

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

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Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was first produced by the Union Theatre Repertory Company at the Union Theatre, Melbourne, on 28 November 1955, with the following cast:

PEARL	Roma Johnston
BUBBA	Fenella Maguire
OLIVE	June Jago
BARNEY	Ray Lawler
EMMA	Carmel Dunn
ROO	Noel Ferrier
JOHNNIE	Malcolm Billings

Director, John Sumner
Set Designer, Anne Fraser

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CHARACTERS

BUBBA RYAN, 22

PEARL CUNNINGHAM, early 40s, a widow

OLIVE LEECH, 39

EMMA LEECH, approaching 70

BARNEY IBBOT, 40

ROO WEBBER, 41

JOHNNIE DOWD, 25

SETTING

The Leech house in Carlton, Melbourne. A Victorian two-storied dwelling with verandahs of the period, featuring decorative lacy ironwork.

There is a sitting room on the ground floor, with an archway that gives access to a hall containing a flight of stairs, together with a passage that leads in one direction to the kitchen and in the other to the street door. A window in the sitting room overlooks the front verandah, and there are also French windows leading out to a largely unseen side verandah, heavily laden with shrubs in pots, along with hanging ferns and plant baskets.

The setting in 1953 reflects Olive's taste rather than Emma's, and marks the passing of household power from mother to daughter. Most of the solid pieces of furniture have been retained (among them Emma's piano and a chaise longue), but the dominant decorative features are the souvenirs from past summers. Most notable of these are sixteen kewpie dolls on walking sticks scattered around the room, stuck behind pictures on the wall, flowering in twos and threes from vases, and clustered in a pattern over the mantelshelf. They are accompanied by a collection of colourful mementos that feature a number of brilliantly-plumaged, stuffed North Queensland birds, as well as coral pieces and shells from the Great Barrier Reef, and picture frames backed with black velvet to which cling crowds of shimmering-winged tropical butterflies. A string of Christmas cards is looped from the mantelshelf, and a festive decorative centrepiece hangs from the overhead light bracket. The riot of colour disguises the fact that the house interior has not been renovated in recent years.

The house garden has been allowed to become a wilderness and, together with the overgrown ferns and shrubs on the side verandah, enshroud the house in a tangle of plant life. The overall effect is not one of gloom, however, but of a glowing interior protected from the drab outside world by a shifting curtain of light-filtered greenery.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

It is five o'clock on a warm Sunday afternoon in early December 1953. The sitting room table has been set for a celebration meal.

BUBBA is busily tying wide blue ribbons to a couple of red-and-white striped candy walking sticks. At the same time, she is chatting with shy but determined authority to PEARL CUNNINGHAM, who is sitting nearby, smoking and ostensibly leafing her way through a fashion magazine. PEARL is a widow in her early forties, driven back to earning a living by the one job she knows well, that of barmaid. Given the choice, she would prefer something of a more classy nature—head saleswoman in a dress salon, for instance. The pub game, she feels, is rather crude. She is wearing what she refers to as her good black, with a double string of pearls. Very discreet.

BUBBA: So—I was the only one went to the wedding. Autumn it was and the boys were away, though of course, when Olive wrote up and told them, they sent down money for a present. But I was the one who had to buy it and take it along. Olive wouldn't have anythin' to do with it. Wouldn't even help me pick anythin' out.

PEARL: [*a fishing expedition*] The—boys—didn't mind her getting married, then?

BUBBA: [*frowning a little*] Bound to. 'Specially Barney—must've been a shock to him—but like I say, they wouldn't do anythin' to stand in her way. That's how they are, see. Olive was the one really kicked up a fuss. Wouldn't believe, even up to the Saturday afternoon, that Nance'd go through with it.

PEARL: Seems to me this Nancy had her head screwed on the right way.

BUBBA: [*caught, forgetting the candy sticks for a moment*] She got tired of the waitin', I think. Olive doesn't mind it, she just looks forward to the next time, but it used to get on Nance's nerves a bit. And of course, she reads a lot, and this feller, this Harry Allaway—he runs a bookshop, and he'd bring books into the pub for her. I s'pose that's how he got around her, really. I don't reckon Barney's ever read a book in his life.

PEARL: Mmm. [*Turning a page*] Well, I'm fond of a good book myself, now and then.

BUBBA: [*tolerantly assured*] You won't need any till after April. Even Nancy, she only used to read in the winter time.

OLIVE's voice is heard calling urgently from upstairs.

OLIVE: [*off*] Bubba?!

BUBBA: [*moving to the archway*] Here!

OLIVE: [*off*] Those earrings of mine with the green stones?

BUBBA: Haven't seen them.

OLIVE: [*off*] Ooh, I'll bet the old girl's taken a loan of them. She knew I wanted to—no, it's alright. Here they are. Couldn't see 'em for looking.

BUBBA moves back into the room, smiling at PEARL with a half-apologetic explanation.

BUBBA: Olive always gets a little rattled. Nance and me, we used to have to joke her out of it. And she's prob'ly worrying a bit today on your account—

PEARL: [*sharply*] Why should she be worried my account? All I'm here for is a visit—and if Olive's told you anythin' else—

BUBBA: [*hastily*] Oh, she hasn't. She'd hardly said a word.

PEARL: In that case, then, there's no need for insinuations.

BUBBA: I wasn't—

PEARL: Yes, you were. Very cheap and underhanded. What you said about not needing any books till after April was bad enough.

