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Fierce Love: The Gritty Poetry of Patricia Cornelius

Richard Watts

The muscular, vernacular poetics that typify the recent works of Australian playwright Patricia Cornelius first appeared in her 2004 Wal Cherry Award-winning play, *Love*; a fresh and urgent take on the *ménage à trois*.

‘*Love*, which I wrote about fourteen or fifteen years ago, marks the very first [appearance] of that grungy poeticism that I like to play with. And that’s not just being playful because I like the sound of it—though I do—it’s also a way of being seductive with a language that is usually too hard on one’s ear,’ Cornelius told this writer in May 2019.

‘The vernacular has a great power—we’re frightened of it when people let rip in the tram or the train ... it makes us really nervous, because it does express an incredible anger and distain for a world that has done them wrong.

‘But to be able to use that language in its real tones ... I sort of lucked upon the fun of it, the weird poetic grunge of it, and I think that it’s quite seductive. You can seduce people so that they don’t walk out [of the theatre] going “I know those people and I can’t stand them—listen to the way they speak!” You’re kind of a little bit entranced,’ Cornelius said.

In her plays about broken souls and bastards, Cornelius works an alchemical magic, transfiguring individuals we might otherwise avoid into figures that fascinate.

Such characters are often volatile, even contemptable, as they spit their fury at the world. But Cornelius writes them with depth and nuance in plays whose foundations are invariably built upon her dramatic bedrock: the socio-political and gender inequalities that shape our contemporary world.

Love was first staged at Wodonga’s HotHouse Theatre in 2005 and tells the story of Tanya and Annie, young women who fall hard for each other when they meet in prison. Their relationship is

complicated once they're out of jail by the appearance of Annie's other lover, Lorenzo.

It's telling that when Tanya first sets eyes on Annie, the similes she uses to describe her new emotions evoke violence and pain:

I knew the feeling straight away though I never felt it before, I knew it as if it were a second skin, as if something had crawled up and bit me, like something had fallen off a building site and hit me, I knew, I loved you.

Through her characters' words, Cornelius shows us that these damaged and disenfranchised individuals are so beaten down by the world that they believe themselves unlovable, as Annie articulates:

The moment I saw you I knew you could love me, I just knew it, that you could really love me and I could love you. Until that second I'd never felt loved, never known it, it was a stranger to me. I thought it was bullshit, a big load of bull, that someone had made it up. Like God. I'd never been loved in my whole fucking life until I met you. And I'd never loved anyone. I didn't think I was capable of it.

Conversely, Lorenzo has a man's arrogance and confidence concerning romance, telling Tanya:

I know everything there is to know about love.

But as Annie, Tanya and even Lorenzo soon learn, love is a finite resource. Like water, it can easily evaporate, leaving former lovers high and dry—gasping, like fish out of water.

The short play *SLUT* started life as a Platform Youth Theatre production and grew out of interviews and workshops conducted with young people living and studying in Melbourne's northern suburbs. First staged in March 2008 at Melbourne's fortyfivedownstairs (together with *Ugly* by novelist and playwright Christos Tsiolkas as part of *Tenderness*, a double bill) *SLUT* explores the life and perceived crimes of Lolita, a schoolgirl whose sexual confidence both frightens and fascinates her peers.

The play opens with a telling stage direction—'*A chorus of young women sit in judgement*'. It goes on to explore the way women are sexualised and objectified from an early age and how Lolita's peers first admire her for taking control of her sexuality before rejecting her when, in their eyes, she oversteps the mark:

She was disgusting.
Over the top.
She was frightening.
She was.
She'd done it with almost everyone.
Such a slut.

This policing of women's sexuality by women themselves is one of several themes in Cornelius's work connecting *SLUT* with the two most recent plays in this collection: the STCSA production *In the Club* (Cornelius's mainstage debut, which premiered at the Adelaide Festival in February 2018) and *The House of Bernadette* (an adaptation of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, staged under that name by the MTC in May 2018).

