

**'A potent  
meditation on  
the intensity of  
women's lives.'**  
Charlotte Wood

**'Witty, affecting,  
brilliantly wise  
and original.'**  
Gail Jones



**THE  
PERFORMANCE  
CLAIRE  
THOMAS**

**'I read from start  
to finish almost  
without looking up.'**  
Clare Bowditch

**'Read it as soon as  
you possibly can.'**  
Emily Bitto

**THE  
PERFORMANCE**

**CLAIRE  
THOMAS**



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*Dedicated to Katie Ridsdale and Annabelle Roxon,  
the best two of our three*

I can't write one complete sentence about her because she  
was her own complete sentence, and her sentence about  
herself was better than anyone else's because she uttered it  
sort of without thinking while thinking too much, I can't  
tell you how unusual that is in a world where, nowadays,  
no one leaves the house without some kind of script.

Hilton Als, *White Girls*

How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching  
it all! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play.  
Who could believe the sky at the back wasn't painted?

Katherine Mansfield, *Miss Brill*

ONE

MARGOT IS SHUFFLING IN A balletic first position along the strip of carpet between the legs of the already-seated people in the theatre and the chair backs of the row in front. She is almost late, and only some of the seated legs are shifting sideways to enable her to pass.

Excuse me, Margot says to no one in particular. Excuse me.

She is holding her handbag in front of her, moving it carefully over the row of heads. She is determined not to bump anyone with her bag or her body as she watches her feet in her sandals on the carpet, step step stepping.

As she reaches the centre of the row, she looks up to see a young man in the seat next to hers. He stands, nodding his head, all chivalrous and patient.

Thank you, she says, squeezing past him. That's very kind.

Margot sits down and drops her bag onto her lap.

The young man also sits. He presses his forearm on the red velvet armrest between them. His flesh spreads out along the length of the armrest, his fingers hanging down towards the floor.

Margot considers asserting her own claim with her own presumptuous arm, but she doesn't want to touch him. His skin is covered in tattoos and pale ginger hairs. He has goose-bumps from the air conditioning. A parrot is inked onto his arm. Primary colours and a neat, sharp beak. Is he thinking of pirates, perhaps?

You're not usually here on a Friday evening, Margot says.

He frowns at her – an arrow between his eyes.

I'm a subscriber, she explains. You get to know the people around you. She didn't mean to sound territorial. He looks annoyed.

But he replies. A whole sentence. We're doing a bit of Beckett at uni.

Beckett, says Margot. I didn't know that's what we were seeing until I got here. Just grabbed my ticket and fled. I was worried about being late. The traffic is always absolutely

## THE PERFORMANCE

dire in the heat, don't you find? People seem to drive very strangely in the heat. And that smoke haze. I thought my windows were dirty for much of the drive until I realised it was just the smoke haze.

I got the tram, the young man says. No air con. That was absolutely dire.

I see, says Margot, turning her face forward. She has an expensive, unobstructed view of the stage.

Margot coughs, more loudly than she would like. She clears her throat.

She is conscious of her bare arms in her shift dress. Her bare legs and sandals. Her bare toenails, unpainted. Her father, many years ago when he was still alive and she wasn't old, told her she shouldn't expose her elbows if she could help it. Wrinkly elbows are ageing on a woman, he said. And for decades, Margot wore sleeves. More recently, they've been useful with the bruises. But this summer – this unusually oppressive, stinking season – she decided she was tired of sleeves. She was sick of the cling and the pull. When it is hot, she will have bare arms. And it's been very hot today – still forty degrees at 7 p.m.

The false cold of the theatre makes it hard to imagine the heavy wind outside in the real world, the ash air pressing onto the city from the nearby hills where bushfires are taking hold.

Margot loosens her wristwatch from her cooled skin, and slides its face back and forth around her arm. Her legs are stretched straight with her ankles crossed beneath the chair in front.

The house lights lower.

The auditorium feels hopeful in the darkness.

Margot coughs again.

The young man beside her fidgets. She knows he is annoyed by her coughs, the jolt of them cutting through the tenuous quiet of the waiting theatre.

But then a bell rings! It is harsh and institutional.

The play has started.

The buzz seems to be coming from all around. The audience shudders as people adjust to the shock, rearranging their limbs.

The buzz goes on – so loud – and stops.

Begins again! Stops.

Blazing light.