two pearlers Hanif and Sukimoto.



## BROOME IN THE 1930'S

### *Broome and "The White Australia Policy"*

In 1901 the new Australian Parliament introduced the Federal Immigration Restriction Act, an Act which remained in force until 1958. It was designed to control and limit both Asian and non-white immigration and it did so by requiring immigration applicants to pass a written dictation test (called a CEDT) which could be given in any European language.

The White Australia Policy evolved through fear that Australian would be overrun by Asians and it evolved and sustained itself through both Liberal and Labour governments until the 1970's. It was believed that Asians (particularly Chinese) would prosper unfairly in industry in Australian because they had access to foreign capital, they worked hard and were able to live in poor conditions. White Australians also feared foreign ideas and culture that would contradict white or British concepts of God, queen and country.

However, the pearlers in the north west of Australian applied to be exempt from the CEDT for both their divers and crews because:

- ◆ no one else had the skills
- ◆ no one else wanted to do this particular type of work
- ◆ Asians could be hired cheaply

As a result, Asians were allowed to enter Broome as contracted labourers at a time when Asian immigration was on the decline. However, they were not free citizens. Asians (among others) were referred to as "aliens" and were only allowed into Australian for 2 – 3 years under special contracts. At the end of their contracts they were forced to return to their homes and reapply. Ironically, they were rarely refused as their skills and the cheapness of their labour was in great demand by the master pearlers. Many Asian and Islander workers respected their new "home" and often adopted Australian customs – supported football, talked politics, cooked Western meals and wore Western dress. By the 1930's Broome was "home" to many cultures – Japanese, Chinese, Malays, Phillipinos, Torres Strait Islanders, and Timorese – who lived, worked and did business with each other and the Australian and British pearling masters.

However, the "Aliens Act" made marriage to these men problematic. Australian-born Asians or European women who married Asians born overseas were immediately classed as aliens and subjected to the same laws. Asian men were also forbidden to marry Aboriginal women. As a result, many couples were unable to legitimise their partnerships and the births of their children.

The Whitlam Government finally abolished the White Australia Policy in 1973 under a policy that forbade all racist criteria in immigration legislation. Many Asian and Islander workers who had lived in Broome for 50 to 60 years were finally classed as equals.

## ***Broome and the History of Pearling***

Pearling began in Western Australia in the 1850's at Shark Bay where natural pearls were found in local oysters. During the 1880's larger "maxima" pearls and mother-of-pearl were discovered and this spawned the development of a massive pearling industry.

By 1910, nearly 400 pearling luggers (ships) and 3,500 people were fishing for shell in the waters around Broome. Broome became the biggest pearling centre in the world supplying the majority of worlds' buttons and other fashion items. The Master Pearlers, mainly white Australians and British, controlled the industry through private companies (note that the character of Mott is a third generation master pearler).

The divers were mostly Japanese from a province called "Taiji" (from where old Mr. Tanaka comes). Their diving ritual would often begin by downing a bottle of alcohol before donning their cumbersome vulcanised canvas suits (treated with sulphur at a very high temperature to strengthen it) and massive bronze helmets, after which they would be lowered over the lugger's side to spend hours underwater gathering shells.

On the bottom they struggled about in lead-weighted boots, peering through thick faceplates into murky water frantically scooping up shell because they were paid for the amount of shell they collected.

By the 1930's most pearling luggers were motorised which allowed for mechanical air pumps (as opposed to manual) to pump down the vital oxygen to divers. However, the death toll in the early years of the pearling industry was horrific, mostly from the "bends", cyclones and sharks. References are made to this in the play particularly in relation to the death of Mr. Tanaka's wife from shark attack, and the mention of a "cock-eyed Bob", a type of cyclone.

The bends, otherwise known as "decompression sickness", refers to a condition arising from the sudden lowering of air pressure and the formation of bubbles in the blood. The result is an increase of nitrogen in the bloodstream. References are made to this in the play, especially in relation to old Mr. Tanaka being "a cripple". As well, by being constantly exposed to the various hazards of pearl diving, many divers aged before their time.

Cyclones too were a major hazard. Imagine the diver on the bottom of the ocean when his ship was smashed by one of the four cyclones to hit the pearling fleets at sea between 1908 and 1935. It is known that more than 100 boats and nearly 300 men perished during this time and their deaths are commemorated at the Japanese cemetery in Broome.

## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN ROMERIL, PLAYWRIGHT

### ***What was your initial inspiration for writing Miss Tanaka?***

Well my inspiration stems from my long-term interest in the region. In 1972, for example, I was returning from Europe overland, and for the first time in my life I really encountered some of those great Asian cities in India and Pakistan. I stopped off in Thailand and Singapore as well and then had to stowaway to get back to Perth because someone had stolen my tickets in Calcutta. But for the first time I really understood how close the Asian region was to Australia and also got an inkling of what great civilisations existed there. So from that point on Asia has been an ongoing concern of mine and *Miss Tanaka* is an instance of following that through as a focus for my playwriting. There are many forms of theatre in the region, that I find incredibly interesting and of great relevance to me.

More specifically the reasons for this play happening were principally to do with being in Japan in 1993, at a conference of the Australian New Zealand Studies Association of Japan who look at Japanese Sociology, Japanese studies of our literature, and Asian Pacific Anthropology. I met a man there who'd just turned up a bit like me to check it out because he had a particular project that he was working on. He was trying to gather and translate English materials concerning the Japanese role in the Pearl Diving Industry in Australia. He was doing so for a group of Wakayama families. Wakayama is prefecture (region) in Japan that is quite economically poor. The ground there is not really good farming territory so they've always had whaling and fishing and, to a certain extent, pearling themselves, as mainstays of their economy. But in the big depressions that Japan went through, first in 1890 and later in the 1920s and 1930's, a lot of labour went off shore. The fact that there are so many Japanese spread throughout the Pacific now is due entirely to those really big depressions. There are Japanese in Peru, in Bolivia, in America, and of course in Australia, not to mention Hawaii and the Philippines. So that those two large diasporas of Japanese people occurred during those two depressed economic periods.

