

LIP SERVICE

A play

by

John Misto



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DO contact ORiGiN™ Theatrical if you have any questions about anything. At all. And we mean anything. One of us that works here (not me) has a peculiar interest in recording the unusual bird calls of the adult hoatzin (a species of tropical bird found in wet forest and mangrove of the Amazon and the Orinoco delta in South America) so we should be able to answer any questions you have about the Hoatzin. Plus we know some things about some other things too.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Shoe-Horn Sonata

Harp on the Willow

Dark Voyager

Lip Service

Peace Train: The Cat Stevens Story

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Misto has been writing plays since 1992. His play, *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* has been reprinted nineteen times and sold more than sixty thousand copies. *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* also won the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Best Play and the Australia Remembers National Playwriting Prize.

Misto's other works include *Dark Voyager* about the turbulent relationship between Joan Crawford and Marilyn Monroe. Misto also wrote the hugely successful play, *Harp on the Willow* which won the Rodney Seaborn Award for Best Play. John Misto is co-writer of *Peace Train: The Cat Stevens Story* which has enjoyed several successful national tours of Australia.

John Misto's most recent play, *Lip Service* had a sell-out season at London's Park Theatre in 2017 (under the title Madame Rubinstein) and a successful season at Sydney's Ensemble Theatre and at the Lawler Theatre in Melbourne. *Lip Service* is to be performed in Poland, Lithuania and Israel.

John Misto is also an established scriptwriter and his telemovies and scripts have won many awards including the Queensland Premier's Literary Award, three Australian Film Institute Awards, three Australian Writers' Guild Awards and a Gold Plaque at the Chicago Television Awards.

John Misto has degrees in Arts and Law from the University of New South Wales.



Australian Premiere - Ensemble Theatre, August 2017



Cast: Tim Draxl, Amanda Muggleton and Linden Wilkinson
Photographer: Prudence Upton

CHARACTERS

HELENA RUBINSTEIN (Approx. 75– 85 years)

ELIZABETH ARDEN (Approx. 65 – 75 years)

PATRICK O’HIGGINS (Approx. 25 – 35 years)

Plus the offstage voice of **MARTA** - Helena’s Secretary, and various others.

The play is inspired by real people and real events.

The action takes place between 1954 and 1965.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

HELENA'S OFFICE (1954) - DAY

The lights come up to reveal Helena's Fifth Avenue Office.

Helena is on stage. She is wearing a white medical coat while talking on the phone.

HELENA: Heart attack? No, no, he was murdered. Oh the doctor called it a heart attack, but that *schlut* he married – so young she hasn't been born yet – made him jiggy-jig day and night. He must have hated every minute. He always used to say to me, "Most men aren't interested in sex. We just do it so women can have children." (*Sniffs, wipes her eyes*) Upset? (*Me?*) Don't be silly. You never miss husband number one. There are plenty of other fish in the bowl.

As Helena has been talking, Patrick has appeared at her door. He knocks.

HELENA: Go away, Marta. You can't have the key to the toilet. You've already 'been' once today – and paper doesn't grow on trees.

Patrick knocks again.

HELENA: (*Without looking around*) All right, take the key, but tomorrow wear a diaper.

Patrick walks into the office and approaches Helena gingerly. He carries a brown paper bag. Helena does not see him and continues talking into the telephone.

HELENA: So I went to see White Christmas to cheer myself up. Danny Kaye was in it. I knew him when he was Jewish. *(Looking at her watch)* I have to go.

Helena hangs up and starts polishing a photo of her son, Horace, which is on her desk. Patrick clears his throat loudly. She turns and sees him.

HELENA: Aaah! Marta!

PATRICK: There's nobody there. It's lunchtime.

HELENA: Get out or I'll call security!

PATRICK: You mean the old guy reading Playboy?

HELENA: What do you want?

PATRICK: Fifty cents.

HELENA: *(Appalled)* You'd rob me for half a dollar!

PATRICK: *(Shocked)* Rob?

HELENA: *(Scornfully)* Where's your ambition? At least ask for ten.

PATRICK: The money's for the cab I took to follow you here to give you this. *(Holding up a brown paper bag)* You left it on your seat. At the cinema.

Helena tries to grab the bag but Patrick holds it out of reach.

PATRICK: Fifty cents. *(Indicating contents of the bag)* Is this stuff hot?

HELENA: Huh?

