

EXTRACT

THE MARGARINE CONSPIRACY

LISSA BENYON

[*australianplays.org*]

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NOTE ON THE SCRIPT

This is an unedited manuscript as provided to us by the playwright. We distribute it in good faith; however it may contain layout inconsistencies or typographic errors.

The Margarine Conspiracy was first performed by the Sydney Theatre Company at The Wharf, Sydney, on 9 March 1985 with the following cast:

TOM	Lewis Fitz-Gerald
HELEN	Katrina Foster
BARBARA	Kate Fitzpatrick

Directed by Carol Woodrow

Designed by Geoffrey Gifford

The text reproduced here is the text as published by Currency Press in 1985
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This text, in turn, is the complete text as presented on the first day of rehearsal by the Sydney Theatre Company, with a few minor subsequent revisions.

CHARACTERS

BARBARA, a schoolteacher, aged 29

TOM, Barbara's younger brother, aged 24

HELEN, Tom's girlfriend, aged 21

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have used no stage directions in this script. In keeping with the non-naturalistic flow of story and language, the action in the piece should almost be choreographed like a dance.

Images of summer and people's ways of keeping cool should be strongly suggested by the performer's movements. There is an electric fan blowing – the kind that turns back and forth with a dull hum.

There is an impression of heat and heaviness and dazzling washed-out summer light over everything – possibly even bushfire smoke haze. There may be sounds – a lawn sprinkler, cricket on the radio, traffic in the city.

AUTHOR'S NOTE – UPDATE

The play was originally written and performed in 1985, and on looking at it from the perspective of 2020, it's interesting what has changed and what is still the same. My personal feeling is that keeping the 1985 setting would give a current production quite a telling layering of modern environmental concern over some of the now-quaint-seeming perceptions voiced by the characters in their own time.

Updating various references would also be possible, to bring the setting forward to the current era. Whether this would enhance the meaning of the play for a contemporary audience, I'm not sure. I leave this decision up to those mounting a production.

TOM: We've come round.
HELEN: Hope you don't mind.
TOM: We thought it might be cooler.
BARBARA: We sat on the bathroom floor
And played Monopoly.
Tom won.
I found that ironic.
HELEN: We're not feeling very happy.
TOM: It's not the heat.
BARBARA: That summer
Conversations took place like this
Over cool drinks
Over the dishes
And on the way to the beach.
They didn't seem to need to be led up to
By the usual methods of skirting round the subject.
Helen must have decided that we were going to be close.
I was glad.
I had always thought
She was too good for Tom.
I have to say that...
HELEN: I've always wanted someone...
BARBARA: ... though I am his sister.
HELEN: ... to be like a sister.
TOM: After the talk...
HELEN: After the talk...
TOM: I felt worse.
HELEN: We decided to go to an afternoon movie
To escape the heat.
It was Saturday
And we thought the beaches would be too crowded.
BARBARA: I could not help feeling a bit resentful
That we always used my car.
TOM: I've got some new moles.
BARBARA: You could use more clock-out cream.
HELEN: Tom thinks block-out cream
Is just as carcinogenic as the sun.
TOM: They never test things properly.
BARBARA: You've got to die of something.
TOM: Our arms are stuck together with sweat.
HELEN: It feels quite nice.

BARBARA: I wish I had air-conditioning.

TOM: Look at my finger nails.
I scrape them across my skin
And they're black.

BARBARA: I was saving for an overseas trip
And they never offered petrol money.

HELEN: Yes.
All our pores are clogged with city air.

BARBARA: I decided
That I would say something about it soon.

TOM: It's disgusting.

BARBARA: Perhaps the beach
Would have been nice.

HELEN: The clean sea-breeze.

BARBARA: As we drove,
Tom spoke of some of the things
That had been on his mind lately.

TOM: It's all tied up with everything that's wrong.
The other day
I was at the State Library.

BARBARA: I wish Tom would find himself a job.

TOM: I found a book called *Car Parking and the Environment*.
Then I looked up the catalogue
And found that there were dozens of things about it.
The Parking of Motor Vehicles
Joint Committee on Urban Traffic Congestion and Parking
Report of the Parking Advisory Committee for the City of Sydney
With all those words
You'd think they could have done a better job of solving it.

HELEN: I think you worry too much.

TOM: Victor gave me a pamphlet about seeds.
Have you heard this, Barbara?

BARBARA: Is it another one
Of your theories?

HELEN: Not only *his* theories.

TOM: Not theories. Facts.
Multi-nationals are buying up all the seed companies.

HELEN: You really should listen to this one, Barbara.

TOM: They're getting copyrights on seeds, so they can choose what kinds to
develop and what kinds to sell.