The man I met at the conference just happened onto some Xavier Herbert stories that dealt with Japanese characters in Australia, in Darwin particularly. He was trying to translate those in order to make a book for the family, so that they may get some idea of what their ancestors had gone through whilst working here. I thought to myself "Oh yeah, that's very interesting. Here I am in Japan talking to someone about stories I haven't read!" so when I returned to Australia, I read the Xavier Herbert stories and one of them was *Miss Tanaka*, and I thought it was an ideal vehicle for theatrical adaptation.

### ***So you had both personal and professional interest in the story?***

Yes, both. If I hadn't caught the "germs" whilst in Osaka, I probably would still be ignorant of the story but of course it fits in with my general on-going concern with the region. There's a whole lot of other issues in the story too that are worth tracing. For instance it's impossible for anyone in Australia today, certainly in most of our major cities to not realise what kind of Asian-Australian connections there are.

Many members of the population now are of Asian origin but even when I was a kid I used to follow an old Chinese market gardener who had a horse and dray and he would traipse around Maldon selling his stuff. He was a sort of last link with the gold-mining Chinese, and he was the last Chinese market gardener in Maldon. The cemetery there has Chinese burial urns where you actually cook the ingredients for a funeral celebration. There are traces of it everywhere. I think it was in 1974 they pulled down the last of Chinatown in Bendigo and then in 1975, they decided to make it over and make much more of a tourist attraction of those links with China that occurred during the Gold Rush period!

So in those ways I think we're all aware or have some direct contact with Asia and its influence on Australia. I mean if you refer back, by 1900 Japan was our second major importer so that way, way back, a hundred years ago, it was a hugely important customer to us. There are always people out there, always Australians out there, you know in ex- oil exploration, in forestry, in architecture, in teaching, in journalism, making their own little journeys into Asia and having their own contact with. But Asian influence on aspects of Australian life that has never been considered mainstream until perhaps the 1990's. There is one particular experience of the first newspaper in a Western sense to be produced in Japan. As a result of this Australian going to live in Yokohama after having edited the Adelaide Advertiser, his son grew up in Japan and spoke Japanese really well and he became a Rakugo which is a Japanese storyteller. He was the first foreigner to ever enter the ranks of this role.

There is all sorts of evidence of the connections at all types of levels – business, artistic, social – and its territory that hasn't been thoroughly explored and I've rushed in there, fool that I am, but I just find it interesting.

***Do you feel that there is a sense of Australians not totally accepting the Asia-Australia links, that they are more of a fringe dwelling part of our society?***

I suppose it's an example of where in practical ongoing life, the nation or the culture is streets ahead of what it thinks or officially says about itself. Sure there is evidence of racism in Australia. I have a few aunts who are that way inclined, who still like to believe they're part of the British empire, but most of us have just got on with the job and live in a very practical world even though perhaps it's not the officially stated case.

***When you discovered Xavier Herbert's stories, you appear to have found those quite personally and professionally very interesting and satisfying. Can you comment on the difference between Xavier Herbert's original story or Miss Tanaka and the play itself?***

Well it's about a 7 to 8 page story and we've developed it into an 80 minute play. There are a lot of fairly obvious differences. One is we've relocated the setting to Broome. One of the reasons for that is that I was working with Noriko Nishimoto who is based in Perth and we thought that a West Australian production was possible. Whilst Herbert wrote about Darwin, he did so because he was there, so he had his



own direct contact with the Japanese community at the time in the early 1930s. But by then Darwin had ceased to be a hugely important pearling port. It and Thursday Island continued to function, in the pearling industry but the major centre of activity was Broome, even in his time. So by taking the Herbert story and considering as much other research as was around, we made the choice to relocate the story to Broome. We also widened the cast of characters to include a Malay (Hanif) and I've - taken the step of making Kazuhiko (who is in the original story and is the son of old Mr. Tanaka the diver) the product of a mixed marriage. There are a number of

instances where Japanese divers either married or simply lived with Aboriginal women and we've adopted that idea for the play. We did this just to widen the sociological landscape a little. To Herbert's credit he'd made very much a story of the Japanese community in the 1930's. I've tried to capture the more cosmopolitan feel of a place like Broome. Similar to the Goldfields, and other moments in Australian history, Broome was an incredibly international town. People do come from all over the world. Take for example some of the great projects of the 1950s, the Snowy Mountain Scheme, these places have an incredible cast of characters who have landed there from everywhere, and places like Broome - times like that provide great dramatic potential.

Broome did have a number of simmering race issues. It was the case that an argument between two people could suddenly take on racial overtones. So widening the cast of characters of the palate of the piece seemed a good idea and you could historically justify it. For me one of the important things the play does is give you a sense that a multicultural Australia has long been part and parcel of our history for the last 200 years.

***In your essay "Climbing the Golden Stairway to the Moon" you mention a woman called Sr Mary Alberta Spane. What significance has she had for you in the writing of this particular play?***

Sister Mary is one of the primary sources of history for the play. My sense of Broome I owe largely to her from a book she published in 1981 called "Full Fathom Five". She's a Dominican sister who lived in Western Australia most of her life and wrote three books, the only one of which I know is the one about Broome. She became very interested in the Australian landscape and worked with various Aboriginal

communities. I suppose you could say she is an example of an academic nun who dwelt mostly on West Australian subjects. She died just last year, but I think she has a fabulous eye for detail and for the quirky event. The book has as much official and statistical information as you would need, but she also has the knack of finding wonderful human detail and strange stories, and weaving them into her work. So my mentioning of her is that, apart from the Xavier Herbert story, which is only about 7 or 8 pages, her writing has provided a lot of the background information necessary for the play.

It is a strange read because she tends to leap all over the place, but that's fine because there's a drama to her history-making that isn't untheatrical at times. She's captured weird stories like the one I desperately wanted to use was that of, Congil's

Parrot. There was a talking parrot that used to drink a lot of whisky but it also made its way into someone's house one day and stole a thousand pounds from the desk, and flew off with it. They never found much by way of real money.

They apparently discovered some of it in a bit of spouting some years later, a few quid blocking up the downpipe, but a lot of people thought that both the man who owned the parrot, Congil, and the bird itself, had a supernatural, voodoo-type knowledge of what was going on in the town. Yes, weird stories like that are ideal!

