

Andrew Shaw

TOURING

Things start to come apart in Brisbane. Fiora's agreement states that the contractor, in this case the Student Union, provide a venue with not less than one hundred seats. Carmella counts eighty-nine in the theatrette. There is a provision for two meals but only one arrives. Carmella makes Fiora eat it. Fiora says she doesn't mind sharing, but Carmella insists they bring another from the canteen across campus. She isn't hungry, but she needs to stop the tour unravelling like a cheap cardigan. It's November, 1985.

Near the photocopier a handsome girl with bare feet and gentian hair says to relax, they are all struggling for the same thing. Carmella laughs in her face. The girl turns at the door and says, *Viva La Revolution!* Carmella applauds because it's a child's performance; she doesn't even know the language she's fighting in.

Carmella continues. The union failed to supply two merchandise sellers. Not so, says the Activities President. So how come, she counters, tightening the piece of tortoiseshell that fixes her hair, students were coming to her and asking where's the stuff to buy? She takes a step closer to the Activities President. She knows she scares him, all of them—no one knows how to deal with her here. She shows him a whole box of coarse-woven rugs and berets. Does he think this—she nearly spits on the cheque he has given her—is going to cover the price of the airfares, the hotel rooms, even cheap, dirty hotel rooms, and food for herself and Fiora? Has he forgotten that money is not exactly easy to come by in her country? She glances at the blue and white striped cambric of his shirt. Ah! Now she understands. Her mother made such shirts in a Santiago sweatshop for five thousand pesos an hour.

The Activities President transfers a hundred and fifty dollars from the Drama Society account to Entertainment and Miscellaneous. He is chubby and pink with cheeks like mangos and he wears a *Young Labor* tie pin. He thinks he understands political pressure.

Carmella is not embarrassed when he gets into a shoving match with the Treasurer. It's a bright, summer afternoon. She watches the students asleep on the grass. The Treasurer slams out, everyone trembles with political delight. The Activities President hands her a cheque and makes a remark about factions getting in the way of the things that really matter.

She has him call a wheelchair taxi for the city. Fiora waits with her, they don't talk.

Back at the hotel Fiora is petulant and hungry. There is no room service—the desk clerk laughs in Carmella's face—so she walks over to the railway station and brings back a packet of clammy sandwiches.

They eat in silence. As usual they have covered the walls with photographic panoramas of Chile. They are turning green due to the poor skill of the developer and the frequent changes in climate. Turquoise moulds ride the backs of burros and mildew creeps through mint-coloured clouds. When they've finished, Carmella doesn't look up when she asks what went wrong.

Fiora says she doesn't know. Things will be better tomorrow. She promises not to hide again tomorrow.

But she does. And she looks for somewhere good—not the toilets or the basement like before. She discovers the university library has a wheelchair ramp. She takes the elevator to the top floor, finds a book in Spanish—Borges—and hides in the stairwell.

Carmella sniffs her out. Who else could be wearing that three hundred peso cologne—like roses baking in a clay oven. Carmella pushes her back to the thetrette, just in time.

The audience is waiting. Lucky people who can sit in a dark room at two o'clock on a work day. Fiora doesn't look at them as Carmella wheels her into the centre of the stage. Their eyes drain her with their sympathy. They are against the torture of political prisoners under the military regime. They will not drink Chilean coffee or eat Chilean bananas. The personal adjustments they have made for the Chilean cause are endless, bewildering. How do they find so much time to tinker with themselves? Fiora starts her speech.

Carmella watches from the wings, smoking a cigarette. Her hair is too long but she refuses to use their funds for a cut. She tries not to make eye contact with Fiora, there's too much tension now. When Fiora does glance over she pretends to be flicking a piece of lint from her sleeve, or moves her mouth as if she's talking to someone just out of sight and can't stop.

Fiora is halfway through the speech. She has reached the part where the police have her cornered in the alley near the town hall and the other student protesters are fleeing. She uses the line about them disappearing like water

from a split bowl because Carmella suggested she vary the descriptions in case people came two days in a row, and she used the other one, the one about opening your fingers and letting beans trickle through, the day before. She says the part about the split bowl and then tilts forward in the wheelchair covering her face with a hand. Carmella is allowing herself to be casually complimented by a student, but now she pushes him away.