In the Club explores football culture and women's experiences of it and features an overt and striking scene of slut-shaming set in a nightclub toilet. Two older women, Ruby and Olivia, scold the younger Annie for her perceived shamelessness:

RUBY: You're overdoing it.
ANNIE: Overdoing what?
RUBY: You're pushing it.
ANNIE: What am I pushing?
RUBY: You're shoving it down their necks.
ANNIE: I'm shoving it down their necks. What is it exactly
that I'm shoving?
RUBY: Sex.
ANNIE: Oh, it's sex I'm pushing and shoving.
RUBY: It's too much.
ANNIE: You're right, it's none of your business.
OLIVIA: I think it's a bit much too.

Set in the West Australian outback, *The House of Bernadette* evokes the Rhinehart family's feuds over mining millions. Matriarch Bernadette, whose second husband Tony has just been buried, 'turns the frustrated rage of her marriage into an uncompromising tyranny over her children ... It's a savage portrayal of how women internalise the chains of patriarchy and of the toxicity of sexual repression,' wrote noted critic Alison Croggon in her review at *Witness Performance*.

The target of the slut-shaming here is Rosie, Tony's illegitimate child by an Aboriginal mother. Although she is never seen, Rosie's presence casts a long shadow across the house and its inhabitants, provoking near-hysterical reactions from her half-sisters. As events unfold and closet doors are forced ajar, revealing skeletons and secrets, Bernadette's response is to repress everything—children, truth, everything:

BERNADETTE: If whatever is going on stays inside, I don't mind.

While Cornelius's poetic rhythms are less overt in *The House of Bernadette* than in other plays, they are still evident, such as in this exchange between sisters Marti and Magda about Marti's friend Victoria, whose husband Gary is violent and controlling:

MARTI: Won't let her wear what she wants.

MAGDA: No make-up.

MARTI: None.

MAGDA: Not allowed to use the phone.

MARTI: Not allowed to go out alone.

Victoria's situation recalls Lolita's fate in *SLUT*, which in turn draws on the real-life shooting of part-time model Kara Douglas by her then-boyfriend, bikie Christopher Hudson, in Melbourne in 2007.

In newspaper coverage of the shooting, which saw one man killed and another seriously injured as they tried to stop Hudson's violent attack, Douglas was euphemistically described as a 'party girl', an epithet which stuck in Cornelius's mind as she began to develop the play.

'Christos Tsiolkas and I researched our two separate plays by visiting schools and TAFE colleges with the idea of gender as a starting point,' the playwright told the website *Theatrepeople* in 2011.

'On the first day of our research we sat in the car and listened to a radio report on the shooting in the city of Melbourne of two men who had come to the aid of a woman being pushed into a car. The woman too was finally shot when she attempted to flee. It was the reporting the next day of her and a friend being described as "party girls" that got my interest.

'In the classrooms young people talked about sluts and girls who came across and weren't worth much and here was one, supposedly a party girl, who actually was shot. I found it deeply sad that the language

of hate and sex was still so nasty and stupid. No feminism here and no legacy of the women's movement at all. Still no pleasure, no passion, no sweetness. Sex remains a dangerous game for most girls.'

Just as *SLUT* draws from real life and *The House of Bernadette* recalls a known family, the story arc of *In the Club*'s Annie references the experiences of Kim Duthie, the so-called 'St Kilda Schoolgirl'. After being dumped by the AFL footballer who seduced her when she was just sixteen, Duthie shared nude photographs of his teammates with the world in a memorable act of revenge—an event replayed in Cornelius's play.

In the Club also dramatises the football world's long and shocking history of rape and sexual assault, as well as Cornelius's own complicated response to such crimes.

'I am the first one to admit that when I hear about some young [footballer] and he's got in trouble with some misdemeanour or worse, of a sexual kind, my first response is to feel really sorry for him ... and then I have to pull myself up and think, no, fuck you. Fuck you. This is ridiculous. And I think my response is what a lot of people feel; they feel that these young men are absolutely set upon by these "voracious women" and what can they do?' Cornelius said to me in 2018, in an interview for ArtsHub.