***You mentioned that you spent considerable time in Japan in the 1990s. What you saw there, what you experienced, how much influence did this have on the eventual style of the play?***

I saw a great deal of Japanese theatre while I was there. I also practised a bit of Japanese theatre while I was there. I went to "Kyogen" classes in English. There's an American who's lived there for 35 going on 40 years. He was there in the US navy and he fell in love with the place, fell in love with certain people there, and stayed. He started to study a style of theatre known as "Kyogen" which is a 600 year old theatre form associated with "Noh Theatre" except "Kyogen" are the comic interludes. They're about 20 minutes long on average, and they are just stuck in a "Noh Theatre" program for their levity. By going to classes and learning to sing certain of the songs in translation, and by learning the movements, getting from the inside a sense of how that particular Japanese theatre form works, was great. While I was Japan I went to all types of theatre. I particularly liked Japanese vaudeville. I went to Kabuki and many of the traditional forms, but I also went to see the contemporary theatre movement. Because I was there I had the opportunity to get a really good sense of Japanese theatre in its many forms and how it works. So that time was a major influence.

One of my most significant plays, *The Floating World*, is influenced similarly, but in a bookish way. I'd read about "Noh" plays at that time and in major ways there are elements of this in *The Floating World*. For example passages of narration that are musically supported were my way at doing a "Noh" play in Australia. The use of elements of Japanese styles, especially "Kyogen" is there in my work. I think I was trying to say that comedy is perhaps universal. Even though the things we laugh at in our separate countries may have specific contexts, and maybe a sense of humour does have local and regional variations. But there's an amazing convergence of ideas about what's a comic situation or what isn't. Interesting.

***What elements of the play would say would be examples of "Kyogen" style theatre?***

I've based a fair bit of Hanif and Sakamoto's (the two divers) banter on elements of "Kyogen", the comic repartee they engage in. The more important thing too in that regard is the idea of their willingness to break into dance. You find this in much of the Asian theatre form, a readiness to move into dance and, in the case of the Malay and Japanese divers in this story, I worked on the assumption that we would be employing actor/dancers. It is important to remember that these were men who worked physically

in a hazardous industry, their bodies were incredibly important to them. So in writing them, I conceived them as dance characters, characters whose physicality was critical. Unlike spoken drama in the west that has become more and more naturalistic, in Asia there are still a myriad of theatre forms that don't mind using dance.

Again, this is an example of how I've found it very liberating, in terms of my imagination, to see as much Asian theatre as I have because you look at it and say "Hey, that works". You learn how to echo it or borrow it. As luck would have it of course it relates to the kind of performance form you find in Aboriginal Australia, where moving to song, moving to rhythm and moving to a form of acting or story telling that is very much in your face is integral to the culture. Perhaps it's the kind of theatre that sits best in this continent.

***You also use the device "Onagata" in the play. Could you explain what this is?***

The female roles in Japanese "Kabuki" are those performed by the "Onagata". In fact they are males playing female roles by female impersonators. This is a specialist role in every "Kabuki" troupe. "Kabuki Theatre" was begun by a woman, but it had fairly disreputable beginnings. It was initially about a priestess who danced on the bend of a river, gradually began to sing and dance in the theatre, added stories to it and eventually she became very popular. But it was also closely associated with pleasure and prostitution. The first move the government made was to ban women from performing in such events, and then they had to ban children too because there was a fair amount of paedophilia associated with the theatre as well.

Japan is a culture where it tends to have an "entertainment quarter" which is given over to gaming, to prostitution, to the theatre, and the popular entertainments of story telling, wood block printing and so on. Every major city has historically had a quarter, where people go for such pleasures and entertainments. So of course the theatres cluster there, the puppetry clusters there. "Kabuki" became a city theatre form. Because government edicts banned women from playing in it, that led to the necessity of men playing female roles. Just as in Shakespeare's time, in Elizabethan Theatre and in theatres in many parts of the world. Therefore the role became a specialisation - the actor who could play female roles. And they're quite extraordinary achievements as acting. They're not just blatant drag queen kind of events. They're seriously studied attempts to depict the female character through the accurate observation of female mores and ways of moving, relating and speaking.

Japan too is a culture where they speak of "women's culture" and "men's culture". There are often forms of language and address that are particular to women. In fact it's often the case that foreigners learn Japanese from girlfriends or wives, and they often get charged with speaking a very female form of Japanese. The actor who is learning to be an Onagatta or who is an Onagatta, spends a great deal of time studying how women move, walk, talk, make love etc. And consequently there are some towering performances, because there's something inherently dramatic or theatrical about an actor being other than themselves. Crossing gender is about as extreme a leap as you can get.

Here too is a story that uses disguise as one of its key plot points. So of course my thoughts turn to the way in which the “Kabuki” characters have been played by men, and they’re done with great grace and are in many ways very real.

I also think that there’s a certain delight for the audience to know that, “Okay, it is a man playing a woman” so that parts over with, but you give points for how well they portray a female character. You go along with the idea and perhaps you could have been fooled too.

Of course, a Kubuki actor in Japan is highly trained and the number of actors in Australia who could do this is not large, and it’s complicated by the fact that the character of Kazuhiko is part Aboriginal, but we shall see.

### ***How did the collaboration come about with Handspan Visual Theatre?***

Well I’d started work on *Miss Tanaka* with Noriko Nishimoto from Spare Parts Puppet Theatre Company in Perth so there was always going to be a puppetry or visual theatre connection. Because we’ve always had many cultures in the mix, the idea of language, though critical, becomes body language and how people signal to each other. Extra verbal ways of communicating are always going to be important in cross-cultural situations. So from the very beginning, almost because I was collaborating with a Japanese operator and puppet director, that was part of the mix. We were a little down the track and Noriko was doing this as extra curricula activity, and her company could never produce it because it’s charter was children’s work only. So we made the move of trying to interest Handspan in becoming a producer or co-producer. David Bell (Artistic Director of Handspan) took a bit of a liking to the ideas of the show and the extent to which it could become a piece of visual or physical theatre and the relationship went from there. Because Noriko ended up not being able to complete the work, David has since tried to take the story ways that he saw as fitting the needs of Handspan.

