

Phoenix in Flames

by Phoenix Black

A naive, pregnant United Nations aidworker returns home to work in the Australian Fire Service, where her new ideas threaten the patriarchy.



ACT ONE

*Words underlined or  
asterisked\* have a particular  
behavioural nudge function.*

1

Christmas day at Wallaby Heights.  
Darkness. The room is uncomfortably  
and increasingly hot. The smell of  
smoke and crackle of embers.

Flashes of embers in streams.

Only voices are heard.

NEIGHBOUR 1 (JONNO)

Who'd -a-thought you'd be the last man standing eh?

TOM

(Aussie accent)

Not me fer sure. What happened to "nothing ever happens in  
Wallaby Heights?"

NEIGHBOUR 1 (JONNO)

Nothing does. Usually. Not even a neighbourhood barbie  
before you turned up. Got any more buckets?

TOM

Nuh. Girls are on the pots and pans now. Sun'll be up in a  
minute. It's gunna get worse befo' it gets betta.

Lights up. Tom's large house.  
Exhausted locals put out spot fires  
using bowls and pots of water. TOM  
(30s), is Australian-Asian\* and  
wears orange. Tom's Australian-  
Asian\* wife JOY (30s), coos and  
rocks her baby. A mobile phone is  
on an outdoor table at front of  
stage.

TOM

(pointing)

Jonno, over there!

NEIGHBOUR 1 (JONNO) looks to Tom,  
hurriedly walks to spot and puts  
water on it.

TOM

Holly, over there!

Dogs bark. NEIGHBOUR 2 (HOLLY)  
looks to Tom, hurriedly walks to  
spot and puts water on it.

TOM

Carol, over there!

NEIGHBOUR 3 (CAROL) looks to Tom,  
jogs to spot and puts water on it.

TOM

I need someone to get inside the roof.

NEIGHBOUR 1 (JONNO)  
(running off stage)

I'm on it!

TOM points to back of audience.

TOM

Paul, what are you doing? She's gone! She's gone mate!

NEIGHBOUR 4 (PAUL), UNSEEN  
Got to get the friggin' cat! I'm going to kill Frank when he  
gets back!

TOM

Joy! How's the baby doing?

JOY  
(strong Aussie  
accent)

Some bloody Christmas present eh?

ALL laugh.

Chickens cluck urgently in a room  
behind stage. The stage darkens as  
clouds of smoke choke the sun. Dogs  
bark desperately.

TOM

Jesus Mary and Joseph, it's behind us!

A tsunami wave of flame rises from  
behind the house. The baby screams.  
ALL turn to back of stage as the  
sound of fire becomes deafening.  
The lights go out as the sound of  
fire continues.

## 2

MERINDA GOODES (MERRY) is in her parents' lounge room. The Pina Colada\* song plays in the background. The family silently chair-dance. MERRY kneels in the centre of white flat pack detritus and baby clothes. She crouches over the assembly instructions. Her MUM, a white Sri Lankan woman in her 70s, is dressed in a salwar kamee on the couch. She watches MERRY intently. Her DAD, a dark Sri Lankan man in his 70s, is slumped and drooling in his wheelchair. He wears shorts and a green and gold cricket shirt.

MERRY sits up revealing a baby's onesie strapped to her belly. Her hands are clasped in front of her chin in concentration.

MUM

(Sri Lankan accent)

Are you praying?

MERRY

(Australian accent)

Yes. I'm praying to the god of flat pack furniture.

MUM

Don't say ugly things!

MUM walks to look over MERRY's shoulder.

MUM

Do you want me to do it?

MUM pulls a cordless drill from behind her back and revs it.

MERRY

No! Please. Stand back. Just let me do it my way.

MUM sits back down on the couch.

MUM

That's the problem with you and your father. Brains in your back side.

MERRY

Oh that's where I put my degrees! Dad, check your undies for your PhD.

