

Two Women of Arles

*a theatre piece from Plays of Pure Land
by Adrian Guthrie*

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TWO WOMEN OF ARLES
from *PLAYS OF PURE LAND* by Adrian Guthrie

(Arles, France, August 1891)

Alice This is Arles, in France.
 And this house of ill-repute - *(She giggles.)*
 or non-repute -
 is my place of residence and work.
 My name is Alice Bart, prostitute -
 underemployed!

 There are now only two of us here,
 Rachel and Alice.
 There used to be Clare and Suzette
 but Clare married and moved out of the district,
 and Suzette died of consumption last April.
 And the Patron says
 that as we are a little out of the way
 it is best with just we two.

 But it means going with more men
 when it's busy
 but his overheads are kept down.

(Rachel enters.)

Rachel Enough of this place, Arles!
 Enough of the Rue du Bout d'Arles!

Alice Rachel, the Lune has killed himself properly.

Rachel I know.
 Thank God he did it properly, this time.
 Only a fool would slash his ear
 instead of his throat.

Alice He did it properly this time.

Rachel Enough of Vincent, the Lune.
Alice How did you know?

Rachel The boss told me -
 Gillet saw it printed in the paper.

Rachel You can read a man by his shoes!

Alice Vincent wore boots like a farmer.

Rachel Not like Lieutenant Millet
in his dress uniform.

Alice When was he *ever* in his uniform?

Rachel When he arrived -
but not necessarily when he left.

Alice And *not* while he was here.

Rachel The good lieutenant, well armed
without a stitch on.

Alice He might look good, and
he sounds good if you listen
to him talking about himself -
but for all his weapons of war
he's not a very good shot!

 He tried to shoot every moving target -
and all at once.
He'd chase Suzette,
God rest her soul,
but then want Clare, or you, or me,
and not make up his mind. (*They laugh.*)

Rachel The Lune's only love was drink.

Alice No.
Dear heart, no,
he may have needed absinthe -
it may have picked him up from sleep
in the morning
given him a full belly at lunch,
and fired his strange painting -
his fever -
but it was not absinthe he loved.

Rachel I hate drunks.

Alice He was more than a drunk.

Rachel My father in Avignon drank himself rotten
and beat me and fucked me so I was pregnant

when I was fourteen.
And the baby died when it was three days old.
And I was pregnant again when I was just about
sixteen, and he tried to get the thing fixed
and eventually it came out.
Now I've never been pregnant since.

*Bang away, boys,
it's nothing to me.
My father's ploughed
the fields for you.
I'll no more mother you a bastard,
than you will father my heart.*

*But keep the syph to yourself,
keep it well away,
and I'll hide my itching
'til you've done and gone.*

Alice Vincent was a good man,
but lost amongst drink
and God and his colours.

Rachel But why does he have to love
when he hasn't got hold
of his own wits or his own
purse or his own prick.

He hardly knows one from
the other - and any of them
might go off at any moment. *(Alice laughs.)*

He's a fool.
But I defended him.
I said, "I'll kill anyone
who calls him that name."
The Lune.

Alice You were drunk.

Rachel But I call him that myself,
now.

Look, I've got something.
Some where. *(She produces a bottle.)*

Alice And you drink.

Rachel Like a camel in the desert.

Alice *(Very gently.)*
 You said, "I'll kill anyone who calls
me the Lune's woman." *(Rachel in stunned.)*

Rachel I said, I'll kill anyone who calls him that.

Alice Really?

Rachel Anyone who calls me that,
 the Lune's woman.

Alice That's what you said,
 when he spoke his love.

Rachel He was a child.

Alice They weren't child's eyes.

Rachel They weren't!
 They were not child's eyes. *(She drinks.)*

 There was a moment when I felt for him -
 like some involuntary response -
 and I loved him for a second.
 And his eyes saw it,
 and deny it as I might
 he had seen.

 But for me, it passed.

 He might have been the greatest
 fool this town has ever known,
 but he held onto that moment
 like a terrier -
 he wouldn't let go -
 I could drag him through shit
 but he'd still hang on.

Alice That's love.

Rachel But he was no good to me!
 He shot off as soon as he looked at me! *(Alice laughs.)*

Alice You punished him though.

Rachel Then he'd want to eat me -
 which was nice.

Alice Don't complain, then.

Rachel But then he'd cry -
 which I didn't understand.

(Alice laughs despite herself.)

 Then he'd say that I was Christ
 and that he'd worship me.

 Then he said that I wasn't Christ
 but I was the suffering child
 and that he would stand up for me -
 But he wasn't standing up, then!

 He said,
 that he would bear the load of my suffering.

 I loved him for that -
 no one else has ever
 wanted to carry my cares in a bundle for me.

 But how could you marry a man
 who talks like that!

(Alice laughs despite herself.)

Alice I remember him singing -
 and falling about giggling
 and playing the fool...

Rachel He took himself less seriously
 than most men who visit here.

Alice Gauguin, who took us on
 four at a time.

(They laugh.)

Rachel A very serious man.

Alice With his fingers and his toes
 as well as his tongue and his prick.

Rachel It's hard to concentrate

your mind on it -

Alice You've got to be very serious
to do it like that!

Rachel Vincent was simply embarrassed.

Too drunk to do anything
but swear and cry.
So in love was he with me,
that he even forgot I had a name
and feelings, even, eventually,
he was so worked up with
being in love, he forgot about sex
and satisfied himself
with looking and sighing.

Alice He was gentle.

Rachel Better than the bull from Camargue.

Alice His heart -

Rachel His heart pumped absinthe
and absinthe will turn your brain.

Alice His heart pumped love -
and oil paint colours
through his veins.

Rachel He's the only man
who never said, "I want".

(Pause. Rachel goes up stage and holds up the paper the fan Vincent gave her. She slowly and deliberately unfolds it into an open sheet of cartridge paper. She carefully tears around the edge to produce a long narrow strip of paper which she then holds up and wraps around her head like a bandage, creating a crazy semblance of the famous self-portraits of Van Gogh with bandaged head.)

Alice *(As narration.)*
Vincent came from the north
to our sun, like a man seeking God.
Drawn to the warmth -
shunning the brutality
of the city.

Vincent

I am a Buddhist monk,
my head shaved,
distaining the things of this world,
concerned only with my work.
My work is twofold -
to see and paint,
and to save others' souls suffering
as I.

I am a monk.
A bonze.
A yamabushi.

I live in the two dimensions
of a print.

What I deny is the people of Arles,
and the people of Paris.

What I affirm is love.

The people of Arles feared me
though I explained that I could
do no other person any harm.

They took lists of names to have
me locked up.

Gillet, my landlord,
instigated it,
and got his house
back on the market -
my Yellow House.

I don't resent him,
but I deny that he now exists -
or Arles -
except in my paintings.
That is the only Arles.

What I know is love.

What I sought was love.

What was left was only love.

Love which did not touch -
did not own -
did not speak.

Love beating.

And eyes to see.

I live in the two dimensions
of a print.