

Wittenoom

by

Mary Anne Butler

**Winner of the inaugural Shane and Cathryn Brennan
Prize for Playwriting, 2022**

Cast:

Dot – an older woman

Pearl – a younger woman

Characters segue between past and present, a 30+ year time gap. This is not literal.

The playwright encourages cross-cultural casting in all her works.

Set / Era:

A hospital/hospice - The Present

Wittenoom, in Western Australia's remote Pilbara - The Past

Synopsis:

Dot is dying of mesothelioma; an incurable cancer caused by blue asbestos. Her prognosis is days, if not hours left to live. Pearl sits by Dot's deathbed as the Dogs of the Apocalypse hover, waiting for Dot to finally let go.

Flashback to The Past: Dot and Pearl live in Wittenoom; the blue asbestos mining town in Western Australia's Pilbara region. So begin glorious days when the Pilbara's stunning landscapes, magnificent wildlife and close-knit community shaped an idyllic lifestyle: the wild-natured Dot making the most of every second, while an adolescent Pearl tries to make sense of what her own life might be.

The weaving of Dot and Pearl's personal stories into the frame of the broader mining industry asks questions of accountability in an era where the health and cultural impacts of mining ricochet as heavily in 2022 as they did in 1962.

Wittenoom juxtaposes vivid life with looming death in an ultimately hopeful reminder that life is here, and now: a chance gift to be lived to the full.

Dot and Pearl are fictional characters. *Wittenoom* is a work of fiction, based on stories and public records of a mining town which operated in Western Australia's remote Pilbara.

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A hospital/hospice - The Present

PEARL: The dogs of the apocalypse lie at her feet, ears alert.

...waiting...

They can feel it in their flesh-bones; under their fur -
sense the rising of the soul into the night
as she floats, barely present;
not quite ready
to face the great emptiness.

Blue sickness gorging on her insides.

Bones sucked empty of marrow.

Flesh dissolved, eaten away.

Her whole life drowning inside her own lungs.

The hoarse rattle of death – not animal, not human.

The dogs of the apocalypse lie at her feet, fangs bared.

They are patient. They can wait.

They have waited for millennia.

They understand that time melts glass, if you give it long enough:
that flesh becomes ash,
and ash becomes dust

...eventually...

Breath shallow and rattling. Body all but corpse, now:

bone-thin and hollow,
skeletal sparrow.

Shudder of soul eclipsing –
atoms reforming:
soft,
like stardust.

The dogs of the apocalypse rise
tense
curve their maws up towards the
full
bright
moon.

Beat.

Wittenoom - The Past

- DOT: Pearl.
PEARL!
...there you are...
- PEARL: She calls me Pearl, but I tell everyone I'm Saffron. Not orange and not red: an in-between colour like the rusted dirt of this country, before they laid the tailings.
- DOT: Where you been? You're filthy. Now go wash up. We got a visitor.
- PEARL: Another fella.
- DOT: Miners, millers, stockmen, tourists. It's a smorgasbord out here.
- PEARL: Smorgasbord of single men, looking for a wife.
- DOT: Well, they can keep looking. Don't need a forever one, taking up space and time. Just need them for a night or two, so's to meet my needs – then on to the next when I feel the need again. Lonely out here, otherwise.
- PEARL: What about me?
- DOT: You're too young to be lonely. Teach you: you can be anything, all on your lonesome. Don't need someone else to make you a whole person. Now off you go. Me n' him got things to discuss. Not back until four, you understand?
- PEARL: I cycle through the blue-grey streets, looking for other kids to play with. Past the pub, past the cinema, past the bakery, past the racecourse. Ride all the way out of town 'til I find the boys, surfing down a mountain of tailings, hessian sacks for surfboards. Get my own sack, run up to the top and surf down a giant blue wave. Again.
- Like I'm in the ocean; middle of the deep blue sea.

Again.

Feel free, and light, and strong. Like I can do anything.

Again.

Stack it at the bottom, all blue and bruised – but I don't care.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Until the sacks are shredded by the sharpness of the tailings, so we stop.

Light starts to fall across the ranges: yellow-gold-orange-red.

Shadows grow bone-thin and fragile.

A hospital/hospice - The Present blending in to...

Wittenoom - The Past

DOT: A cough. Dry. Persistent.

PEARL: Light fades beneath rock.

DOT: Then a hack. Can't stop.

PEARL: Here, at end of land's end

DOT: Phlegm and bile and raging chest.

PEARL: drowning in swathes of bones

DOT: ...hard...

PEARL: where ghosts sing back their mournful songs

DOT: ...to...

PEARL: through layers of crusted time

DOT: ...breathe.

Beat.

Have nightmares about fingers of poison spreading vivid across my lungs;
worming their way deep down into my chest.