In relation to the structure of the play, I was heading off in several directions. I’d done a pretty operatic version that involved a number of original songs and therefore needed a lot of original composition. I think there was a lot of magical realism in the piece at one stage. David has had his vision of what’s do-able by Handspan, what suits Handspan’s aesthetic agenda, and we’ve collaborated around that, getting rid of several versions in the process.

### ***The music - has that been your vision?***

The music is an example of something David (David Verhagen, composer) brought to it. I was a bit uncertain about the use of some of the 1930’s music. For example, I think at one stage he wanted to use a Cole Porter song and it just doesn’t happen as easily as that. Getting permission to use those songs is very difficult, so I thought that was not likely to happen but much of it has. I think it does establish period and it creates challenges – how do you work to a song? It is a show that has a song, but it still has to advance the story. If you study the 1930s, well, the entire 20th century in Asia, there’s a wonderful struggle - the journey to modernism. People were playing a

lot of western music and western songs in places like Tokyo and Osaka and whole generations of people had grown up with a tension in their culture between western modernism and traditional kind of folk culture or influences.

***Could you talk about the inclusion of the character of Mott - how did that come about?***

There is a Xavier Herbert character - a type of Mott - in a story called "Sounding Brass" and he's a pearling master. He's in his 40s or 50s and he's a bit of a bastard. He owned a fleet of luggers and becomes something of a slave driver. And Herbert hones in on this rather economic animal, puts him out in a cyclone and this figure suddenly becomes dependent on the physical prowess, courage, and bravery of a Japanese diver, and his racism in some ways is put on its head.

A new kind of humanism is bred from the experience in this otherwise fairly scrooge-like figure. So that was Mott. Herbert drew him at the age of 40 or 50. I personally thought, was this man always like this? How did he get like this? Here he was, an Englishman who'd come to Australia and set up a business here in the pearling trade. I asked myself the question, what if I portray Mott at a much earlier age? After the entanglement or encounter with the Japanese community in *Miss Tanaka* my character may go on to become bitter about it perhaps, a bit like the Mott that Herbert actually used, so I took that road with it which I often tend to do. There are some weird behaviours in the play. Mott pulling a gun and trying to sort of create law and order here and be a policeman, an event that is based on an actual historical fact. A man trying to create a bit of order in an Australian Navy gun boat, fired a few rounds at the Japanese fleet and nearly caused World War II before it started. So I took that too and turned that into a much smaller personal kind of incident. A case of letting the research perhaps produce or underpin an artistic result. It's a somewhat weird way of working, but it's good, I like it. Borrow from life, rip off life and you end up with good stories.

***When the audiences come out of the theatre, what would you like them to be thinking about after they've seen Miss Tanaka?***

I'd like them to be thinking, "Hell, that was exciting!"

No it's true, I really do set great store on writing exciting theatre. It's why in many ways linking up with *Handspan* is a bit of a journey, a bit of a stretch for me. I've worked with puppetry before, but it's also putting me on my mettle, how do you write for a primarily non-word driven kind of form? If there's a drama occurring in the making of a piece for me, if there's a journey that I'm taking artistically, there's every chance I think that the result will be worthwhile. Or at least it's an interesting struggle getting there and that's a dramatic thing. I've always tried to be a writer who tackles subject matter that I'm not totally familiar with. There are things I have to find out and if I have to find things out, then maybe that's a clue to what audiences will want to know, and also the reasons an audience might come to the play.

I want it to be an exciting, worthwhile kind of journey for an audience. Thematically I think I want to make the point about how far back in practice - how many rehearsals we've had for a multicultural Australia in the last 200 years. And even if you go further back, I want to look at the kind of encounters or cross-cultural situations that developed in ancient Australia. The Aboriginal connections, trading connections with people both in New Guinea and connections with Indonesia and even the way Australia politically was organised five hundred years ago, a thousand years ago.

So its recognising just how far back a multicultural Australia goes and the strength and joy and to be had from that. Sure, it's very complicating but it makes you think, it keeps you on your toes, you know you're alive because not everyone thinks like you, not everyone looks like you. Those things give a culture a great strength, give an individual a great strength and a great humility, a readiness to communicate. You know communication isn't always easy. You know you're not always going to hear your opinion back at you. So that makes for a richer life in my view. These are positives that I would like the audience to take from the show.

***Do you see playwrights in Australia at the moment as having a particular role to play in society?***

Yes, they always do. In many ways I regard playwriting as one more way of telling the time and depicting the place. It's one of the tools that we use to register what life is like at this moment in this place. Other forms of writing do that, other forms of recording do that. But there are moments in this society when the audience likes you, the playwright, to be their spokesperson. I don't think this is one such moment. I do think perhaps in the 60s and 70s, theatre held a much sexier and political kind of form. A culture does go through those fashions of "now this form of art, now that". In the 60s and 70s, it was the theatre. People looked to it as an arena where issues of national significance were thrashed out - who are we, what are we, where are we, where are we going? The great issues of the day were kind of hammered out. Then perhaps it became Australian music. Australian rock and roll for example has had a bit of a honeymoon of late. These things happen in a culture you know. The important thing I suppose is to be ready when the audience wants the kind of things that we're dealing with, delivered in the way that the theatre can deliver them.

It's a live medium as opposed to a technologically driven one. I think people will again learn to come out of their houses and away from their televisions, away from their screens and enjoy being in an audience in a collective situation. I mean we talk about television as mass media, but what's mass about sitting in your own living room? Certainly what's being technologically driven in there, you can consider mass, but the way people absorb it is in a very privatised, individualised way. How many ways can people live in a flat? Thousands. How many things can they have on their wall? Thousands. It's very individualised. The audience for a television program at the point of consumption is perhaps a family or a household. Four people, five people, maybe ten if you've got a really crowded arrangement, but usually it's just one or two of you looking at the screen and that is nothing like the experience you get when you're in a theatre. In a theatre you're part of a group. So it's a social event and I think anyone who forgets the audience when they do write for the theatre - and I don't think

you can even make theatre without considering the audience – is mad. Ultimately the theatre is great when the writers are great, the actors are great, but the audience too needs to be great. It's an audience hungry for what the theatre can deliver. And when those three conditions are in place, it's exciting times in our artform Otherwise it's the usual porridge and toast and peanut butter.

