



A Playlab *New Vintage* Title



Bag O' Marbles

by Kathryn Ash



Foreword by Dr Stephen Carleton



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Playlab acknowledges the assistance of



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1. *Bag O' Marbles*

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Foreword

Kathryn Ash's *Bag O' Marbles* is in some ways emblematic of the success of the Cairns-based theatre company — JUTE — that developed and first produced it. Both were 'launched' in the eyes of the national arts industry by this work. Ash is a founding member of the company, along with actor Susan Prince and indefatigable Artistic Director, Suellen Maunder (you'll note all three women performed in *Bag O' Marble's* first season in Cairns). The play was developed at the (then) Australian National Playwrights' Conference, and it secured Ash a prestigious residency at New Dramatists in New York. When Queensland Theatre Company picked the play up and remounted it in 2002, both Ash and JUTE had officially arrived on the state's mainstage.

It's a wonderful, tough, humorous, forensically observant and above all, *theatrical*, play that takes its place alongside a tranche of works by other women playwrights working and living in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Its *mise en scène* — the brutal and unyielding inland Queensland landscape — places Ash in conversation with writers like Elaine Acworth, Angela Betzien, Mary Anne Butler, Gail Evans, Anne Harris and Linda Hassall, many of whom Ash would go on to work with after this play more than any other alerted writers in disparate regions of the country to each others' presence. As Linda Hassall has written in relation to these Northern and Central Australian playwrights' theatre corpus:

These plays depict a landscape that is alive, which participates in and determines the action. The works delineate place as that which often brutally determines the fate of the characters that are in immediate conflict with their surroundings, and explore the crossover between worlds — historical, present and apocalyptic — by often surreal characters existing dually in temporal and spiritual realms. (123)

To this observation I have recently added:

The collective impression here is of a gendered landscape in which the nation's psychological faultlines surrounding masculinity, femininity, sexuality and place are being played out in the nation's Northern landscapes. It is as though the harshness, isolation and lawlessness of the Northern frontier are being activated to articulate visions of sexual violence; the North is operating here as metonymic space in which some of the nation's core

instances of 'shame' and 'guilt' about gender and violence are being played out. (62)

For Ash, of course, this setting is home. *Bag O' Marbles* is above all else a play about memory and childhood, and in its protagonist, Samantha, we see the trope of the returned city girl. Samantha is the family black sheep who returns on the occasion of her pregnancy to confront and perhaps to make peace with the violence that resides at the core of the country family she has fled from for most of her adult life. Her father, Stanley, is a violent alcoholic. He punched her mother, Rose, in the stomach many years ago during a particularly awful rampage, while she was pregnant with what would have been their fourth child. This shameful incident is the pivot around which the action swings; it is the great silence that no one will break or name. Samantha arrives as a ghost/witness/memory/catalyst and relives key moments of the past. She re-plays them and plays out different hypothetical presents and futures as she speculates about her family's response to her own pregnancy and the associations it will surely trigger. As she states early in the piece:

I am travelling along the axis of my universe. I am travelling to the epicentre of my cause and effect. Everyone has one. It is the place where the rules on which you base yourself, whether you like them or not, or whether you acknowledge them or not, were created. (11)

It is in these time-related flights of fancy that we see Ash as puppet-master, ever-mindful of her chosen medium's opportunities for speculative play. What also makes her work idiosyncratic is her faithful and painstaking homage to rural Queensland idiom. These characters speak in a regionally distinctive way. I hear my grandparents and my own extended family in those wonderful, laconic turns of phrase — particularly in the instances of Queensland simile: the council "charged us like bulls for the piping"; Harry has "the patience of a saint". You can almost feel the texture of the paper in the QCWA recipe book when Shirley tells us "I've made lemon meringue pie, lemon sorbet, lemon biscuits, lemon spread, lemonade and lemon delicious and I'm sick to death of lemons. You want them?" There's an authenticity to this sort of level of character detail that invites us into the piece and personalises its message about the danger of family secrets being left undealt with.

Bag O' Marbles is an important play for JUTE and of course for Ash,

personally. But in its eye for detail — not only as regards vernacular, but also in relation to domestic setting, childhood reminiscence, and family ritual — this play earns its status as a legacy piece for our region of the country.

Stephen Carleton

Works consulted:

Carleton, Stephen. 'Australian Gothic: Theatre and the Northern Turn.' *ALS*. 27.2 2012: 51-67.

