

COLD LIGHT

adapted by Alana Valentine
based on the novel
by Frank Moorhouse



CURRENCY PRESS
The performing arts publisher
www.currency.com.au



CURRENT THEATRE SERIES

First published in 2017

by Currency Press Pty Ltd,

PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia

enquiries@currency.com.au

www.currency.com.au

in association with The Street Theatre, Canberra

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Cataloguing-in-publication data for this title is available from the National Library of Australia website: www.nla.gov.au

Typeset by Dean Nottle for Currency Press.

Printed by Finline Print + Copy Services, St Peters, NSW.

Cover design by Mike Jackson, DAMS design.

Cover illustration by Maria T Reginato.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: THIS LIFE-STREAM THIN

EDITH *stands alone on stage. She recites from the poem by Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, 'The Rhyme of Joyous Garde':*

EDITH: Now I know full well that the fair spear shaft
Shall never gladden my hand, nor the haft
Of the good sword grow to my fingers;
Now the maddest fray, the merriest din,
Would fail to quicken this life-stream thin,
Yet the sleepy poison of that sweet sin
In the sluggish current still lingers.

Lights come up and the glamour, noise and vivacity of a cocktail party manifest around her.

The Lodge, Canberra, 1950.

PRIME MINISTER MENZIES *goes over to* EDITH.

MENZIES: Adam Lindsay Gordon.

EDITH: That's right.

MENZIES: The only Australian poet in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

EDITH: In fact I know where Poet's Corner is, Prime Minister.

MENZIES: That's because you're clever, Edith. Clever enough to serve
Australia at the League of Nations.

EDITH: To serve the world, sir.

MENZIES: Not clever enough to have prevented it from failing miserably,
but then, we shouldn't associate you with its demise.

AMBROSE joins them.

After all, you were clever enough to marry into the British High
Commission.

AMBROSE: And now it is I who must correct you, sir, for it is she who
condescended to marry me.

MENZIES: And if not for yourself, Major Westwood, then again I say,
clever that in doing so she affirms that her security, her cultural
existence and her love will always be with Britain, as will mine.

EDITH: Perhaps it is you who should have married him, Prime Minister.

MENZIES: If I had I would not allow him to force me to quote the mediocrity of Adam Lindsay Gordon.

AMBROSE *snorts with laughter.*

Indeed I would not, sir.

AMBROSE: I am laughing, Your Excellency, at the preposterous notion of me being able to force Mrs Westwood into doing anything of which she herself is not the author.

MENZIES: How then do you explain her predilection for his verse?

EDITH: You're not an admirer?

MENZIES: The Archbishop of Canterbury thought I should be. When we met at a dinner very much like this one, at Neville Chamberlain's house. He told me that it was he who helped secure approval for the Poet's Corner bust and I told him that no good purpose was ever served by elevating the third-rate to the company of the great.

Beat.

Will you take your seats?

MENZIES *goes over to a table and sits down.* EDITH *keeps a smile fixed on her face as she speaks in a low voice to* AMBROSE.

EDITH: Well, what was all that about not blaming me for the demise of the League? Why would he say that?

AMBROSE: Perhaps you should take it at face value.

EDITH: Well, thank you for that nuanced reading of his political motives.

AMBROSE: He said three times how clever he knows you are.

EDITH: So why isn't he announcing my appointment to some government post in External Affairs?

AMBROSE: Perhaps he thinks you're enjoying just being home?

EDITH: Home is wherever he asks me to be this country's ambassador.

He needs to make me Australia's first female diplomat.

AMBROSE: Well, he's not likely to if you keep trying to thrust me into his arms.

EDITH: He's reluctant now but wait till he sees you in heels.

AMBROSE: We should sit down.

EDITH: Who are you next to?

AMBROSE: Some sort of town planner. Apparently there's a new vision for Canberra. Which sounds absolutely terrifying. You?

EDITH: Someone called Richard. Seconded to a position on Menzies' new uranium committee.

AMBROSE: Stab him with the salad fork and then take *his* job.

EDITH: I may have to.

AMBROSE: When he asks you if you're missing the 'so-called' sophistication of Europe.

EDITH: And I tell him that in Canberra one can enjoy the privileges and discomfort of three modes of living in one place—the capital, the rural life and exile.

AMBROSE laughs. They both take their seats, EDITH facing out to the audience, AMBROSE behind the table, opposite EDITH. The WOMAN next to her smiles as she sits down.