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## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR, DAVID BELL

***Miss Tanaka has had a long evolutionary developmental process as I understand. Could you describe that process?***

I think it probably originally started when Noriko Nishimoto, who is the Artistic Director of Spare Parts Puppet Theatre in Perth, received funding from the Australia Council for a professional development project in 1995. She was doing a personal exploration of styles based around some Australian stories and some Japanese stories. She met up with the playwright John Romeril and they got talking about her project. John suggested that these short stories by Xavier Herbert about Broome, could possibly be an interesting hook for them to develop a show out of.

Noriko and John came to me in late 1997, not long after I'd started at Handspan as Artistic Director. They showed me a sketch of this short comedy that they'd written, which at that point was called *The Fox, the Old Turtle and Miss Kitso*. The fox was the Kazuhiko character, the old turtle was the Mister Tanaka character, and Miss Kitso of course was the persona that Kazuhiko adopts. I really liked the story and I could see potential for it to be broadened and developed and pushed around a great deal. So I put it into the Handspan Development Program in '98 and over the intervening period there have been a number of short workshops. Some of them have just been for a couple of days, some of them have been meetings and some of them have been longer sessions over a number of weeks. We started by looking at a possible scenario and style issues. Then we had a big full on workshop with a whole (potential) cast and musicians. That was not to work on the play as such, but to start working on the visual style and some of those things from that workshop have remained in the play. Other things have "fallen off" since then. But I felt it was important that the visual elements, or the visual story-telling, be woven into the whole play at a very basic level, before the first draft was written.

Usually, you end up receiving a script and then doing a production of it and the visual elements tend to get ladled on afterwards as a kind of decorative element, but I don't like working like that. I think that visual story telling and imagery have incredible power, as much power as text. I think it was Shakespeare who said something like "A picture's worth a thousand words." I think that is true, that visual imagery has great potency, and so it was really important to me to include it very early on in the process.

So, in a funny way, it has taken five or six years for this show to reach the stage.

***When did Playbox come into the process?***

Aubrey Mellor (Artistic Director of Playbox) was very interested right from the beginning. Noriko and I had a workshop with some actors at Playbox in 1997, where we spent a couple of days in The Beckett playing really, messing around with some of the ideas for the show. Then in the last six months, Louise Gough (Literary Manager and Dramaturg at Playbox) came in as an outside person to run her eyes over the script, to ask questions and to act as a kind of sounding board for us.



***What specifically attracted you to the play Miss Tanaka, both as Artistic Director of Handspan and as a director yourself?***

There were a couple of reasons I suppose. One, I liked the story; I thought it was really interesting. I liked the idea of isolation; the fact that the play's set in a very isolated part of the world. The people there are isolated from their families and their friends, they've all come from all over the world to work and they live with this interesting mix of loving and hating each other. They get on and then they don't get on; they're learning how to live together. The idea of isolation really struck a chord with me, the isolation of a place where these men could actually fall in love with this supposed woman. When you think of the reality of the situation, it would seem patently clear that Miss Tanaka is man in a frock, but I think these men genuinely believe it's a woman. They're so desperate for something - and here's someone who's actually looks astonishing and gives them something in return. The persona of Miss Tanaka changes all the characters in some way, touches these people and changes the course of their lives. So I thought it was a pretty good, interesting, basic story.

Then on top of that there are themes that I'm particularly interested in and that Handspan has also, over the years, been particularly interested in, and they are: working in an intercultural way, exploring various Asian cultures, and also working with Aboriginal performers and issues. So there seemed to be a kind of meshing there. We made the decision quite early on that this was a story about people, about human beings, and we wanted the visual ideas, the puppetry and puppetry techniques to be

about creating the interior and exterior worlds of the real people. So that gave us lots of opportunity, lots of scope to play...

***You mentioned "visual theatre". As Artistic Director of Handspan could you describe exactly what you mean by "visual theatre"?***

That's a curly one and I've been asked that many times. There are folk within Handspan who don't even agree on what it is. Handspan was originally a puppetry company, but it's now 23 years old, and over its development it very quickly pushed the envelope of what was perceived to be "puppetry". It very quickly started working in adult theatre, mixing puppets and humans on stage, which I think creates a very forceful tension.

Now there are loads of different kinds of puppetry, and all of them are valid and have their place. I also come from a design background, so I think there is power in all sorts of images. For example: two people sitting in an empty room having a discussion: you don't necessarily have to hear what they're saying, but it can be a very interesting and fascinating image that can be full of resonance for the audience. I guess what we've been doing at Handspan over the last few years, is trying to take another look at what the company is doing; take another look at the possibilities of puppetry, object manipulation, and how they can enlarge your view of an idea. So within that, we've had in development a whole range of projects, including pure character-driven "banraku"-style puppetry, through to a piece that just uses shadows,

so there are no actors or puppets appearing on the stage, just light and shadow. There's another work in development that really doesn't include any puppetry at all, that is more a visual art project, called The Cone Project. We're also looking at short film and clay-mation, animation and computer generated animation as well. So we're looking at a whole range of possibilities, but of course a company as small as Handspan with such small amount of money to play with, will have difficulty often in doing what we'd like to do when we want to do it. What we do have is time, so things can get developed over a long period of time.

That's a long way around to answer your question about visual theatre - it's a difficult question, and I don't know whether there is actually an answer to it. It's certainly a mixture of things, and does not exclude text at all. But it certainly gives visual imagery equal weight to text; sometimes more, but certainly at least equal weight in story-telling presentation.