BUBBA: I was talking of the lay-off. I'll bet Olive never said there was anythin' cheap and underhanded about the—

PEARL: Never mind what Olive said. Strikes me you know too much of this place for your own good.

BUBBA: I've lived next door all my life. Why shouldn't I—?

PEARL: I'm not going to argue. You just shouldn't, that's all.

Her tone is final enough to silence BUBBA, and it is in this hostile pause that OLIVE comes swiftly downstairs.

OLIVE: Hang on to your hats and mittens, kids, here I come again.

She moves into the sitting room with a determined and excited gaiety, wearing a crisp green-and-white summer dress that she displays with a brash self-mockery.

What d'you think this time? Snazzy enough? Mightn't knock your eye out, but it's nice and cool, and it's the sort of thing Roo likes. Fresh and green, and not too got-up—

She postures for their comments, and BUBBA, still a little unsettled by her spat with PEARL, volunteers automatic approval.

BUBBA: Yes, it's lovely.

OLIVE: Pearl?

PEARL: Ye-es. Not me, but it suits you.

OLIVE: Well, have to do, anyway. Haven't time to change again. Now, what else is there? I know—nice cold bottle of beer.

BUBBA: [*quickly*] I'll get it.

OLIVE: [*after her departing figure*] Would you, love? Top lot in the fridge.

Ooh, she's a good kid, that.

PEARL: Yes. I'd say she knows more than her prayers, just the same.

OLIVE: Bubba? Don't be silly. Only a baby.

PEARL: Not too much of a baby. If Vera spoke to me the way she does, I'd put her back across my knee. And it's more than talk, it's the way she acts—

OLIVE: Oh, c'mon.

PEARL: Far too much at home.

OLIVE: Well, what d'you expect? She's been runnin' in and out here ever since she could walk—Roo and Barney, she treats 'em like they was uncles.

Deliberately making light of PEARL's reservations with a head-shaking laugh.

God, you're a wag. Talk about Cautious Kate.

PEARL: How?

OLIVE: Look at them suitcases by the stairs. You'd think someone was gettin' ready for a moonlight flit.

PEARL: Only common sense. I've taken my overnighter up, and I'm not takin' anything else until I'm certain.

OLIVE: Wouldn't have asked you, y'know, if I hadn't thought it worth your while.

PEARL: I'll find that out for myself, if you don't mind.

OLIVE: Your decision. Said so from the start, no-one's tryin' to talk you into anything. Just don't take too long mullin' it over, that's all.

OLIVE *dismisses these foolish quibbles for a survey of the table, and PEARL feels the need to make amends.*

PEARL: Where's that photograph you said you'd show me?

OLIVE: Oh, yes.

She collects a framed photograph from somewhere and takes it to PEARL.

You can see him much better in this one. Those others, he was always clownin' around.

They study the photograph together.

It's the four of us at Luna Park, the year before last. Roo, me, Barn—and Nance is on the end there.

PEARL: She looks drunk.

OLIVE: She was, a bit. Right after that was taken, she got sick on the Ocean Wave.

PEARL: I know the type.

OLIVE: No, you don't. Wasn't like that really. Nance was... [*a hundred memories*] ... she was a real good sport. Barney, he was pretty mad about her.

PEARL: 'S obvious. The way he's holding her. Bit intimate, isn't it? Even for Luna Park.

OLIVE: Look, Pearl, you'd better make up your mind. [*She takes the photograph away to replace it.*] These are a couple of cancutters from the tropics. Not two professors from the university.

PEARL: He'll never lay hands on me like that in public, just the same.

OLIVE: Wouldn't be too sure. He gets away with murder, Barney.

PEARL: I'll believe that when I see it. Didn't seem to stop her goin' off and gettin' married.

OLIVE: [*a touch of steel*] She made a mistake.

PEARL: Who says?

OLIVE: I say. Marriage is different. And Nancy knew it.

PEARL: I'll guarantee she made herself cheap. A woman keeps her self-respect, any man will toe the line.

OLIVE: Wouldn't bank on that, Pearl. Not with Barney.

PEARL: Oh, I'm not anticipatin' anything. But from what you've said, it's time some decent woman took this feller in hand. Never heard of anyone with more reasons to toe the line in all my life.

OLIVE: Maybe I shouldn't have told you?



Helen Thomson as Pearl in the 2011 Belvoir production at the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney. (Photo: Heidrun Löhr)

PEARL: Don't you worry, I'd have found out. I'm a mother myself—a thing like that, you couldn't fool me.

OLIVE: Prob'ly tell you himself, anyway. Doesn't make any secret of it.

BUBBA enters hurriedly, with a glass in each hand and a bottle of beer tucked under her arm.

BUBBA: Ooh, this beer is co—old—

OLIVE moves to relieve her of the bottle and glasses.

And we forgot the salad dressing.

OLIVE: Sugar.

BUBBA: 'S alright, I mixed some up in the little blue jug. Wasn't any vinegar, though, I took a bottle from your mother's cupboard.

OLIVE: She'll love that. What about your walkin' sticks?

BUBBA: All done. Bows and everything. [*She moves to collect the candy sticks.*] Only got to put them up—

PEARL: What are they in aid of?

OLIVE: Tell her, Bub.

BUBBA: [*lamely*] Nothin', really—just a bit of a joke. One's for Roo, and one's for Barney.