Hassall, Linda. 'Evoking and Excavating Representations of Landscape: How are Experiences of Landscape Explored in the Creation and Development of a New Play: *Dawn's Faded Rose*?' PhD Diss., Griffith U, 2012.

Biography - Kathryn Ash

Kathryn Ash has worked for over twenty-five years in theatre, as a performer, writer and dramaturge and is a co-founder of JUTE Theatre Company in Cairns. As a successful published writer she has written some fifteen plays, including *Cake, Flutter*; and New Dramatist's Award-winning *Bag O' Marbles*. As a dramaturge she helped plan and run the award-winning Enter Stage Write program for the development of new works for performance, a program that still flourishes some 14 years after its beginning.

Characters

SAMANTHA

ROSE

STANLEY*

PHILLIP*

CYNTHIA

SHIRLEY

* PHILLIP and STANLEY are played by the same actor.

First Performance Details

Bag O' Marbles was first staged on 31 May 1994, by Just Us Theatre Ensemble (JUTE) in Cairns with the following cast and crew:

SAMANTHA	Suellen Maunder
ROSE	Susan Prince
STANLEY/PHILLIP	Jim Gosden
CYNTHIA	Kathryn Ash
SHIRLEY	Lou Bennetto
DANCERS	Ivan Medel
	Mary Ann Russell
MUSICIAN	Nigel Perrera
DIRECTOR	Velvet Eldred

After further development, *Bag O' Marbles* was presented as a co-production by the Queensland Theatre Company and Just Us Theatre Ensemble, opening on Thursday, 28 March 2002, with the following cast and crew:

SAMANTHA	Stephanie Briarwood
ROSE	Carol Burns
STANLEY/PHILLIP	Peter Marshall
CYNTHIA	Susan Prince
SHIRLEY	Karen Crone
DIRECTOR	Michael Gow
DESIGNER	Robert Kemp
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Matt Scott
COMPOSER	Pete Goodwin (smear)
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	Scott Witt
STAGE MANAGER	Sam French
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	Tanya Malouf
Emerging Artist Secondments:	
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Jon Driver
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER	Simon Tait

Bag O' Marbles

ACT ONE

The sound of a bus travelling, hydraulic brakes releasing, speeding up. SAMANTHA is sleeping in a bus seat. The others are standing about the backyard of her family home. A sense that they are not living, rather like they are waiting to live. Both SAMANTHA and the others sway in unison to the bus movements, as if they are all travelling together. This is her landscape; these are the elements of her journey. In the backyard: a weather-board house, with steps leading to a verandah and a flyscreened door leading into the house, two curtained windows visible, one on the verandah front, one to the side of the house, a water tankstand and a wheelbarrow filled with soil. In the distance, there is a field of broken dead trees. SAMANTHA wakes, strains to see the time on her wristwatch. She opens a book and seems to be reading from it at first. Halfway through speaking, she closes the book and continues.

SAMANTHA

There are some games we participate in without full knowledge. There are rules to these games, but we often play without a conscious understanding of them. There are the rules of action and reaction. Of power and powerlessness. Of possession and the possessed. Of cause and effect.

The bus brakes sharply, lurching SAMANTHA forward, propelling PHILLIP and CYNTHIA into action. They are children of 6, 12 and 10 respectively.

PHILLIP

Righto!

CYNTHIA

Righ-ti-o!

PHILLIP uses a stick to draw a four-foot diameter circle on the ground. SAMANTHA excitedly joins them.

PHILLIP Ringer rules, starting with a Tom Bomber, knuckle down —

SAMANTHA No cheating!

PHILLIP No hunching!

SAMANTHA Thirteen targets!

PHILLIP *[to CYNTHIA]* Thirteen targets, seven from you and six from me —

SAMANTHA And no junk! *[to PHILLIP]* Can I play, Flip Flop?

CYNTHIA *[to PHILLIP]* How come I got to put in seven and you only got to put in six?

PHILLIP 'Cos there's got to be thirteen. Add it up, you stupid girl!

SAMANTHA Yeah, stupid girl.

CYNTHIA swipes at SAMANTHA who jumps away for protection behind PHILLIP, laughing.

PHILLIP *[to CYNTHIA]* Playing for keeps, yeah?

CYNTHIA One point for every shot out the ring!

PHILLIP abruptly scrubs out the circle he has drawn.

PHILLIP Only girls keep scores. Boys have keeps.

CYNTHIA Aw, come on ...

