

FRESCO

a black comedy in one act

by Alan Phillips

Running time approx 40 minutes

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CHARACTERS

UNITY 49

BIANCA 34

HUGH 53

NATIONAL AFFRONT MAN

POLICEMAN

POLICEWOMAN

TIME

The present

PLACE

A room on church premises

SYNOPSIS

Bianca returns from Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of Australia, where she has lived with the Yolngu tribe, studying their customs, their paintings on rock and bark and their ceremonial dances. In her Catholic parish they need a mural for the church hall. Bianca suggests a fresco inspired by Aborigine art which Hugh, the parish priest goes along with. This meets with strenuous opposition from Unity, a sour spinster whose mother has put up the money. Unity wants a scheme in memory of her father but it emerges that he made his money producing the illegal poteen potato spirit. Bianca puts forward an alternative scheme inspired by the life of Thomas Merton which is likewise condemned by Unity since she disapproves of Merton for having associated with pagans like the Dalai Llama and Doctor Suzuki. Unity goes off the rails, publicly accuses Bianca and Hugh of having an affair, is arrested and taken to a psychiatric hospital. At a further meeting a National Affront man intervenes on Unity's behalf. He also is arrested and taken to a psychiatric hospital. Hugh and Bianca go ahead with the original Yolngu tribe scheme.

AUTHOR

Phillips has written several plays: *The Sapphic Way* is about the renowned Sappho who, in her lifetime and after, was wrongly maligned as a corrupter of innocence. *A Model Graduate* is about a young woman who celebrates her Oxford philosophy degree with some bohemian behaviour! *Subterranean* is a drama centred around the discovery of palaeolithic rock paintings at a site in Southern France. *I Sing the Body Electric* is a video script about life drawing. Phillips's published novel *Darline Dominant* is about the love of an internationally known lady painter for a lady psychiatrist. He has also published short stories.

SCENE 1 (The lights go up on a room bare but for a table and three chairs, one at the head, one at each side of the table. BIANCA and UNITY are counting church collection money on the table. BIANCA is a pleasant attractive woman having undercurrents of eroticism, deeply tanned, perhaps in mid thirties. UNITY is older, a severe spinterish woman in her late forties, her features hinting at undertones of bitterness)

UNITY What does it feel like, being back in England, then, Bianca?

BIANCA It's so utterly different. It was like being on another planet out there.

UNITY Where were you?

BIANCA In Arnhem Land, in the North-Eastern part of the Northern Territory. I lived with the Yolngu tribe.

UNITY (curiously) What were they like?

BIANCA I found them a wonderful people.

UNITY In what way?

BIANCA They have developed such a culture in those great wide-stretching lands. And they have a wonderful religion with its roots in the Dreaming as they call it. Their ceremonial dances are awe inspiring. As an artist I found fantastic inspiration in the paintings they create on rock and bark.

UNITY But isn't their work a bit crude?

BIANCA Not in the least as far as I'm concerned. I found . . . I found an elemental immediacy and truth in their work which inspired me to create paintings of my own.

UNITY What is their dancing like?

BIANCA I found their corroboree dancing utterly enthralling, really quite out of this universe. I had a go myself, I couldn't resist it. I had to practise quite a bit. To my utter surprise they said I was good.

UNITY What did you wear for it?

BIANCA A little body paint.

UNITY Nothing else?

BIANCA No, just body paint like them.

(UNITY silently registers disapproval)

BIANCA I just wanted to live like them.

UNITY I suppose they wear something when they're not dancing.

BIANCA No, not a thing. Some tribes went through a stage of wearing home-made bikinis, scraps of fabric tied at the hips - but I'd guess this was under white influence. But where I was in North-East Arnhem Land they wore nothing.

UNITY And you went naked like them?

BIANCA Of course. I wanted to live like them. And I felt it was only courtesy to them. (she smiles) I got tanned all over, almost as brown as them.

UNITY Wasn't this a bit, well, daring?

BIANCA How do you mean?

UNITY Well, to say the least of it, you might have been ravished by one of the men.

BIANCA (laughing lightly) No, I had no fear of that.

UNITY How could you be so sure?

BIANCA They're a moralistic people.

UNITY But were you moralistic, I mean to go naked with them?

BIANCA I saw nothing wrong with it. I followed the principle that when in Rome do as Rome does. I never *have* seen any evil in the body.

UNITY But I still think it's improper for a Christian woman to go naked generally.

BIANCA I can only disagree, Unity. Just think of it. In India many of the sannyasis, the holy men, go dressed in the sky as they put it. Any evil is in the eye of the beholder.

UNITY But how otherwise are the Aborigines so wonderful?

BIANCA They don't have the cravings of the whites, the compulsion to always want something, to make a profit at any cost by cunning, they live in a communion with nature that's unimaginable to us, they respect their environment and take from it only what they need. In burning the brush they do it carefully to bring forth new vegetation. With them everything is shared. If they kill a kangaroo it is shared between them all. I really do think that in many ways their culture is superior to that of the whites.

UNITY I was told by someone who'd been there that they were regarded as inferior.

BIANCA That used to be the attitude towards them but nothing like so much now. They're all Australian citizens now, which they didn't used to be. A man called Bill Harney lived among them and wrote several books about them. He lived under a tree in the dry season and only went indoors in the wet in a house he built. The two seasons there are just the wet and the dry. He said they were a very intelligent people. He'd been

in the first World War and when he got back he threw away his medals and rode into the outback on his own. He really found a new and meaningful life living with the Aborigines.

UNITY Not much of a meaningful life living under a tree.

BIANCA But in the weather there you can enjoy something like that.

UNITY It's not something I'd enjoy.

BIANCA You never know, Unity, you might if you tried it.

UNITY There's no likelihood of that.

BIANCA I had a conversation with Hugh when I first got back. I told him about the life I'd had there and he was very interested. He suggested I should give a talk about it and we discussed the possibility of my creating a mural for the refurbished hall.

UNITY (critically) You did! Did you suggest this?

BIANCA No, it was Hugh's idea.

UNITY The parish priest suggested that?

BIANCA Yes.

UNITY I'm disturbed to say the least of it.