

THE TURQUOISE ELEPHANT
STEPHEN CARLETON



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Theatre Program at the end of the playtext

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Thank you finally to Gale Edwards. Your razor sharp and unflagging perception and theatrical savvy—your unrelenting eye for the story—have made this play so much better than it would have been without you. Thank you for bringing the superb Brian Thomson to the design table with you. Two theatre legends for the price of—well, half a one probably! I'm blessed. Thanks, Lee, for introducing us.

Stephen Carleton

*For Hugo, as always. And hoping your
future's a bit brighter than this one.*

The Turquoise Elephant was first produced by Griffin Theatre Company at SBW Stables Theatre, Sydney, on 14 October 2016, with the following cast:

VISI	Catherine Davies
AUGUSTA	Maggie Dence
JEFF	Julian Garner
OLYMPIA	Belinda Giblin
BASRA	Olivia Rose
MASKED FIGURE	iOTA

Director, Gale Edwards
Set Designer, Brian Thomson
Costume Designer, Emma Vine
Lighting and Audiovisual Designer, Verity Hampson
Sound Designer, Jeremy Silver
Associate Lighting Designer, Daniel Barber
Stage Manager, Karina McKenzie
Videographer, Xanon Murphy

CHARACTERS

AUGUSTA MACQUARIE

AUNT OLYMPIA

BASRA

VISI/VIKA

JEFF CLEVELAND

MASKED FIGURE (who appears only via video)

The other character in this play is the turquoise elephant itself. How this character is solved, theatrically, will depend on budget, space, and directorial and design choices. It may be that the elephant appears physically on stage, or maybe its presence is only suggested by sound, by videography or by lighting. Whichever choice is made, it should mesmerise, unsettle and perhaps even frighten us a little.

Regarding the Visi/Vika doubling, note that the audience should think it is Visi throughout. They are not in on the duplicity until it is revealed in the plot. The characters are distinguished on the page to assist the actor playing the roles. The theatre program should probably only acknowledge Visi.

SETTING

The household of a powerful, wealthy family. Sometime in the near future. It is 'now' with the dial turned up.

In this version of the script, it is clearly Australia; but the point should be that this could be any first world country. The place names and cultural references can be changed to suit national context.

This play went to press before the end of rehearsals and may differ from the play as performed.

SCENE ONE

Video of a FIGURE in an ornate decorated mask, voice moderated slightly for the purposes of disguise.

MASKED FIGURE: We are The Cultural Front for Environmental Preservation.

We are a political art movement who decry politicians and artists who say nothing and do nothing about the survival of the planet when all around us sea levels are rising, ice is melting, forests are drying up, and species are dying on a colossal scale.

You've heard the overnight news. Sea water has entered Melbourne's sewerage system. The city has awoken to discover its underground rail system is flooding and all the government can do is stand by and wring its hands.

'Oh dear.'

'We thought this was only supposed to happen in Tuvalu.'

Meanwhile the World Business Summit convenes in Sydney.

Really?

Melbourne is quite literally drowning in its own shit, and all Sydney can do is call a Business Summit?

Ironically enough, it would appear that bullshit has been established as the currency of the talks. In response, we, The Cultural Front for Environmental Preservation, have created an ... excremental artwork. We call it: 'Cut the Crap—or Have it Back'.

We hope you enjoy viewing it as much as we enjoyed making it.

And suddenly we are in the lounge room of the Macquarie family. BASRA has flicked off the video screens and is numb—frozen—with shock.

BASRA: Melbourne? Oh, my God! But this wasn't supposed to happen for years. Decades ...

I should—

I should—

But what can BASRA do?

A sudden roaring gale as AUGUSTA MACQUARIE enters, splattered head to toe in shit. Someone has clearly attempted to clean her up. She slams the door shut and locks the inferno out.

AUGUSTA: Basra!

BASRA is still rooted to the spot, immobilised by shock.

Basra! Help me.

BASRA: [*coming to*] Oh God, you stink!

AUGUSTA: It's human.

BASRA: What did you do—shit in a fan?

AUGUSTA: Don't be disgusting. I need to be stripped clean and water-gunned.

BASRA: You're supposed to be at the Summit.

AUGUSTA: I can't stay there like this!