***So what is it about the story of Miss Tanaka that works particularly well as a piece of visual theatre?***

Well I think that, for an example, all the characters have animal equivalents in the production. For the Malay pearl diver, his animal is a monkey, so physically, he moves a bit like a monkey and at one point he is represented on stage by a monkey puppet. The Japanese pearl diver, on the other hand, is represented by a frog. Because there's a cultural difference between Malaysia and Japan, and these characters are rivals in all things, it seemed to work well if one was land-based and one was amphibian. They were linked but also wildly different, so we could develop different kinds of personalities for them. For Mr Tanaka who is Japanese and an ex-pearl diver, his animal is a turtle and for me, that's about carrying the weight of the world on his back. He's crippled, so he kind of flails his way around like a turtle on land, but in the water, he moves freely. There's also a link with the turtle and the frog both being Japanese and both being pearl divers, in the fact that they both "hit the water". So these animal representations work all the way through the show.

I wanted to approach each scene so that it was done in a slightly different style, so for example, the opening scene works a lot with paper. Each scene is subtly different; it grows and changes and mixes different Asian movement styles, martial arts styles and so on. That idea goes right the way through the production into the music and the sound, so there's live Japanese drumming and there's a big sound-track that has been composed especially for the show by Darrin Verhagen. Plus there are original 1930s songs that have been included to set the period, but that are hopefully a fairly unexpected use of those songs as well. Constantly surprising the audience is what I wanted to do. It is a show about disguise and surprise and never really knowing what's coming. I'd like the audience to sense right at the beginning that they're in good hands, that it all will end well, but they're just not sure what surprises the journey will bring.

***The short story of Miss Tanaka is quite a naturalistic story. There is no mention in it of the animal representations that you talked about. I'm wondering whether that is an example of how you take a story such as this, and transform it from a fairly naturalistic piece to a piece of very visual, more "non-naturalistic" theatre.***

The idea for the animal representations came from Noriko's original project where she was working on this whole "animals" thing. The interesting thing about the play is that it merges cultures, and it also merges forms. That's what we're trying to achieve. Broome at that period was a huge cultural mix, a melting pot, so we're trying to get all these different forms to merge and melt together, hopefully not in a big stew, but in a really lovely way. So it becomes possible for a very straight forward, naturalistic piece of short-story writing by a European about Australia to be melded with Japanese folk stories about animals. That gives us interesting places to go, since the original story was indeed about that melding of cultures. So all the form and styles that we use have come out of the content and nothing has been grafted on top as just a stylistic device.

***Have you done any particular research for this production?***

John Romeril has done the most amazing amount of research for the play; it's part of the way he works personally. That has mainly included really fascinating historical stuff about Broome and so on, and we've all had access to that research. For myself, it has been more of a general interest in Asian form. I would say half the company - both performers and backstage crew - is Asian, so that has been a great help as they bring enormous knowledge and experience to the working process.

***How would you describe the style of the play? Obviously there are a large number of stylistic influences that come into it, but how would you sum up the style of this particular production?***

Well, it's only the second week of rehearsal so it's a bit hard to tell, but I hope it'll be funny, it'll be light, it'll be fast; things will effortlessly pass before your eyes and you will just be carried along by the exuberance of it all. That's the broad notion. There are a whole lot of theatrical styles that we're looking at: there's direct address, there's the use of various dance forms, there's Japanese "kyogen", and there's even a curious nod to the Italian plays of the 18th century, like Goldoni, or even the French plays of the same period. There's a farcical quality like a wind-up clock-work toy; you know the sort - you wind them up and up and up. The plot gets wound up in this way and then there's a moment of release, and the whole thing goes crazy and plays itself out. I really wanted that madcap kind of tone as well. So I hope it will be all those things - a kind of light, breezy, rich confection.

While we are using a number of traditional forms in the play, there are also a whole lot of contemporary things that are impacting as well. The visual style hopefully looks pretty contemporary. Then there's also the fact that we're using some film sequences threaded through the show. And a lot of Darrin's score takes its cue from 1980's Japanese pop music! That has a kind of mad quality that I like, and that he likes too, obviously. It also has a driving, quite funky kind of beat to it that I thought provided an important energy to the production.

***Are there any themes that you're wanting to highlight in your production?  
How have you used particular visual elements in order to highlight those specific themes?***

I think one of the big things that the play is saying is that many cultures can live together. And I think that we forget that. We think that multiculturalism is a new invention, but in fact it's not, it's thousands of years old. And in Australia, in Broome, it's been lively for around a hundred years. The people who came to Broome were attracted by the money, by the adventure, by the possibilities of fortune, and a lot of them ended up having a very difficult life. There were race riots and all sorts of dramas happened there. What is interesting however, is that over time, people found a way to live, and I think that if the play does anything, it shows us that it is possible to live like that now. There are huge precedents for a multicultural existence and they are not necessarily about merging all those cultures together. They are about those cultures meeting and being respectful of each other. They are about give and take and working as one for a common goal. But they are ultimately about keeping the individual flavours of different cultures at work, rather than merging them all into a kind of soup.

I hope the way this production will end up is that the flavours will still be all separate and quite apparent, and it won't become a big muddled soup. There are a lot of elements, but hopefully they will all be working for a common goal, and that is to drive the story along. So the biggest thing for me that the play is about is that multiculturalism isn't so new. People have been doing it for centuries and we've just

got to get on with it. It may be difficult, but as long as you approach people with mutual respect and sensitivity, then all things are possible.

Because Handspan has always been about that mix of things, it felt like the perfect project for the company. It's multicultural in content and form.

***How have you worked in rehearsal to coordinate all these different styles?***

It's a tricky piece to rehearse because there are a lot of visual elements. There are also a lot of different performance styles to be dealt with and a lot of movement styles to be dealt with, along with the different schedules of the various artists involved. For example, Andris Toppe, the choreographer, is only with us for the first two weeks, so we're working very hard on dance during that time. We are trying to approach each scene as we get to it and get it up on the floor fairly quickly, even if it's in the roughest, most elementary kind of way. That way we can give it some kind of physical shape, and then go back later and see how we can clean it up. It's certainly very different to rehearsing a regular play or a straight forward text. Because all the rehearsals are very active and there's a lot going on, you don't get that period where you can do lots of sitting down, and discussing and musing over bits and moments. There will probably be a bit of that in week three of rehearsal, but not nearly as much as would happen normally. And that's because the visual, physical, musical elements have such weight in this production.