WOMAN: I love what you're wearing. It's Dior, isn't it?

EDITH: Thank you.

The WOMAN turns her chair 'in' to the table. EDITH turns to say hello to RICHARD, both with their chairs still facing the audience.

RICHARD: She's right. It is a lovely suit.

EDITH: You have to look closely to see it's not a copy.

RICHARD: Well, copy or not, it fits you very well.

EDITH looks at him with interest.

EDITH: Are you interested [*beat*] in fashion?

RICHARD: I especially like the idea of Parisian knickers.

EDITH: Do you mean Paris knickers?

RICHARD: Do I?

EDITH: I must say that it is quite indecent to be speaking to me about knickers when we haven't even been introduced, sir. I might wonder why you have the presumption to do so.

RICHARD: As I might wonder how you have the presumption to disagree with a newly elected Prime Minister to his face.

EDITH: 'Newly elected' being the operative words. I'd never try it when he'd been in office for some time.

They laugh.

RICHARD: Still, it marks you out as a mutinous woman.

EDITH: Edith.

RICHARD: Richard.

EDITH: And what if I am a mutinous woman?

RICHARD: Then you know that in the case of Paris knickers, we are in fact talking about no knickers whatsoever.

EDITH: Yes, indeed.

RICHARD: So that when we turn to eat our lobster cocktail and our duck à l'orange, if I slipped my hand onto your leg and then moved it tentatively upward, pausing just a moment to thrill at the feel of the silk lining of your suit moving slightly against the silk of your stockings. If I did that would you edge your skirt up as far as you dared so that I could feel the smooth flesh of your leg between your stockings and your silk corselet. And would I, Edith, find that you are wearing the aforementioned Paris knickers which are in fact no knickers at all.

EDITH: You would.

RICHARD: Then perhaps we should turn and begin to enjoy our dinner.

EDITH: Alright.

But they do not turn.

How did you know I wouldn't be scandalised by such a suggestion?

RICHARD: Are you?

EDITH: Absolutely.

RICHARD: Then why haven't you slapped me?

EDITH: I want to show you how much I know about uranium.

RICHARD: What do you know?

EDITH: I know that it has the symbol U and the atomic number 92.

RICHARD: Not enough to get a job, alas. You'd do better to talk to the town planner seated next to your husband.

EDITH: Do you think he'd like to hear my opinion on whether Canberra should have a lake?

RICHARD: While I'm only keen to splash my fingers around in any wetness I can find.

EDITH: Then by all means let's go paddling.

They turn, backs to the audience, to face the others.

AMBROSE: Edith, I was telling Mr Gibson what a talent you have for plans and policies and plots.

GIBSON: Major Westwood seemed to think you might be able to help me with the diplomacy required in the designing of a new city.

EDITH: I am by background better suited to administration, Mr ...?

GIBSON: Gibson. Would you like to help make the *caput mundi*?

At this point, RICHARD finds her own caput mundi. She gasps.

AMBROSE: He means the centre of things, Edith.

She looks at RICHARD but he is absorbed in his dinner.

EDITH: Then it is surely the *novum caput mundi*. The new centre of civilisation.

GIBSON: I accept the amendment.

EDITH: So you are planning the point around which all of Australia revolves?

GIBSON: I'm wanting to organise a congress. A regional and town planning institute conference.

EDITH: Canberra as the point from which Australia grows and flourishes, yes I see that.

GIBSON takes out and hands her a card.

GIBSON: I will give you my business card. Please telephone my secretary and arrange an appointment.

EDITH: I will.

AMBROSE: Shall we move to another position?

EDITH: Let's.

She looks at RICHARD who stands. EDITH stands. MENZIES, the WOMAN, AMBROSE and GIBSON exit.

RICHARD: I made you gasp.

EDITH: Mr Gibson made me gasp.

RICHARD: Oh?

EDITH: Offering to make me Mistress of the Capitolium.

RICHARD: I heard him say organise a conference.

EDITH: Then you were distracted.

RICHARD: And you weren't?

EDITH: Men think a sexual woman is not a serious woman when, in truth, the most focussed of us are frequently the most erotically fecund.

RICHARD looks at her and exits.

SCENE TWO: THE OUTERMOST BRINK

Hotel Canberra. The same evening.

EDITH *removes the coat of her suit and puts on a claret-coloured silk nightgown. She pours two glasses of port.*

AMBROSE *enters, wearing a matching negligée and nightgown.*

EDITH: A matching couple in claret silk.