BASRA: I was looking for you on TV, but all they're talking about now is what's happening in Melbourne and some artwork they—

AUGUSTA: Where's the maid?

BASRA: The Philippines.

AUGUSTA: Cecilia?

BASRA: She left on Sunday.

AUGUSTA: Not another one of those hysterical Catholic festivals.

BASRA: Her mother—

AUGUSTA: Some sighting of the Virgin Mary on a garbage mountain.

BASRA: Her family has just been wiped out by a category six typhoon.

AUGUSTA: Not again.

BASRA: They've lost everything.

AUGUSTA: When's she coming back?

BASRA: The agency's sending a replacement.

AUGUSTA: You'll have to do it.

BASRA: I'm not touching you!

AUGUSTA: Get me out of these. Incinerate them. Thank God it's summer.

Can you imagine this on my stole? Jesus on a sandwich!

BASRA: What actually happened to you?

BASRA searches for a bin liner.

AUGUSTA: The Summit opening. Two lunatics with buckets. Flung it all over the Australian delegation. 'This is what you give us. Have some of it back.' That's what she said. The shrill one. Some kind of

machine doing it to her voice. There was a shrill one and a cretin. The delegates thought it was part of the opening ceremony. People actually applauded.

BASRA: Oh, my God.

She bursts into laughter.

AUGUSTA: Have I said something funny?

BASRA: You're the artwork.

She can't stop laughing.

It was the Cultural Front, wasn't it? You're their excremental installation.

AUGUSTA: I don't want to talk about it.

BASRA: You've been Fronted. Don't touch a thing. You could be worth millions in a few years.

BASRA assists in the clean-up throughout the following.

AUGUSTA: 'The Front'. Trying to make themselves sound like artists, I suppose.

BASRA: They are artists. They're an internet sensation! How can you not have heard of them?

AUGUSTA: Why should I have?

BASRA: They're the ones who covered themselves in red paint and lay across the M1—remember? Brought it to a standstill for days. To protest against human trafficking. Called the work 'Road Kill'.

AUGUSTA: I'm having them listed.

BASRA: On what?

AUGUSTA: The terrorist register.

BASRA: You should be funding them, not banning them.

AUGUSTA: This isn't protest. This is animal behaviour.

BASRA: How else do they get the message through? Genius. 'Stop the Crap.'

AUGUSTA: I mean, really? *Really?* How dare they—

BASRA: Oh, they dare.

AUGUSTA: How *dare* they violate—

BASRA: They have every right to comment—

AUGUSTA: No, I'm talking, Basra. *I'm talking.*

Beat.

How *dare* they presume they have the right to desecrate another human being—

BASRA: You weren't being desecrated. You're not a holy relic.

AUGUSTA: —in such a base and—

BASRA: 'Defiled' maybe.

AUGUSTA: —and disrespectful way?

BASRA: 'Vandalised.'

AUGUSTA: Vandals. Yes, they're vandals. Not artists. Not environmentalists.
Vandals.

BASRA: Haven't you seen the news?

AUGUSTA: I am the news!

BASRA: Not this morning.

AUGUSTA: I will be by dinner time.

BASRA: You have seen Melbourne? You do realise how critical things have just become?

AUGUSTA: What—the sewerage?

BASRA: The sea water has entered the sewerage system, yes.

AUGUSTA: A few suburbs—

BASRA: The entire CBD.

AUGUSTA: Don't exaggerate.

BASRA: Water. Filling the train stations.

AUGUSTA: Some temporary inundation. Honestly. What's all the fuss about?

BASRA: Everything's changed now.

AUGUSTA: What has?

BASRA: It's finally happening.

AUGUSTA: What?

BASRA: It.

The tipping point.

AUGUSTA: Yes.

And the people in a position to turn it around and do something about it are gathered in a room together in the Sofitel—strategising—while I'm stuck here rinsing faeces out of my hair.

BASRA: We should be protesting on the streets.

AUGUSTA: Go on then.

She picks up a controller, points it towards the door. Flicks the switch. The gale returns.

It's lovely outside. Forty-eight degrees in the shade. Off you pop.

A détente. Flicks the switch again.

Honestly, Basra. You live here in a dream world. What's happening out there can only be fixed by realists.