The theatrette is silent, respectful. Fiora is bent over in the wheelchair, one hand over her mouth, the other raised dramatically in the spotlight. The tips of her fingers glow. Tears come to Carmella's eyes and she moves her face deeper into shadow, hiding in a curtain's velvet turn. She imagines Fiora has reconnected with her experience and is once more ready to bear witness to the despicable truth.

Then she sees Fiora is giggling. She's raised her hand not as a gesture of solidarity, but because she's cracking up. The audience consult their programmes, looking for an explanation. Someone leaves, the open door flooding the space with light. It mingles with Fiora's giggles, sprays like cheap glitter over surprised, upturned faces.

Fiora is sniggering, saying they'll get their money back, don't worry, in her lazy English. She winks and gives everyone a thumbs up. It's too much. Carmella dashes into the light and wheels her off.

In the wings Fiora hums while she fingers a plastic topiary. Last week she met a boy who lives in a commune on Mount Tambourine. He speaks terrible Spanish, but he's blond and his body is light.

Carmella sends Fiora back to the hotel and spends an hour soothing the Activities President. She returns the hundred and fifty as a gesture of good faith. No one offers her anything while she waits for the Treasurer to see her. She has lost them. She cancels Fiora's last campus appearance and returns to the hotel.

Fiora is watching pay TV. Carmella becomes angry with her for wasting the money they need for food. They argue over the dollar for fifteen minutes then Fiora locks herself in the bedroom.

Through the door, Fiora tells Carmella she wants to stop touring; not because she has to tell the story of her torture, but because she is starting to forget it. The further away from Chile they go, the more unlikely it seems. Isn't Australia the most beautiful country they've seen so far, she says. Why should she live in that Chilean past?

Carmella doesn't understand—this is how they'll reach people, make them aware of the horror back home. This is why they came on tour in the first place. People have to know.

But why me? Fiora whines, biting her nails. She's stopped having regular nightmares about her torture. When she can conjure the experience up, dragging it onto the dream stage, her actors seem distracted. She waits, tied to a chair (sometimes they forget to tie her) while the secret police make phone calls to their wives to say they'll be home late. They loosen their collars and look through the bullet proof window at the courtyard outside. "Hey!" Fiora shouts at them. "Do you mind?" She sees their attention wandering and it annoys her. Sometimes they forget to put on their uniforms and keep going out to change and coming back in, looking at her resentfully.

Fiora wants to move into the commune with Davey, the boy who speaks bad Spanish, and look after animals and eat organic, whatever they are—Davey doesn't know the Spanish word. The scars on her arms and thighs will heal with good food and water. Davey's waiting for her on the Tambourine mountain. She hums happily.

Carmella begs her to persevere another month or so, until they have enough money to return to Mexico where they can continue their work from exile. Fiora refuses. Tomorrow she will call Davey.

That night Carmella dreams of Fiora on fire. The secret police chase her down the blind alley, then block the entrance with their cars parked sideways. They are smiling with a can of petrol and they sprinkle it over her clothes and hair. You should have run faster, one of them says and he flicks a match into her lap. Carmella wakes in a flower of flame.

Fiora is sleeping beside her, hands twitching against the coverlet, bare thighs purple and thick with scars. She turns in her sleep and sighs. Carmella stays up smoking until dawn.

The next morning over cortisone injections, Carmella reveals her scheme. Fiora is enthusiastic.

Having cancelled the university gig, their next appearance is for the Green Party of Queensland. There is no stage to speak of, only a concrete slab painted with a red hammer and sickle and rimmed with plastic chairs. A young woman in overalls explains that the Green Party used to be the Communist Party but there was a general lack of interest. She seems apologetic.

Carmella, wearing one of Fiora's long-sleeved dresses and cheap, souvenir shop sunglasses, looks up from the wheelchair. You did the right thing, she tells her. We have to adapt to survive.

The lights dim. Sunlight tries to squeeze under a door and gets dampened with tea towels. A single candle is lit—Carmella is amazed at the thoughtlessness—and placed at the centre of the hammer and sickle.

She takes her cue, wheels herself into the middle of the floor next to the naked flame, and begins to tell Fiora's story in the first person. She talks about the weeks of torture, the conflagration and the six months in hospital. Many of the audience members weep openly—who can imagine such cruelty? Carmella weeps along with them. Back at the hotel, Fiora snoozes, dreaming of blond Davey and clouds passing over fields of perfect organic.