PATRICK: Stolen? Why else would a cleaning lady carry half of Tiffany's in a brown paper bag? (*Looking into the bag*) Rubies, emeralds and a very nice amethyst.

HELENA: Trinkets, baubles, all of them fakes.

Patrick holds up a diamond.

PATRICK: I know enough about rocks to know the real deal when I see it. So who did you swipe these from?

MARTA (VOICE ONLY): I'm back, Madame Rubinstein. Would your guest like a coffee?

Patrick looks at Helena, stunned.

PATRICK: Madame... Rubinstein? You're...

HELENA: So Mr Genius works it out.

PATRICK: (*Holding his leg and sitting, groaning*) Oh, God...

HELENA: (*Sarcastic*) Make yourself at home.

PATRICK: I raced up three flights of stairs chasing you. Your elevator doesn't work.

HELENA: I shut it down. Electricity costs money. Stairs are free. I climb them all day.

PATRICK: (*Rubbing his knees*) You've never been shot in the ankles.

HELENA: You should find yourself a job instead of watching *White Christmas* on a Tuesday morning.

PATRICK: I didn't come here for a lecture.

Helena peers at Patrick's face.

PATRICK: What are you doing?

HELENA: Your skin isn't bad for a man.

PATRICK: They gave us some stuff during the war, to stop blisters and sunburn. I've been buying it ever since.

HELENA: (*Happily inspecting Patrick's face*) No blackheads, no razor rash. It must have been one of my creams. I supplied them to all the American soldiers.

PATRICK: I was in the Irish Guard.

HELENA: (*Peering at Patrick's skin*) Even tone, not too dry. It's things like this that make me proud. Which one do you use? No let me guess, my *Valaze Skin Food*?

PATRICK: (*Uneasily*) No.

HELENA: *Helena Rubinstein Youthifier*?

PATRICK: No.

HELENA: Then it must be my *One Touch Lotion*... Well?

PATRICK: *Eight Hour Cream* by Elizabeth Arden.

HELENA: (*Shocked and revolted*) What?! You rubbed her dreck into your skin?! (*Furious*) Get out!

And Helena grabs the paper bag.

PATRICK: But what about my half-dollar?

HELENA: You can crawl home, nudnik!

PATRICK: Look, Mrs Rubinstein -

HELENA: Madame!

PATRICK: You're obviously in some kind of trouble. No sane woman carries round ten grand's worth of rocks.

HELENA: That's none of your business. Now out! Out!

Helena pushes Patrick towards the door.

PATRICK: I couldn't help but notice your new advertising slogan.

And Patrick grabs the compact, opens it and reads from a small note -

PATRICK: 'Helena Rubinstein says Fuck You.'

Helena stops.

PATRICK: How many of these have gone out?

HELENA: (*Reluctantly*) Over a hundred.

PATRICK: Do you know who's behind this?

Helena, meanwhile, opens her wall safe, puts in the jewels and takes out a chicken wing.

HELENA: If I did, do you think he'd still be alive? I'd put on my biggest diamond ring and stick my fist right up his -

PATRICK: (*Astonished*) - Is that a chicken wing?

HELENA: You want one?

PATRICK: You keep chicken wings in your safe?

HELENA: Why not? It's airtight and cheaper than a fridge.

Helena's telephone rings.

HELENA: (*Tossing a coin at Patrick*) Here's your half-dollar. Now go, Irish man.

Helena tosses the coin too far for Patrick to catch. While Helena is on the telephone, Patrick has to crawl beneath her desk to retrieve it.

HELENA: (*Answering phone*) Hello? What do you want? Yes, Roy, I saw your designs for the hand-lotion bottles. (*Irate*) Ugly, over-coloured slush. How can you call yourself my son when you when you give me garbage like this? If you didn't have a wife and child, I'd fire you tomorrow! Put better designs on my desk by Friday! Schnorrer! And don't forget to hire a prostitute. (*Pause*) No - one's not enough, you need two. And watch them closely while they're doing it.

And Helena hangs up.

PATRICK: (*Shocked*) Do you always tell your son to hire hookers?

HELENA: Of course. That's how I test my products. If whores can wear makeup without it fading, any woman can.

Patrick, meanwhile, has retrieved the fifty cent coin but he has noticed something of interest under Helena's desk, tucked away in a corner. While Helena speaks, Patrick retrieves this small item.