MUM

You think the instructions to life are in a manual. You don't know how to get things done in the real world. Just bat your eyelids at that friend of yours. He'll do it.

MERRY

That is so wrong, on so many levels.

Merry's MUM gesticulates head and hands Sri Lankan style.

MUM

What's wrong with being charming? I'm charming. Your father's charming, in his own way. If you'd been a bit more charming and a bit more tactful in your last job you might have got -

MERRY's hands say STOP!

MERRY

Don't.

DAD looks up and slurs in a heavy Sri Lankan accent.

DAD

Asshole!

DAD slumps again. MERRY laughs and kisses her DAD's hand.

MERRY

Mum I'm paid to be tactical not tactful. And, I'll have you know, you can get the job done just by being good at your job. Even if you are a woman.

MUM

You're just too...

MERRY

Smart? Capable? Fearless?

MUM

Naïve.

MERRY

When did optimism and trust become naivety, I tell you. And what does this have to do with baby furniture?

MERRY surveys the chaos around her  
and exhales heavily.

MUM

Look! I want to get something off my chest!

MERRY and DAD slump and sigh  
dramatically.

MERRY

Oh God. What?!

MUM

I don't think you should take that job. It's full of white  
people.

MERRY

You're white.

MUM

But they're white aaall the way through.

MERRY

(laughingly)

White Australia Policy, apartheid, they're over Mum.

MUM

You've been working in the United Nations too long. This is  
not the country you left. Just think of the baby, it took so  
long for him to come to us, and -

MERRY

And babies need to eat. So do we. The nurses have to paid,  
the mortgage has to be paid.

MERRY rolls her long black hair  
swiftly into a top knot.

MERRY

The Lord is not going to provide Mum. Speaking of which -

MERRY taps her absent watch. MUM  
jumps up, rushes to door and looks  
over her shoulder at MERRY.

MUM

Are you coming to church?

MERRY

No.

MUM

You have no God!

MUM slams door behind her.

MERRY

Pray for us Mum!

DAD

Tell me what God says.

They laugh at their regular Sunday comedy routine. MERRY raises her Dad's limp hand and high fives it.

MERRY

Now. This should all be straight-forward. Easy-to-assemble. See? It says here in the manual.

TRANSITION.

3

The operations room (The Pit) at the Australian Fire Service (The Service). A sea of bright red shirts and black pants. The click-clack of hands scuttling across keyboards. John Baptist (nicknamed Teflon) is being interviewed by a REPORTER on the fire impacting Tom's house. Three STAFF are behind TEFLON, typing.

TEFLON

The fire has cut off Wallaby Heights.

REPORTER

So you're sending in the Yellow Angels?

TEFLON

We have activated the Automated Text Message system so the residents have been alerted.

REPORTER

So you're not sending in the Yellow Angels?

TEFLON

The Service cannot, will not, endanger the lives of our volunteers. There is one road in and one road out. Even if our volunteers got there, they couldn't get back.

REPORTER

So you're not going to do anything?

TEFLON

We have activated the Automated Text Message system.

The click-clack stops. The STAFF look up simultaneously at an overhead monitor.

STAFF 1

Oh my God!

STAFF 2 turns and touches TEFLON.

STAFF 2

We've got a situation.

TEFLON checks the monitor and calmly turns to the REPORTER.

REPORTER

Is that the Telstra Tower?!

The click-clack becomes louder. STAFF hunch over their computer screens. Phones ring urgently.

TEFLON

Sorry guys, we're going to have to close the media room. Operational priorities. I'll give you an update in an hour. Jenny! Jenny, can you show the guys to the catering?

Door closes as REPORTER leaves.

TEFLON

Fuck!

TRANSITION.

4

The footage of the fire at Tom's house is played on a TV, to an emotive soundtrack. The COMMISSIONER, sitting behind his desk, meets with TEFLON and BRENDA, head of human resources. The COMMISSIONER turns off the TV.

Silence.

COMMISSIONER slams his hand on his desk.