BASRA: So what exactly is it that the realists have gathered to do? Are you working on tax loopholes for big polluters? I hear there's money in sewerage treatment at the moment.

AUGUSTA: We're challenging the science on climate change once and for all. Killing it dead.

BASRA: What?

AUGUSTA: Things have gone too far. Today's events prove it.

BASRA: Oh, you think?

AUGUSTA: We've given the recyclers and wind farmers a quarter of a century to solve this. It's only gotten worse. The Green movement has failed. Worse than that. It's lied. We've found the evidence.

BASRA: Of what?

AUGUSTA: A cover-up. The Bureau of Meteorology has kept it hidden. Deliberately concealed the evidence.

BASRA: What evidence?

AUGUSTA: That this is exactly what happened before the last Ice Age.

BASRA: Not heat like this.

AUGUSTA: Yes, dear.

BASRA: It has never regularly hit fifty degrees on this continent before. Never.

AUGUSTA: How do you know?

BASRA: The Antarctic ice shelf melted in a year. It was supposed to float around for decades.

AUGUSTA: Exactly like the last time.

BASRA: That's simply not true.

AUGUSTA: Yes it is.

BASRA: Because you say so? You're making this up.

AUGUSTA: We've produced new figures.

BASRA: I bet. Where from? The TAB?

AUGUSTA: Core samples.

BASRA: Where?

AUGUSTA: The arctic tundra. A university in Murmansk. And another one in Houston.

BASRA: Oh, well, then ...!

AUGUSTA: I'm heading back later this week and presenting it all in a keynote. Historical data. Cycles of warming and cooling. The patterns are there to see. It's uncanny.

BASRA: It's bullshit.

AUGUSTA: We need to go back to fossil fuels. Coal. Uranium! Now! Renewables are what got us into this mess. Solar panels are useless if we're about to plummet into another Ice Age. No sun, no power.

BASRA: That's crazy.

AUGUSTA: No, dear. Perfectly sensible.

BASRA: No, Grandma—it's actually insane. No wonder The Front targeted you.

AUGUSTA: Them? Ha! They're irrelevant. Let them target me.

Beat.

Oh, God, I just remembered: your aunt!

BASRA: Don't panic. She gets here tomorrow.

AUGUSTA: But the car—

BASRA: —will be cleaned in time. Gregor will take care of it.

AUGUSTA: The man's a saint. We need to pay him more.

BASRA: Says the Queen of the Minimum Wage.

AUGUSTA: Here.

She dumps the last of her outer layers into the bin liner.

Give them to the homeless.

She's about to head off and then recalls something.

The strangest thing happened on the drive home. I thought I saw something on the streets. An elephant.

BASRA: An elephant?

AUGUSTA: It was blue.

BASRA: What?

AUGUSTA: Or green. That colour in between.

BASRA: You saw a turquoise elephant?

AUGUSTA: I know. It's silly, isn't it? Just for a minute. Out of the corner of my eye. Then when I turned to look at it directly ... it vanished.

Beat.

BASRA *is away with the pixies.* AUGUSTA *clicks her fingers in front of BASRA's eyes.*

Basra, really, what's wrong with you today?

BASRA: It's just that—my blog. My blog is called *The Turquoise Elephant*.

AUGUSTA: Is it?

BASRA: Of course it is. I've told you a dozen times.

AUGUSTA: I suppose I must have known that.

BASRA: It's my work.

AUGUSTA: It's a hobby, Basra.

BASRA: It's what I do. I write about climate change. And turquoise elephants. And then Melbourne floods, and you see one. On the streets.

AUGUSTA: Nonsense. I just said I *thought* I—

BASRA: It's a sign.

AUGUSTA: Of what?

BASRA: I need to ...

AUGUSTA: What?

BASRA: Watch.

I need to watch it all.

Take it all in.

And then ...

AUGUSTA: What?

BASRA: And then I'll know what to do.

AUGUSTA *stares at her perplexedly.*

AUGUSTA: Basra?

Have you been taking the Stillnox again?

BASRA: Yes.

What? No.

AUGUSTA *leaves warily.*

AUGUSTA: Spray everything I've touched.

BASRA *opens up her laptop. Waits for it to reboot. Picks up the remote control and is about to turn the video screens on again when there is a buzz at the door.*

BASRA: Shit.

She presses the intercom.