***As the Director of Miss Tanaka, what role have you played in the design of the production? Has that been a fairly collaborative process?***

It has indeed. I've worked with the designer, Greg Clarke, on a number of projects before in Brisbane, so we have a pretty good working relationship. He came on board relatively late in the development process, in the last eight months, so the set really didn't form until only a few months ago. I tried to keep it open as long as possible. I suppose I wanted to do something that was quite surprising in the way it looked and the way it worked, so the set is actually quite plain. I felt that that was an important way to go, so that it was the action and what went into it that was important, not the set itself. I didn't want a set that was going to really call attention to itself. The other thing is that because we don't have a huge quantity of money to work with, we needed a way to make some of this imagery work that wasn't about gigantic scale.

The set is essentially a white box, a perspectived white box with a ceiling, that opens out to a black void behind the back wall. This allows us to do more classic performance work in the white box, but also allows that white box to be lit really beautifully, because part of Broome is its amazing colour. If the set was too colourful and then lit on top of that, it would be too coloured all the time. The black area up the back allows us to do black theatre and different kinds of performance styles up there and then we can also mix the two areas together. It has a sort of Japanese aesthetic to it as well, a minimalist aesthetic, which is nice.

The design of the set also allows us to concentrate the imagery rather than have it on this huge scale. The bigger the area that you're performing in, the more stuff you need to fill it. So I decided to reduce it down into a smaller, more concentrated area and I think that will work well.

## INTERVIEW WITH DESIGNER: GREG CLARKE

### ***What was your initial response, as a designer, to the text of Miss Tanaka?***

The interesting thing was, I knew a lot more about this play than I normally would before I read the text. Because the project had been gestating for a very long period with Handspan, I had an initial meeting with David Bell where he outlined the process and the storyline, and gave me a great sense of detail before I actually had a script in my hand. Normally as a designer you're just handed the script; you might get given the smallest precis about what the script is about, and then you respond to the writing. Whereas with this project, because it's visually based, the ideas were already being talked about in visual terms.

Reading the text, it is obvious that it is driven by the workshops that had gone before it, and there's a lot of visual imagery already in the script. What's good about that is that it's written in a style that challenges the designer. The script didn't actually tell you how they should be realised, it just gave you those really nice visual images to work with. That was then the challenge: getting the visual imagery happening in a way that's practical within the theatre space and within the budget and things like that.

*Miss Tanaka* is a very stimulating text because it works on a lot of different levels. Within the context of the play, there's the reality: that is Broome in 1939, and the story that goes on within that. Then there is the psychological background to several of the characters, for example, Kazuhiko and Mott. You see bits of their fears and dreams realised in "fantasy" sequences within the play. There is another sense of fantasy which is almost taking the story and romanticising it, like a 1930s musical - there is 1930s music that is injected into the script - and so that is almost another level of reality that goes on. And then, of course, the story is about deception, with the man pretending to be the woman, so there are a whole lot of levels operating there. Some characters know what is going on and others are completely fooled. Then there is the audience's response to the deception taking place. They know what's going on - hopefully not when they first see Miss Tanaka - but they do get let in on the joke very early on. So it's playing interesting mind games with the audience.

### ***What have been the main stylistic influences on the design of the play?***

There's quite an Asian aesthetic to the work. There are obvious influences from Noriko's original workshops for the production, and she has a very Asian puppetry aesthetic. The population in Broome in the 1930's was seventy percent Asian I think, and there are the two Asian pearl divers in the story. At the same time, Broome at that stage was a bit of a shanty town and living was quite hard, so one of the main keys to the design was finding a way that we could create these different realities. One of the things we are looking for is to try and get the "sense" of Broome with its very red sand and blue skies, but not have it dominate the whole production. So we've ended up going for a set that is actually incredibly neutral, but hopefully with lighting, we will be able to achieve different impressions within that.

Another obvious stylistic aspect is that there are dream sequences within the play. We've ended up creating a set which is like a box with a void behind it, so that there's a space for dreams, for unreality. Then there is the fact that *Miss Tanaka* is a period piece; it is set in 1939. That's a stylistic consideration, however we're not doing it as a particular period piece. We're not getting down to exact historical detail. For example, with the pearl divers, it's much more important that we get a sense of their cultural background than an authentic reproduction of what the pearl divers would have worn at that time (which would have been very much what any normal working person in Australia would've been wearing in those days, in that sort of climate). We've chosen to push those costume designs a lot further; to make Sakamoto very Japanese and Hanif very Malaysian, so that you've got the sense of the different cultures involved.

***Was there any specific research required for the design?***

The nature of the text is very sweeping. We've got a character who is a Japanese woman (Miss Tanaka) so we've had to find out about the specifics of Japanese dress: the "kimono", the "obi" and so on. We're particularly interested in references we've found for a hat which we've since discovered is something that's only used in weddings, so that is very appropriate because it's explained in the script that the "kimono" was a gift to Mr Tanaka's wife for their wedding. So, we've had to research a whole lot of Japanese stuff. The same thing in trying to culturally identify the two divers; we've had to work on the different aesthetics between Japanese and Malay textiles and decorative features.

The writer himself, John Romeril, had found a wealth of information on Broome, so in some ways that was quite handy for me. I was just handed a package that gave me the background reality to Broome in the 1930s and the pearling industry there.

Because of the visual nature of this show, there are the more practical aspects to be considered: how are we going to make things, what are they going to be made out of and so on. That's a different sort of research in the sense that it goes into the use of specific products - for example, how to get the finish on a two foot round, black pearl, so that it looks beautiful. Things like that.