HELENA: (*Looking at the photo on her desk as she speaks into the phone*) Horace? It's your mother. I've just seen Roy's designs for the hand- lotion bottles. What can I say? Your brother's a genius, such colours, such shapes, took my whole breath away. (*Firmly*) Now where are your plans for the launch? What! Friday! (*Annoyed*) Roy kills himself to finish on time - and you give me Friday? Only one of you can get promoted. So I'm warning you, Horace, lift up your game!

Helena hangs up then turns to Patrick.

HELENA: (*Proudly*) My sons are so talented.

PATRICK: (*Shocked*) And you treat them like that?

HELENA: If I praise them, they get lazy. And why are you still hanging round like a bad smell?

PATRICK: (*Whispering privately*) There's no need to shout. They can hear you quite clearly.

HELENA: (*Quietly*) Who?

PATRICK: (*Holding up a small item*) The people who planted this.

HELENA: A hearing aid?

PATRICK: It's a microphone. Your office is bugged, Mrs Rubinstein.

HELENA: (*Whispering*) You mean they can hear everything?

PATRICK: (*Nods*) You know who they are?

HELENA: I have my suspicions.

Patrick breaks the device. Then Patrick indicates that it may not be over. He picks up the telephone and starts to unscrew the hand-piece.

HELENA: (*Whispering*) No. Wait...

Helena takes the telephone from Patrick and moans loudly into it.

HELENA: (*Moaning*) Do me, big boy, do me! And when you've finished, bring in your friends. (*Hanging up the phone*) That'll give them something to talk about.

PATRICK: Now I'm ready and willing to offer my services.

HELENA: As what?

PATRICK: (*Removing the bug from the telephone*) Personal protector and bodyguard.

HELENA: You don't have any ankles.

PATRICK: (*Holding up the bug*) And if I did, I wouldn't have found these.

Patrick smashes the bug or perhaps drops it into a glass of water.

PATRICK: (*Trying not to sound desperate*) Look, I need a job. And you need *me*. These people won't stop at rude notes. There'll be ground glass in the face cream, rusty nails in the lipsticks -

Helena suddenly sees something outside and hurries to the window.

HELENA: (*Sticking out her tongue*) Nerrrrr!

PATRICK: (*Alarmed*) Mrs Rubinstein? Are you...

HELENA: (*Correcting Patrick*) Madame! (*Yelling at someone outside*) And I hate you too. Nudnik! (*To Patrick*) Look at him. (*Calls*) Meeskait!

Patrick looks out the window at an unseen building opposite.

PATRICK: Who's that?

HELENA: That faygeleh. Charles Revson. (*With contempt*) The founder of Revlon.

PATRICK: He's waving.

HELENA: He's shaking his fist!

PATRICK: Oh... (*Realises*) Yes...

HELENA: He rents that building opposite, just to provoke me.
(*Yelling*) And good morning to you, you greedy Jew! I know who bugged my office! (*To Patrick*) Well don't just stand there, yell something.

PATRICK: I spent three years fighting the Nazis. I won't abuse a Jewish man.

HELENA: (*To Patrick*) All right, but for two bucks you can pull a face. He'll be offended if you don't.

PATRICK: (*Puzzled*) Offended?

HELENA: He'll think that you are ignoring him because he is a Jew. (*Shaking her fist at the window*) You blood-sucking schmuck.

PATRICK: (*Reluctantly obeying*) You... You... (*lost for words*)

HELENA: (*To Patrick*) Schlemiel.

PATRICK: (*Yells*) Schlemiel!

HELENA: Momzer. Meschugener.

PATRICK: (*Yells*) Momzer. Meshsuggarny!

HELENA: (*Impressed*) That's good. You're a natural.

Helena walks happily back to her desk while Patrick looks at her astonished.

HELENA: Well don't just stand there, keep it up!

PATRICK: If Revson hates you this much, you need someone like me to protect you.

HELENA: Every man I've ever met has wanted to protect me - and when their eyes look me up and down, their hands aren't far behind.

PATRICK: (*Offended*) No, no, I'm not like that.

HELENA: You're a man, aren't you? Or did you lose more than your ankles to Hitler?

PATRICK: (*Defensive*) I'm a fully cocked and loaded male.

HELENA: I have enough cocks in my life already. You should see my board of directors. (*Accusingly*) It's men like you who have fathered my ulcers...Name me one person you've body-guarded.

PATRICK: Me.

HELENA: What?

PATRICK: I got myself through the war alive. What better reference can you ask than that?

HELENA: (*Amused*) You're going to waste as Irish. You should have been a Jew... Go home and live a happy life. You're much too nice for the make-up business.