PHILLIP *[moving away]* Nuh, nuh, nuh,

SAMANTHA Nuh! Nuh!

CYNTHIA kicks at his shin but misses.

CYNTHIA You're a big fat pig!

- PHILLIP And you're a big fat girl! That's worse.
- PHILLIP hacks a gob of phlegm and spits close to CYNTHIA. She dives away.*
- CYNTHIA Um-wah! I'm telling Dad!
- PHILLIP turns to leave. CYNTHIA rushes from behind and jumps onto his back.*
- CYNTHIA I'm gonna box your ears in!
- She punches at him. SAMANTHA squeals excitedly. PHILLIP shrugs CYNTHIA off and she falls to the ground.*
- CYNTHIA Mum!
- ROSE Phillip! One game and then you better come inside.
- CYNTHIA and PHILLIP eyeball each other.*
- CYNTHIA All right! Play for keeps!
- PHILLIP returns to drawing the circle. CYNTHIA blows a raspberry at SAMANTHA. SAMANTHA reciprocates.*
- PHILLIP Now, get it straight, Cynthia. These are the rules.
- SAMANTHA First there is a big circle!
- PHILLIP Every marble I shoot out of the ring is mine, right? If I hit your shooter out of the ring, then all your marbles are mine, right, and no belly-aching to Mum about it.
- SAMANTHA *[walking through the ring]* It's a big, big circle and you're not allowed to walk through it.
- CYNTHIA Hop out of it, Sam.
- SAMANTHA I'm playing too!

PHILLIP/CYNTHIA No, you're not.

SAMANTHA Why not?

PHILLIP Cos I'm the eldest and I says so.

CYNTHIA You don't even know the rules.

SAMANTHA I do too! Tell them Aunt Shir!

SHIRLEY Samantha, pet, it's just a game.

SAMANTHA I'm gonna draw the cross!

PHILLIP hands her the stick and with it she draws a cross in the middle of the circle.

PHILLIP What you got, Cyn?

CYNTHIA Um ... I got me yellow and blue Catseye, me Onion Skin.

SAMANTHA [*now as an adult*] This game doesn't end.

CYNTHIA Purple Galaxy. Alley Agate. Me Popeye Corkscrew.

SAMANTHA It could be played forever if I let it.

CYNTHIA Me Mulberry Pinch and ... me Little Missy.

PHILLIP Ow bull, I'm not playing for that. Rack off out of the ring, Samantha.

CYNTHIA Yeah, ping ding.

SAMANTHA stands in the middle of the circle.

SAMANTHA No. This time I will not leave.

CYNTHIA Hurry up, Dad'll be home soon.

PHILLIP Yeah, we'll tell him you've been mucking up, Sam.

SAMANTHA Let him come. I won't run! I won't!

ROSE Samantha!

PHILLIP Pipe down, pip squeak.

PHILLIP grabs for the stick. SAMANTHA kicks him in the shin and he yelps. SAMANTHA raises the stick over her head as if she will strike him with it. A roll of thunder, which turns into the sound of a truck approaching. Dogs bark, chooks flurry. All turn towards the noise of a truck in the distance. SHIRLEY exits hurriedly in the direction of her own home across the creek, looking over her shoulder with concern. ROSE walks up the steps indicating the children should follow.

CYNTHIA scrambles away into the house after her mother. PHILLIP pockets all the marbles, watching fearfully over his shoulder, then goes to exit. He has second thoughts and returns to smudge the lines of the game on the ground with his feet, with an eye always toward the sound of the approaching vehicle. He then bolts in a direction away from the house. SAMANTHA is left standing alone in the middle of the faded circle. Silence.

SAMANTHA I am travelling along the axis of my universe. I am travelling to the epicentre of my cause and effect. Everyone has one. It is the place where the rules on which you base yourself, whether you like them or not, or whether you acknowledge them or not, were created.

ROSE, as an elderly woman, enters, picks up the handles of the wheelbarrow filled with soil and begins to push it cross stage. SAMANTHA unconsciously rubs her stomach, swaying with the rolling of the bus, an action mirrored further on stage by ROSE as she brushes the rim of the faint circle around SAMANTHA and then veers off to the other side of the stage.