***Miss Tanaka is a co-production between Handspan Visual Theatre and Playbox. Is the designer's role larger or more integral to a piece of visual theatre than to any other piece of theatre?***

I don't know that I'd say that it was. I'd say the benefit is that the design is much more obvious. There are obvious levels of stylisation and scale in visual theatre which make the design a much stronger feature in terms of an audience's perception of the piece. But if you're going to do a thorough job of designing anything, then the basic process is the same. Whether the show you're designing is the simplest thing in the world, whether it's *Waiting for Godot* and you're doing it on a blank stage, the role of the designer is to make sure that the audience understands why you've made that particular choice. In some ways there's more payoff to doing a piece of visual theatre because people will appreciate the visuals and probably hold me, as designer, more responsible than I am. It is, of course, a collaboration - with Noriko Mishimoto initially, and now with Rob Matson, the Puppetry Designer and Heather Monk, the Puppetry

Director. There is a whole melting pot of people working on the visual stuff but as the designer, I'm seen as the key person to the way the show looks, so in some ways it's great. On the other hand, there are shows I've designed that I am really proud of that never get a mention in the reviews; they are actually quite subtle and because they are so integrated into the whole piece, people don't consider them to be "designs".

***What were the major challenges involved in designing Miss Tanaka?***

The main thing was to create a space that allowed for a great sense of play. One of the key things in discussions with David Bell was that the very nature of the text, the integration of the 1930s music, all of that meant that the audience needed to be constantly surprised. One of the initial ideas for the design was to definitely confound people's expectations. If you're told that the play is going to be set in Broome in the 1930s, what you see then when you walk in to the theatre at the beginning is completely unexpected. Hopefully, the audience will always be questioning what they're seeing. The design, as the story does, unravels as it goes, but hopefully by the end it makes complete sense to everyone. It was definitely a challenge with the design to enable things to be continually opening out, changing and moving around, so that the journey of the design follows the journey of the play. The production is full of mysteries, twists and turns and zany, mistaken identities, so the design needs to have that kind of energy.

The design is kinetic, both because we have puppeteers in the show and objects are manipulated, and also because the very structure of the set itself has a lot of movement built in to it. The ultimate event in the story is a big storm and the storm not only affects all the characters, it affects the set itself.

***Could you talk a bit about the process of collaboration with the Director, the Lighting Designer and also the Puppetry Designer?***

The director of course, as with any production, is the key to it, but David Bell is particularly central in this case because he is one of the few people who has been through the whole process of workshopping and developing the piece. The only other person to be there the whole way through is Heather Monk, the Puppetry Director. David has been working on this show for four years and it's now developing into a whole new stage. He's really welcomed collaboration from three new design people: myself, David Walters, the Lighting Designer and Rob Matson, the Puppetry Designer. We've all come into it at about the same stage, and we've been working on the actualisation of the piece. Up until now, there has been quite a lot of the show that has been theoretical. The workshops had worked on specific puppetry moments and a visual vocabulary that used a lot of paper and other things which have all been incorporated into the show. But then major things like the storm have only recently been developed by David Walters, David Bell and myself, sitting down with the rough model, and going through it scene by scene. That was really where the design gelled and where we came up with all the kinetic elements. David Walters worked out the way the lights would move and react to all those kinetic elements, and how we could



incorporate slide projection and video projection into the show. So the show has kinetic lighting as well as scenery.

My collaboration with the Puppetry Designer, Rob Matson, is on a different level in the sense that Rob has craft skills that I have very little knowledge about. Working with a lighting designer is something that I've done for years and years now, and I've worked quite a bit with David Walters in the past, so we have an existing working relationship. With Rob however, it's the first time that we've worked together. He has a very specific task in terms of creating the puppets/objects and how they work, and that's a field that I have very little background in. So it's been an act of trust with Rob in just how to do things and how to produce things. He has a great aesthetic sense and he's been making objects that resonate with the Japanese imagery that we're working with.

One of the major elements is like a big fish kite that Rob has managed to make into a beautifully articulated object. This fish kite is in a dream sequence, and we wanted it to have that resonance to Japan as well as forming the function of the shark in the dream, and so it is quite a stylised object. With the turtle on the other hand, David wants it so that the moment that the turtle appears in the play, the audience will be able to suspend belief enough to go, oh my god, they've got a real turtle on the stage! So it is basically Rob's brief then, to go away and make the turtle as real as possible.

That's the sort of skill then that has been called on from Rob. Aesthetically, we've always discussed things, and luckily, we've always agreed. With the objects he's making, I would always give him the space to dictate the aesthetic, but none of the decisions he's made have ever caused any controversy. It's been a smooth collaboration.

This production has been a learning curve for me in terms of working with inanimate objects. Normally, I would do the set and create a space; then I would costume the actors, the living things in that space. This show, however, has that third dimension of inanimate objects that are endowed with a sense of life, and that's something that I've never really dealt with before in my career as a designer. There is a certain etiquette to how objects are handled by the performers - by the puppeteers particularly - that gives them a sense of power. I learnt a lot from Rob in terms of how things are actually constructed to be manipulated properly. I also think that audiences have a different aesthetic appreciation of objects or "puppets", that gives you a greater scope for stylization. There's an interesting correlation, for example, between the divers' quite stylised costumes and then those characters being represented by puppets as animals; a monkey and a frog. They're sort of animal "totems" for want of a better term. So there are now three levels to the characters of Hanif and Sakamoto: there are these really quite stylized characters, then these animal representations, and finally the divers, the real human beings underneath all the rest.

***Have you been involved at all in the rehearsal process, and if so, has the design evolved as part of that process?***

Most of the design was pretty set before rehearsal started. There have been a few logistical things however, that are coming out of rehearsals. For example, we're now dealing with the character of Miss Tanaka having to do major costume changes. During the rehearsal process we've had someone who is an expert on "kimono" in to show us all the accoutrements of that style of dress and how they fit together, and now we're working out how we can do all that in a thirty second costume change! So there are still problems to be solved along the way.

Because of the nature of the production and the short rehearsal process, most of the design is pre-planned. The set itself was essentially built before the end of last year and mostly, that's working to our advantage. Having the givens, the things that we know will be there, is restrictive in some ways, but in other ways, you know you can rely on it; you know exactly how these things are going to work, so we're not going to run into any surprises with it.

The connection with the rehearsal process is very subtle. Basically I have to sit back and let the director and performers discover how it will all come together. With costumes you have to make sure that the actors are comfortable in what they're wearing and I'm always open to suggestions from the actors that will make them feel better. There is a level of negotiation that can happen during this process. But basically my main focus during the rehearsal period will be the realisation of the design and getting it into the theatre.