'If you just scratch our consciousness a tiny bit we go, "She asked for it". Scratch a little bit more and it's "But what did she expect?" Our language is so condemning and moral about female sexuality. We compliment men who are players—we're the slut and they're the player; we're the whore and they're the stud. The language of it is so fascinating, isn't it?

'And how *angry* we are at them, those women,' she continued.

'I remember at high school, the couple of young girls that were kind of out there—I was fascinated by them. I was so jealous of their freedom but my god, the condemnation that they copped. And even if they weren't actually sexual, but they behaved in a way that was—they had great pluck and used their bodies in a very unselfconscious way. They were terrific. I loved them so much. They were gorgeous,' Cornelius said.

Her fascination for such women endures, with *Love*, *SLUT* and *In the Club*, providing her 'bad girls' with characteristically rich internal lives.

Throughout *SLUT*, Lolita is given a series of monologues exploring

her childhood memories—a love of riding her bike fast and feeling the wind in her hair; her sadness and surprise when her father and brothers begin to exclude her from family fishing trips. Such scenes reveal her as a simple young girl who just wants to be liked.

As Lolita ages, her lack of ambition also speaks to the ways in which society teaches young women to curtail their ambitions and their dreams:

I don't remember a single dream. Not one. I never had one. I never thought, one day I will be something, I will be a famous something or other. I will be a model or an actress on TV [...] I suppose I want to be liked. I want that. I'd like to be liked. That's it. That's all. And ... And, I want to want more.

Like the young Lolita, *In the Club's* Annie—a footy-mad teenager—is initially enamoured of her own strength and speed:

For the first fifteen years of my life I was a bird in flight, I was a gazelle running across the steppes, I was a cheetah, a leopard, a wild dog. I was agile, swift, lithe, dangerous.

But she knows the world is not kind to girls like her:

I don't know a single young woman who has kept a childhood dream alive. All their dreams are dead, way dead, died so long ago they barely remember them. Perhaps they never had them.

A dark vein of sexual violence runs throughout all four plays. For *Love's* Tanya and Annie, sexual assault is so commonplace as to be something they can almost joke about, to be used as a weapon to shock their social worker.

In *SLUT*, Lolita is brutally and shockingly punished for being sexually adventurous and her friends do nothing to intervene. Similarly, the daughters in *The House of Bernadette* gossip about Rosie's sexual exploits without acknowledging the reality of her situation, leaving it for the housekeeper, Penelope, to observe of the gangs of men who fuck her: 'The bastards won't let Rosie alone'.

Nor does *In the Club* shy away from the ugly realities of all too many women's experiences of football culture. The character of Olivia, who tells us early in the play that she is scared of men, is shockingly betrayed

and abused, but Cornelius also provides her a final moment of strength in which Olivia refuses to play the victim.

Similarly, Annie's tenaciousness, her refusal to be boxed in and constrained by her gender, is celebrated in the play's final scene:

I've joined a team, a footy team, rough as guts, tough,
fearless they call us. We are. Wild as can be. I'm recognising
more and more of me. Bit by bit. A bit of the old grace, a bit
of the speed, the old agility, good hands and something else.
Something I never had. The ability to stick, to stay in, to
keep grip. Not let go. Like a wild, clawing thing.

In her introduction to *Love*, Cornelius identifies the central theme of her work as 'the story of survival'. *In the Club*'s Annie and Olivia embody that theme—triumphantly.

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Richard Watts is a Melbourne-based arts writer and broadcaster. He works as the Performing Arts Editor of the arts industry website ArtsHub and hosts the weekly program SmartArts on 3RRR FM. Richard is also Chair of La Mama Theatre's volunteer Committee of Management and currently serves on the independent theatre panel for Melbourne's Green Room Awards.