You're a day early, Aunt Olympia. The driver's only just dropped Grandma off. He has to sterilise the car—

VISI: [*via the intercom*] It's Visi.

BASRA: Who?

VISI: Visi. The agency sent me.

BASRA: The—Oh! Of course. Come on up. [*To herself*] Shit, shit, shit.

BASRA exits and reappears with a can and sprays the air. VISI enters quietly.

VISI: Do you disinfect everyone who comes in here?

BASRA: What? Oh—No. Us. I'm disinfecting us. Not you.

VISI: I don't have—

BASRA: No. My grandmother. She—

VISI: What?

BASRA: —came in covered in shit.

VISI: The agency didn't tell me that.

BASRA: It's not typical. You wouldn't normally have to—

Beat. BASRA puts the can away.

VISI: I can come back.

BASRA: Trust me. There's never a 'right' time to enter this house.

Beat.

Is it still blowing a gale out there?

VISI: The wind picks up and dies down. It's weird.

BASRA: Like a furnace. And still my grandmother insists we're heading for an Ice Age. Any day now, apparently.

I've got to do something about it.

VISI: The Ice Age?

BASRA: My grandmother. I've got to stop her.

VISI: From what?

BASRA: From talking to them.

VISI: Who?

BASRA: The World Business Council.

VISI: Stop her how?

BASRA: Phone someone. Or sign something.

VISI: Sign what?

BASRA: I said I don't know!

Beat.

I'm sorry. I've only just found out. I'm—

VISI: You're upset.

BASRA: Yes.

VISI: Okay.

Beat.

This house is like a fortress.

BASRA: Yeah right. It's just missing the cannons.

VISI: Who's the enemy?

BASRA: Not 'who'. 'What'. Check out the windows. Triple-glazed.

VISI looks at the windows—huge floor-to-ceiling jobs that 'separate' audience and actors.

VISI: Wow. Is this like ... bulletproofing?

BASRA: Weatherproofing. An impermeable membrane between us and the rest of the planet. We have our own microclimate. You wouldn't know the Anthropocene is taking place outside.

VISI: The what?

BASRA: Climate change. Human generated.

VISI: Oh, right.

BASRA: But you'd know about that, right?

VISI: —

BASRA: You've seen what's happening in Melbourne. I don't need to lecture you about rising sea levels.

VISI: I'm not political.

BASRA: But you're alive. Living in this time and place.

A silence.

An awkward exchange of smiles.

BASRA gestures towards a seat. VISI remains standing.

So. The house is huge, but there are only three bedrooms. Mine, Grandma's—Augusta, that is. You can call her that, by the way.

VISI: Isn't it 'Your Excellency'? The agency said—

BASRA: She hasn't been Governor-General for ten years. Call her Augusta. For me. The other room is the guest room. The Serengeti Suite. Oh. My. God. You should lock yourself in there sometime. Surround

sound—storms rolling in across the plains. The vents actually pump negative ions into the room. You can experience the world. Without ever having to leave this house.

VISI: Right.

BASRA: Mostly it's Aunt Olympia who stays there. She's arriving tomorrow. And I'm sorry, but this needs to be said. The cleaning can get a little ... *rococo* after she's been here.

Beat.

Are you sure you want to take us on?

VISI: Don't you want to see my papers?

BASRA: The agency sent you, didn't they?

VISI: Yes.

BASRA: So they've screened you.

VISI: Sure.

BASRA: They're meticulous. They've weeded out a paedophile and two voluntary euthanasia advocates already. Do you have a visa?

VISI: To where?

BASRA: Here.

VISI: This is where I live.

BASRA: Of course, I just meant are you here permanently? The last ...
um ...

VISI: It's okay. You can say it.

BASRA: ... *employee* we had here—

VISI: Servant.

BASRA: —the last *worker* left to head back to the Philippines.

VISI: What's left of it.

BASRA: Yeah, right. Is your island ...

VISI: What?

BASRA: Is it ... above ...

VISI: Average?

BASRA: Water.

VISI: If it wasn't above water it wouldn't be an island.

BASRA: Sure. But is it okay? Your home?

VISI crosses to window.

VISI: Everything looks okay. Well, aside from it being forty-eight degrees outside. And Melbourne flooding. And coming tenth at our