- SAMANTHA In my mind's eye she is there. As she is always there. Walking the rim. The slow paces of perseverance as she plots a never-ending orbit around him.
- ROSE rests for a moment on the edge of the wheelbarrow. She wipes her neck and face with the edge of her dress in an uninhibited fashion. We see STANLEY's shadow through the window of the house, seated and still.*
- STANLEY *[Off]* Where are you off to with that wheelbarra there, Rosie?
- ROSE Hey? You awake there, Stanley? Thought you were still in bed.
- STANLEY I am. Where are you taking that soil?
- ROSE Aw ... just re-arranging things here a bit. It's going to be a hot stinker of a day.
- STANLEY Is that top soil you got there? Where'd you get that?
- ROSE I should put the sprinklers on. Make it cool. Hey? Yes, it's top soil. What's left of it.
- STANLEY Where would you be putting that?
- ROSE Harry brought it over for me. Didn't you hear the ruckus?
- STANLEY What's that?
- ROSE I don't know how you could've slept through it. Harry brought it over last night with Shirley, and Shirley made the mistake of bringing that Tina with her. Harry has just finished dumping out the soil when Tina ups and outs the back of the Ute and tears away at our dogs. Well! It was one big ball of top soil and dog's tails. Tina's flying at them something savage, Shirley's in there with a stick trying to pull our dogs out of it. *[laughing]* It weren't funny at all at the time. Thought Shirley was going to get her hand bit off.

STANLEY Our dogs probably mistook Tina for a piece of sausage.
Easy enough mistake.

ROSE Turn around and there's your brother leaning on the
bonnet of the Ute with this big grin from ear to ear.

STANLEY 'Bet Harry hates that bloody dog. Shirley's always
petting it up like it was some five-year-old kid.

ROSE When we finally scattered them, there's Tina, ears
half-chewed off, blood all down her snout, shaking like a
leaf. And Shirley's covered in soil from head to foot.
And Harry grabs Tina, wraps her in a rag, plonks her
back in the Ute and says "Tah for the show!"

STANLEY Oh jeez. Shirl would of made a good mother.

SAMANTHA Odd, isn't it?

STANLEY *[thinking it was ROSE who spoke]* What?

ROSE Eh? No, I was just thinking. The way things turn out.

SAMANTHA Funny old life.

ROSE Funny old life. We got Phillip and Cynthia and
Samantha ... And just across the creek, Shirley and
Harry have no-one but each other and that fool dog.
Shirley and Harry. You and I. Funny, hey? You just do
what you do and you keep doing it and never really put
your head up to see what's happened.

SAMANTHA Or to suppose what could have happened if —

ROSE Like someone had it all planned out for us, right from
the start. You just never know, do you Stanley? Stan?

*ROSE thinks STANLEY has fallen back to sleep. With a
renewed energy, she prepares to push the wheelbarrow again.*

STANLEY Rose?

ROSE Yes?

STANLEY Can you fetch me a glass of water?

ROSE In a minute.

She goes to leave.

STANLEY Where are you putting that top soil?

ROSE throws down the wheelbarrow.

ROSE If you must know I'm putting it out the side!

STANLEY What for?

ROSE Never you mind what for!

STANLEY You building up for that rose garden again?

ROSE What if I am?

STANLEY Not again! Bloody waste of effort! How many times is this now? You tried 'round the front and they burnt up. You tried down the bailyards and the cows et 'em. You tried over near the creek and the floods got 'em.

ROSE I haven't tried 'round the side here.

STANLEY It's not the right soil there!

ROSE [*pointing to the contents of the wheelbarrow*] This is the right soil!

STANLEY They won't take on. And even if they do, they're these miserable little shrivelled up buds that get bit with the first frost.

- ROSE I'll cover them.
- STANLEY What'll be the point? You won't see them then. It'll be this bush full of plastic bags.
- ROSE I'll see them.
- STANLEY You'll use up too much water.
- ROSE Aw, get out! I want a rose garden. I'm sick of cucumbers and caulies with grubs in them.
- STANLEY Well, good! All the grubs'll come eat your roses and leave the rest of it alone.
- ROSE Well, good on them!
- Dogs bark.*
- ROSE [*to the dogs*] Here! Bomber! Sit down!
- STANLEY Can you bring us a cup of tea?
- ROSE [*softer*] In a minnie.
- STANLEY What time is it?
- ROSE Quarter past seven.
- STANLEY What time's this barbecue tonight?
- ROSE I wouldn't have a clue, Stanley. Not until after Sam gets here.
- STANLEY I need me medicine. I don't feel so crash hot.
- ROSE Let me get on with this. I'll be in with you in a tick.
- STANLEY Are you driving into town today?
- ROSE [*exiting pushing the wheelbarrow*] No.