SCENE 2
ELIZABETH ARDEN'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Elizabeth Arden lies languidly in a deck chair. She is wearing an expensive robe. Her hair is wrapped in a towel. Her face is buried beneath a layer of mud and pieces of cucumber cover her eyes.

A choir can be heard outside singing Joy to the World.

Elizabeth has a tape recorder beside her. She is listening to Helena's "bugged" conversation.

HELENA (V.O.): Where are your plans for the launch Friday?

ELIZABETH: *(Switching off the tape, calls out)* Did you hear that, Brigitte? She's churning out another product. *(Upset)* Catholics don't reproduce this fast. If she beats me to the formula for waterproof mascara I'll strangle every chemist on my payroll!! And throw some bricks at those damn carol singers.

Helena enters.

ELIZABETH: *(Sniffs the air)* I'd know that cat's piss perfume anywhere.

Elizabeth remains lying down with the cucumber pieces over her eyes.

ELIZABETH: Why are you here, Helena - to complain about some listening device?

HELENA: Do you think I give a damn? We all have our spies.

ELIZABETH: Well the next bug I plant, I'll make sure you never find.

HELENA: That's very kind, Elizabeth. And I've done the same for you.

ELIZABETH: So what do you want?

HELENA: *(Pulling up a chair)* Can't I share some Christmas joy with my oldest, closest enemy?

ELIZABETH: Well make it quick - you're clogging my pores.

HELENA: Do you know where your husband is?

ELIZABETH: Midnight Mass.

HELENA: At 9pm?

ELIZABETH: He went early - to burn candles. *(Concerned)*
Why?

Elizabeth sits up and removes the cucumber pieces from her eyes.

HELENA: He hit the town - with my husband. *(Shows a photo to Elizabeth)* And that isn't communion they're giving to those hookers.

ELIZABETH: Where the hell did you get that?

HELENA: From the two cops who arrested them.

ELIZABETH: *(Shocked)* Oh my God - how dare our husbands look so happy!

HELENA: They'd screw every hole on the golf-course if they could.

ELIZABETH: Let them rot in jail. I don't give a damn.

HELENA: Not even if The New York Post finds out?

ELIZABETH: (Oh no -)

HELENA: Don't worry. A Jewish Santa paid the cops five grand to release them.

ELIZABETH: Five grand!

HELENA: What can I say? Christmas is expensive.

ELIZABETH: (*Maudlin*) You mean *marriage* is expensive. Why the hell do people bother? No one enjoys it. (*Looking at the Christmas crib*) I bet even Mary got fed up with Joseph. They probably stuck it out for the sake of the kid.

HELENA: Why *did* you take your ex-husband back?

ELIZABETH: He told me he found *all* women repulsive, so I shouldn't take it personally. (*Upset*) Then tonight he's in that whorehouse humping *female* hookers. If he'd been a decent husband he'd have been there screwing men.

HELENA: (*Consoling*) Oy-Yoy-yoy. Now *you* owe *me* a Christmas present.

ELIZABETH: I'll write a cheque for half the bribe.

HELENA: (*With uncharacteristic generosity*) Take your time. It's only money. But there is a...*tiny* favour you can do in return.

ELIZABETH: Let me guess. You need to borrow a cup of castor oil.

HELENA: There's not a drop left in the entire country. Is it Revson again?

ELIZABETH: (*Calmly*) You've just worked it out?

HELENA: Aren't you worried? We can't make lipstick without castor oil! Or does going broke not bother you?

ELIZABETH: My waterproof mascara will save me.

HELENA: So you'll let that weasel Revson walk all over us?

ELIZABETH: What else can I do?

HELENA: There's castor oil in Italy. I have contacts. I could arrange it. But I'll need your help.

ELIZABETH: Then you've waddled over here for nothing. The only help I'd ever give you is to board the Titanic. (*bitterly*) - after what you persuaded *Vogue* to write about me.

Elizabeth thrusts a magazine at Helena and Helena, puzzled, reads aloud from it.

HELENA: (*Reads*) "If she has any brains, Arden hides them very well. It's a wonder she knows how to come in out of the rain." (*Trying not to laugh*) Oh - so nasty - and so untrue!

ELIZABETH: How much did you pay them to write that?

HELENA: I haven't gone near *Vogue* since they let Cecil Beaton call me "a bloated Polish frog." (*Accusingly*) Your work, no doubt.