COMMISSIONER

It's gone viral for God's sake! How did this happen?

TEFLON

It's from a home security camera. The Union put the soundtrack on. Trying to position themselves before the Conditions of Service negotiations no doubt.

COMMISSIONER

It makes us look incompetent, like we left them to die. What are they saying? Is he speaking Chinese?

BRENDA

Which brings us to the reason for our meeting -

TEFLON

We can put a positive spin on this. The Automated Text Message is right there, on the table, central to the action. The Yellow Angels weren't there but the community was so well trained by our volunteers that they knew what to do.

COMMISSIONER

Were they?

TEFLON

Probably not. Our guys put the wet stuff on the red stuff. Talking to people isn't always in their skill set.

BRENDA

I can come back.

TEFLON

We'll flood media with hero stories of our volunteers. The media don't want to see their hero fall. We're their action story on a slow news day.

COMMISSIONER

Yes, yes.

BRENDA moves to rise.

COMMISSIONER

No Brenda. Stay. We need to get through this other stuff.

BRENDA sits and leans towards  
Commissioner.

BRENDA

As per my briefing note, we now need to provide figures to The Minister on percentage of women and people from diverse backgrounds -

COMMISSIONER leans back, casually.  
TEFLON mirrors him.

COMMISSIONER  
We've got loads of women here.

BRENDA  
In admin and human resources.

COMMISSIONER leans forward. TEFLON  
mirrors him.

COMMISSIONER  
There's lots of Indians and Asians in IT.

TEFLON  
And accounting.

BRENDA  
Not in management and not in operations. We also need to  
show that we are working with our multicultural communities,  
that we are inclusive

TEFLON  
We've got those fact sheets in Chinese and Italian.

BRENDA  
And a couple of pages on it in our volunteer recruitment  
manual.

COMMISSIONER  
Yes well we don't need another noodle story.

BRENDA  
Noodle story?

COMMISSIONER  
Before your time Brenda. This Chinese-or-some-sort-of-Asian  
guy, joined the Tumbi Umbi brigade and they nicknamed him  
Noodle. Harmless enough but he didn't see the funny side of  
it. When he left he wrote to the Anti Discrimination Board,  
who didn't find it as amusing as the folks from Tumbi Umbi.

TEFLON  
That's when we did the fact sheets.

BRENDA  
(hands over  
document)  
We need to um, reconsider our approach, recruit people from  
diverse backgrounds, engage with diverse communities -

TEFLON

(animated)

We'll update the fact sheets, get more languages, put them on our social media, get some photos of our volunteers talking to Aboriginal communities -

COMMISSIONER clicks his fingers by his temple, as if to remember.

COMMISSIONER

What about that girl I came into eyeball? When you interviewed for the Behavioural Insights Manager role.

BRENDA

Yes, a real triple threat.

COMMISSIONER

Huh?

TEFLON

Woman, ethnic, outsider.

BRENDA

No! I mean no. She's got serious emergency ops and behaviour change credentials.

COMMISSIONER

Have you hired her?

TEFLON

Just waiting your signature.

TEFLON hands COMMISSIONER a paper.  
He signs with a flourish.

COMMISSIONER

Well done. Well done. Get her started on the fact sheets and this diversity issue. She better not be a prima donna like the last one

TRANSITION.

5

The operations room ('The Pit') at The Service Headquarters, Sydney. TEFLON and MERRY look into the audience. MERRY is in a stylish but professional bright green dress and heels. TEFLON is in his corporate uniform.

TEFLON

Welcome to The Pit.

MERRY

(looking around)

Incredible. I think I'm really going to like it here.

TEFLON, making no eye contact with  
MERRY, punctuates each sentence by  
pointing into the audience to  
several unseen TV screens.