HELEN: It's to give them a new monopoly

For when cars start running on water.
TOM: Soon you won't be able
To just collect seeds from vegetables and plant them.
HELEN: They'll breed kinds that'll only grow
If you use their fertilisers.
TOM: And kinds which will produce plants
That have no seeds.
HELEN: Like breeding a horse and a donkey.
Mules, you know.
TOM: They could hold the whole world
To ransom
And starve whole countries
By not selling them seeds.
HELEN: It's frightening, isn't it?
BARBARA: There are people
Whose jobs it is
To worry about things like that.
TOM: It was the kind of thing
Barbara always preferred to believe.
But I couldn't.
I wanted to become something.
Like a seed activist.
Take steps.
But I didn't know where to start.
I felt my helplessness
Like a yoke on my shoulders.
HELEN: The city was surprisingly busy
And Barbara could not find a place to park.
TOM: The breeze through the window
Was limp and dry.
BARBARA: My legs were stuck together.
It was excruciatingly uncomfortable.
And I was dying to arrive.
I'm not going to one of those awful expensive
Carpark buildings.
HELEN: Just then we found a meter.
It's only for two hours.
TOM: By the time we walk there and back
And the ads...
BARBARA: I'll risk it.
HELEN: Well, if you're sure, Barbara...

TOM: Because it's you that'll get fined.
BARBARA: On a Saturday afternoon, do you think?
TOM: It's up to you.
BARBARA: Oh, God.
I can't be bothered finding anywhere else.
TOM: I wanted to catch the bus.
BARBARA: We left it too late.
TOM: That was you
Putting guff on your face.
I prefer my women natural.
BARBARA: Do you like being called Tom's woman, Helen?
HELEN: Oh, well...
TOM: Just leave it, will you?
BARBARA: Tom had too much influence on Helen.
I hoped she would learn to see his faults as I did.
Perhaps that was partly
What this afternoon's talk had been about.
HELEN: Hoyts was cool
And we enjoyed the film
Which was American.
Somehow,
American films are cooler than Australian ones
Don't you think,
Tom?
TOM: It was strange, but yes, I know what she meant.
HELEN: The heat
Hit us like the flat of your hand
In the street afterwards,
And we just wanted to get home.
The walk back to the car
Seemed further than I had remembered.
TOM: There's an envelope
Under the windscreen.
BARBARA: It's just a leaflet.
TOM: I think it is an envelope.
It's that colour.
HELEN: Buff.
TOM: More like mustard.
HELEN: Rectangular.
TOM: I hate that colour.
BARBARA: Someone's put it there for a joke.

You did it, Tom.

TOM: I didn't. How could I?

BARBARA: Oh, God!

TOM: I was secretly

HELEN: Not pleased...

TOM: But somehow...
Barbara drives everywhere.
She's the first to complain about the traffic
As if it's not her fault just as much.

BARBARA: We didn't talk
In the car on the way home.

TOM: I wish I could just
Stretch out and be fed cool things
All summer.

BARBARA: Some people
Still have to go to work.

TOM: Come on!
You get six weeks off soon.

HELEN: I really enjoyed
Being at Barbara's.
It was so different
From our place.
All her pottery.
And matching furniture.

BARBARA: I think it was that afternoon
That Tom first mentioned
Salt Lake City.

TOM: I've had this idea, Barbara.
Of going to Salt Lake City to live.
What do you think?

BARBARA: It was difficult to know what to say.

HELEN: You see, Barbara,
We have been reading an article
In National Geographic.

BARBARA: I don't see how National Geographic
Can go on having articles
About different places every month
Year after year.
Surely by now
They must have done all the places.
The world is not

That big.

HELEN: And apparently, Salt Lake City
Is a very clean city.

[*Tom makes an exasperated noise.*]

HELEN: What?

TOM: It's not just that.

HELEN: Oh, no, well, of course not.

TOM: People work hard at their jobs
And systems function properly.

BARBARA: You are a real puritan, Tom,
Do you know that?

TOM: It was hard to describe
Why it was important
I just wanted
To find somewhere where people tried their best.

HELEN: At first I thought
That Salt Lake City was just a whim
And that if I humoured it for a week or so
It would fizzle out,
As many of Tom's whims did.
But one day
I found him reading a whole book
About Utah.

TOM: Well, if we're going to Salt Lake City...

HELEN: He was reading other things too.

TOM: Arable land in the Third World which could be used to grow food
Is given over
To trans-national controlled cash crop plantations of rubber and
Coffee
For Western nations.
"By drinking a cup of your favourite brand,
You may be adding to the exploitation."

HELEN: And we spent more time worrying
Than we used to.
So, should we give up coffee?

TOM: No, it doesn't seem to be saying
That that will help.

HELEN: If he could just find a bit of work.

BARBARA: The school holidays arrived.
It was a time of year
When I usually spent a lot of money.



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