ELIZABETH: Me? You're the one who -

Both women stop as they begin to realise something.

HELENA/ELIZABETH: Revson!

ELIZABETH: That son of a bitch!

HELENA: Divide and conquer.

ELIZABETH: When can you get that castor oil?

HELENA: It'll take months to get four hundred barrels through customs. But you could ring your friend J. Edgar Hoover and tell him you're terribly constipated.

ELIZABETH: So how much will it cost to get me moving again?

HELENA: One hundred per barrel.

ELIZABETH: Lira?

HELENA: Dollars.

ELIZABETH: You'll guarantee me two hundred barrels?

HELENA: I found the supplier. Sixty/forty.

ELIZABETH: (*Tough*) Fifty/fifty.

HELENA: Agreed.

ELIZABETH: And Hoover will want a "lubrication fee". We divide that as well - or no deal.

HELENA: Done.

ELIZABETH: All right. I'll smoke your peace pipe.

HELENA: (*Producing a sheet of paper*) Here's the Customs form - sign it at the bottom.

Arden takes the form, and starts to read it - but Helena realises that Arden is holding the form upside down. Helena takes the form and turns it the right way up.

HELENA: You really must get glasses.

ELIZABETH: Spectacles are for degenerates who have wrecked their vision with too much sex. *That* has never been my problem.

And Elizabeth signs the Customs form.

HELENA: Good. Now it's settled.

And Helena puts the form in her purse and heads for the door.

ELIZABETH: Where are you going?

HELENA: Home.

ELIZABETH: What for? To see if Santa filled your stocking with a faithful husband?

Helena sits again.

ELIZABETH: (*Sadly*) Christmas Eve - and we're all alone - what did we do wrong, Helena?

HELENA: We reversed the flow of evolution. We're rich and strong, *we* are the water that runs uphill.

ELIZABETH: (*Bitterly*) I bet those whores were wearing Revlon.

HELENA: Were we any better when we sold ourselves?

ELIZABETH: We didn't have a choice.

HELENA: We could have said "No."

ELIZABETH: And joined those other virtuous women whose brilliant ideas got buried with them?

HELENA: I did it for science. I needed a laboratory to perfect my mother's face cream.

ELIZABETH: I did it for art - to pay for a sign above my first salon.

HELENA: He was a chemist, with three huge factories.

ELIZABETH: *Mine* was loaded. Owned a railway.

HELENA: (*Sadly*) I rang the bell of his Toorak mansion.

ELIZABETH: (*Sadly*) I knocked on the door of his East-Side brownstone.

HELENA: He opened it himself.

ELIZABETH: He already had his shirt off.

HELENA/ELIZABETH: "Come in," he said, "my wife's away."

HELENA: I've never forgiven myself for that.

A moment of understanding. Helena takes out her hip flask, has a swig of whisky, then passes it to Elizabeth who also has a drink from it. They continue to share the hip flask as they speak.

ELIZABETH: God I hate Christmas. All those fucking happy people!

HELENA: Try being a Jew in December! (*bleakly*) More people kill themselves tonight than any other time of the year.

ELIZABETH: I've no one to open a Christmas stocking with. I was always so busy I forgot to have children.

HELENA: I had children. Horace and - what's his name - but I never told them about Santa.

ELIZABETH: (Why?)

HELENA: I was too busy launching my new Christmas products...Can I ask you a personal question? You don't have to answer if you don't want to.

ELIZABETH: I am *not* a lesbian.

HELENA: (*Puzzled*) I don't care where you were born. What I want to know is this - have you bought shares in Revlon?

ELIZABETH: (*Nods*) Years ago - when they were cheap.

HELENA: Me too. And they've earned me a fortune! If only Charlie Revson knew how happy he has made me!

ELIZABETH: I wonder what he's doing tonight? Probably screwing his brand new wife.

HELENA: (*Astonished*) You mean you haven't bugged his office?

ELIZABETH: I was too busy doing *yours*.

HELENA: A week after they were married, Revson's wife started cheating on him.

ELIZABETH: You're just saying *that* to cheer me up.

HELENA: No. No. When Charlie asked her why, she said, "How can I make love to a man who wears lipstick to bed?"

ELIZABETH: He doesn't!?

HELENA: I swear. So for punishment, Charlie covers her in Revlon and locks her in his sauna. She pounds on the window and begs for him for mercy - but he won't let her out until he's seen how his make-up survives in the heat.