AMBROSE: Where would a boy be without a silk negligée.

EDITH: It decidedly makes you unmanly, but I know you are thankful for that.

AMBROSE: That I am. Now what of this offer from the grand designer?

EDITH: The further we are from the party the less burnished the offer is looking.

AMBROSE: Any old position will keep your hands busy.

EDITH: I did not come back to Australia to organise a conference of town planning people who will talk about whether to put electric and telephonic lines above ground on poles or underground in concrete pipes. In Geneva we were disarming the world! We came this close to disarming it in '32. In Vienna I pulled displaced people from where they hid in sewers, shivering with fear. Organising a conference is not really my destiny.

AMBROSE: Then tell me again why we came to this place. I utterly do not know what we are doing here.

EDITH: Are you trying to provoke some degree of defensive patriotism in me? I can assure you my patriotism is very weak.

AMBROSE: Here we are in this diplomatically insignificant country, playing out petty imitations of distant places—the private schools are imitations, the parliament and courts are imitations. The whole place has insufficient identity or heritage or skills. You heard the PM say that the Communist Party is to be banned?

EDITH: We came here for me to be a diplomat and more. I seem to have misjudged how much I might be needed.

AMBROSE: And so we find ourselves in a rural outpost—on the border with the Gobi Desert. So let us despair. Let us despair awfully and enormously.

EDITH: We have never tried the life of the indolent rich.

AMBROSE: We could return to Geneva and I could work as a cigarette girl at the Molly Club. I wonder if Follett is still there pretending to be a dissolute old man while doing secret good works in expensive gowns and exquisite earrings. I envy his life. Must drop him a line.

EDITH: That too, my darling, we can find again. We can have that again if that is what you're missing.

AMBROSE: Oh, it's here, I suspect. In time it would show itself somehow, would wink at me some night, show its garter belt. Always does in whatever godforsaken country. Have not had a glimpse yet, truth be told.

EDITH goes to the butler's table and pours each of them another drink.

EDITH: I have something risqué to tell—and for the telling we need a night potion.

AMBROSE: You do?

EDITH: A man at the PM's table put his hand upon my knee.

Pause.

AMBROSE: And did he do it well?

EDITH: The climax of the gesture lacked what one might call a shapely conclusion.

AMBROSE: How so?

EDITH: After we rose from the table he made no further approach to me.

AMBROSE puts his hand under her dressing-gown.

AMBROSE: But what did the hand do?

EDITH: It reached past the button of my suspenders to the flesh of my stocking top. And as you know there is then nothing between that and the corselet.

AMBROSE: I read that the corselet is on its way out. Sad. I feel sometimes that it braces me.

EDITH: I know precisely what you mean. A girl needs a little stiffening at times and you, I know, at times, my darling—need a little stiffening.

AMBROSE: Well, well. Well, well. A PM's dinner party—our first invitation to this Lodge, our most important social appearance in this capital—and you play hanky-panky under the table with a stranger.

EDITH: You are impressed?

AMBROSE: I am in thrall to you. You are naughty beyond all my highest expectations. I honour you. I worship at your feet.

He slides to the floor.

EDITH: Then will you finish what the stranger's fingers began?

AMBROSE: My pleasure.

He parts her legs and buries his head between them.

EDITH: And when you are done I too shall steal my hand up your silken dress and introduce you to that ever stiffened implement we brought with us from Vienna. My pretty rubber penis for my darling nancy-man.

She gives herself vocally to the pleasure of his ministrations.

SCENE THREE: SOMETHING LIKE A WELSH MINER

EDITH *removes her dressing-gown and puts her suit coat back on. She straightens herself up when there is the sound of a buzzer.*

EDITH: I'm coming.

FRED *enters.*

Oh.

FRED: Good morning.

EDITH: Good morning.

FRED: Reception told me to come straight up.

EDITH: Yes.

FRED: You weren't expecting me.

EDITH: I was expecting room service but ...

FRED: I'm your brother.

EDITH: Yes. I know who you are.

FRED: I thought ... because I would have been ...

EDITH: Seventeen.

FRED: [*simultaneously*] Seventeen when you last saw me.

EDITH: I know who you are. Come here.

They embrace. EDITH is a little teary.

Do you have a handkerchief?

FRED *pulls out a handkerchief.*

FRED: It's perfectly clean.

EDITH: Thanks for the assurance.

They laugh.

You disappeared from our lives. Tell me about you. How was your war?