Wake up scared and shaking; lump of worry twisted low inside –

...and then...

bright

red

thick.

Deep flecks of raw, fresh blood splayed out
across the whiteness of my handkerchief
in the shape
of a star.

Beat.

Wittenoom - The Past

PEARL: Race Day, and in they come...

DOT: ...chartered flights and motorbikes, four-wheel drives and utes, caravans and Kombis...

PEARL: ...churning up dust like slow-falling snow.

DOT: Ladies from Roebourne, Onslow, Carnarvon, Port Hedland strut the blue-paved streets, fascinators quivering.

PEARL: They even come in from Perth. The Big Smoke.

DOT: Watch them goggle at the wild beauty of this place: blue skies and spinifex, ghost gums and budgies, roos and galahs, dingos and wildflowers.

Beat.

Well; will you look at that!

PEARL: ...she means the men...

DOT: Bushies and townies, stockmen and wharfies, builders and labourers; all suited up

PEARL: in the forty degree heat.

DOT: Sweating, and rugged, and handsome. Fresh meat in town tonight.

Look at that one! Yeee-ha!

PEARL: Full on cowboy rig; right down to the spurs.

DOT: Lean jaw and built chest. Arms that strong you could swing on 'em.

PEARL: ...and she does...

DOT: The pub swells to five times its size and the campground splays out, spilling into the paddock next-door. The front lawns of houses grow tents and caravans, swags and tarpaulins. Men sleep out under the open stars with only their coats for comfort.

PEARL: Mum puts a sign out on the front lawn advertising ‘Camping’, and three fellas pull in to set up amongst the dry blue tailings of lawn while she fusses and flutters and flirts about, joining them for a ‘sundowner’ while the sun’s still high in the sky.

DOT: Pearl! Come on, we’ll be late!

PEARL: At the track the Bookies wave their tickets about, crowded in by punters who push forward, laying bets before the race starts. One fella bickers about who’s next and someone bickers back and a fight breaks out; the two of them rolling in the dust: landing punches, ripping shirts, fists flying hard and fast and by the time they’re done it’s too late, the Bookie’s shut up shop and the race is about to start.

DOT: ...and they’re off! Golden Dream won’t leave her gate, and Blue Sky Mine throws his jockey right at the start. The rest of them gallop around the track while the medics carry the screaming jockey off, leg twisted at all the wrong angles.

PEARL: Dust kicks up around the track: whirlpool-whirring, spinning a blue-grey cloud around us.

Dot dances in the whirling dust, joyous and unfettered.

She puts her hand out for Pearl to join her.

PEARL: Mum! Don’t! You’re embarrassing!

DOT: ...you need to loosen up, girl...

PEARL: You got no shame!

DOT: ...and it’s Blue Sky Mine by a nose: unhindered by the weight of his jockey, running free as the wind.

PEARL: After the horses there’s ice-cream and sack races.

DOT: Beer and Two-up.

PEARL: Tennis and golf.

DOT: Picnics, and swimming, and then -

BOTH: The Wittenoom Ball!

PEARL: All dressed up like peacocks and penguins.

DOT: Flirting and laughing and dancing and wine.
My dress is blood-red.

PEARL: Where’d you get that?

DOT: Made it myself, from curtains I found at the back of the pub. Coupla holes in them, but – easily fixed.
Sprig of wattle in my hair. Each little flower like a tiny sun, exploding.

One fella grabs me around the waist and pulls me hard into him and we twirl and spin so fast we become a whirling cloud of hope. God, we dance. Until my feet go red-raw with it; layers of skin peeling off inside my shoes. And still we don't stop.

He asks me my name and I tell him it's Patsy, even though it's really Dot. Dot is a speck on the landscape; a nothing. Patsy has class - like Patsy Cline. That's the thing about way out here. You can be anyone; anything in this centre of the second chance.

They kick us out and we stagger up to the top of Mount Watkins: watch the stars pin-prick their way out from the inky black, making a pattern of possibility.

He peels off my dress and we have each other, slow and soft against the cool of midnight rock

**Wittenoom - The Past blending in to...
A hospital/hospice - The Present**

PEARL: Biopsies.

DOT: until the birds start their happy cackling

PEARL: MRIs.

DOT: and glorious day peels itself upwards

PEARL: CAT scans.

DOT: from deep beneath the blood-red mountain ranges.

PEARL: PET scans.

DOT: A shadow. On my lung. Blue.

PEARL: Spread out in a river system: tributaries winding in and out and over and under; dense and dark and knitted and complex.

Beat.

They'll fix it.

DOT: What if they can't?

What if it sets in and rots. Spreads and consumes me. Eats away at my body.

What if they can't get to it, can't –

eliminate it.

...what then...?