TEFLON

On that screen there you can see our helicopters, tracked in real time. On that screen you see the vision; they're fitted with infrared cameras so you see through the smoke. Twitter screen. Facebook screen. There's a screen for each news channel. See those four semicircular desks? – there's one for north, west, south, east of the state. The Public Information Officer sits there in the centre. He gets the intel and feeds it to the firefighters. That's the media desk, where we get the information from twitter, Facebook and the news and respond to queries. And that's where we keep the Automated Text Message system, my first-born child. We call it the nursery. I won an award for that.

MERRY

Impressive.

TEFLON

Yes, we're ahead of the game.

MERRY

Game?

TEFLON

The mediacomms game. It's not a competition but if it was I'd be winning.

MERRY laughs.

TEFLON

We've got a great brand – the yellow angels.

MERRY

Angels?

TEFLON

The firefighters wear yellow. You knew that right? Speaking of which we better get you a corporate uniform.

MERRY

Is that mandatory?

TEFLON

Almost everyone wears it.

MERRY

I'm not really a uniform kind of person.

TEFLON

Uniform kind of person?

MERRY

I'd feel like I was at school, constrained. It doesn't exactly say diversity of thought does it?

TEFLON

It's just a uniform.

MERRY becomes increasingly animated  
as she talks.

MERRY

A uniform creates an 'us' and therefore a 'them'. We want to reduce the barriers with the community, make them believe they're the experts not us, think for themselves, not wait for us for direction. They need to realise they're the first line responders.

TEFLON

Be careful how you put that. We're the first line responders.

MERRY

Maybe the terminology's different overseas. I just mean they're there first, more often than not, trying to put the fire out, working out what to do.

TEFLON

You'll have to learn how things work around here. It will take some time.

MERRY

I'm used to jumping right in. If you don't make mistakes you're not trying hard enough, right?

MERRY laughs and touches him on the  
arm. TEFLON flinches.

TEFLON

We like to keep mistakes to a minimum here. Our role – I mean media's role – is risk minimisation. Sense the direction of the shit storm and deflect. It's all about perception.

MERRY

I thought it was all about the people.

MERRY laughs. TEFLON looks uncomfortable.

TRANSITION.

6

Footage of fire fighters putting out flames is projected on back screen. Cut to silent scene of TEFLON and THE COMMISSIONER giving a news briefing. Lights up on a chat-show style news desk with three news personalities, WALEED, PETE and CARRIE from The Project (or similar).

WALEED

Terrifying stuff. Putting your life on the line like that.

PETE

Those guys are amazing. Real heroes.

CARRIE

Can you imagine standing up to that wall of flame coming down on you?

WALEED

The whole state is up in flames and The Commissioner, he's so calm, in control. It gives you real confidence. He should be in politics.

PETE

I'd vote for him.

WALEED

Yes, this is the sort of person, someone with real integrity that we need in politics.

CARRIE, PETE and WALEED nod and hmm in agreement.

CARRIE

Did you get the Fire Service text message to leave when the fire got near your house?

PETE

I was waiting for it, then I realised my battery was flat.

CARRIE

I can see you surrounded by flames waiting for the text to get the hell out of there!

PETE

I'm sure the Yellow Angels will knock on my door if there's really a problem.

CARRIE

Yes folks, Pete needs a personal invitation.

PETE

(looking at CARRIE)

And on to other stories, what is it that made Grumpy Cat one happy pussy?

Canned audience laughter.

TRANSITION.

1

MERRY, in green, and TEFLON, in uniform, are in The Pit. MERRY is smiling, talking with her hands. The COMMISSIONER enters and watches them.

MERRY

No you have to close your eyes.

TEFLON, smiling, closes his eyes.

MERRY

Imagine. Your daughter is bringing her fiancé to meet you for the first time. You know nothing about him. Think about what he might be like. Got the picture? Now, say to yourself, I don't care what he's like as long as he's not – and fill in the blanks. That's unconscious bias. Those secret thoughts hiding in dirty corners guide every thought and every action.

TEFLON opens his eyes and is embarrassed to see the COMMISSIONER watching them.