

HOW IT GOES

By Elspeth Tilley

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How it Goes was first performed in a rehearsed reading at Hanging Rock, February 14, 2017, by Carissa Lee, Ash Dyer, Ben Hjorth, Catherine Ryan, Amy Spiers and Beth Sometimes.



CHARACTERS

VISITORS	Heavily armed, dragging large suitcases. Tired from their journey, feeling entitled. They become increasingly oblivious or histrionic, ramping up the satire.
HOMEOWNERS	At first, comfortably at home in their country. Then perplexed, then increasingly angry and sardonic.
SAD FEMALE VISITOR	Bereft. Tragic. Melodramatic.
WHITE ACADEMIC	Well intentioned, somewhat disillusioned and occasionally patronising.
ARTIST	Persistent. Tenacious. Pragmatic.

SETTING

A beautiful homesite near a creek, in the Woi Wurrung language area, Kulin nation. A group of heavily armed visitors arrives and barges in without knocking, looking around inquisitively. A group of homeowners comes forward to receive them. Please use modern dress and inclusive casting for both groups. Each piece of dialogue for each group of Visitors and Homeowners can be split among as many actors as are available, or have one spokesperson for each group.

HOW IT GOES

VISITORS:

Hallloooo! Yoo hoo! Anybody home? Thought we'd just drop in and see how it goes.

[Pause, looking around disdainfully.]

Goodness, you haven't done much with the place, have you? No home improvements at all to speak of. And no garden. Just a big 'ole wilderness.

[Dropping suitcases on the ground, sitting down and generally occupying the space.]

HOMEOWNERS:

Er, no, actually, we've done loads. We've changed the whole ecosystem.

VISITORS:

[Craning eyes.]

Can't see it, myself.

HOMEOWNERS:

Well, we do it sustainably. That's the system we've developed. To your eyes maybe it all just blends in. You wouldn't see what we've done unless you know what you're looking for, but it's all very carefully managed.

VISITORS:

But where's the permanent dwellings and structures? The roads? Factories?

HOMEOWNERS:

That there, see that, that's a road. That's our main trading road in fact. It goes through to the inland mountains where our trading partners operate iron oxide mines. See that flattened area? If it were the right time of year to stay here, we'll build our houses there. Perfectly calculated to last long enough for the season, then we move on to the next site and it returns to the land. We're just moving through at the moment so no need for building anything. But next autumn we will.

[Pointing.]

There, where the freshest new ferns are springing up. They're recycling last autumn's house. And there, in the shallows, the circle of stones, that's a fish trap. Better than a

factory: no pollution or bycatch at all. This whole place is our home. But we don't own it, it owns us.

VISITORS:

No, no, can't see it. Just a bit of a scruffy animal track and what might make a good campsite and a few random rocks in the creek. There isn't even a tent. Definitely doesn't qualify. Well, such a pity for you, but unless you can make us see your home improvements, it's our turn now. That's how it goes.

HOMEOWNERS:

Pardon?

VISITORS:

It's our turn now. You've not done any improvements that we can see. Any renos, you know. Like on The Block. So we get a go.

HOMEOWNERS:

Get a go at what?

VISITORS:

Being the homeowners of course. You've clearly been very lazy, done nothing with the place, so this piece of paper from the other side of the world says we can have a go now.

HOMEOWNERS:

You're kidding.

VISITORS:

No, friend, and we have some wee weapons along of us that aren't kidding either
[patting gun barrels].
Now run along. You've had your chance, and you blew it.

HOMEOWNERS:

But we..

[one of the visitors suddenly and randomly shoots a homeowner, the homeowners retreat to one side, aghast and bereft, taking the body with them, visibly mourning in a huddle and watching what's going on]

VISITORS:

[among themselves]

Good, now you'all never saw a thing, right? Certainly didn't see any homeowners. Just a few stray animals, some of them quite picturesque. No homeowners, they said so themselves. Lovely, well let's just make ourselves at home, shall we? We'll turn this into a gracious nobleman's park before you can say manifest destiny. Those trees'll have to go. And we'll need some rabbits. Maybe some nice deer, really give it the pastoral feel. Some poisonous toads'd be a nice touch at some point in the future, don't you think? And of course lots of fences, show where we've been, which bits we've improved. Make it really obvious. Don't want any other visitors coming in here and suggesting we haven't been doing our bit.

[Lots of sage head-shaking at this. The visitors get busy felling and sawing. Sad female visitor runs in, tearing at her hair.]

SAD FEMALE VISITOR:

[wailing]

Aieeeee! Help me, help me! My poor innocent child has been tempted by the allure of the savage wilderness and wandered off in their little white smock! They've been eaten up by the untamed homeowners – I mean the untamed trees and rocks, because of course there aren't any homeowners!

VISITORS:

Again? Bother, what a nuisance. Ask some of those homeowners over there, I mean irrelevant bystanders, if they'll show us around.

[To homeowners]

Hey, you, the extras. You're not in the show anymore, but will you show us around?

HOMEOWNERS:

[incredulous]

No, why the bloody hell would we do that?

VISITORS:

Grab some of their women and kids will you

[visitors grab homeowner women and hold them captive, binding them harshly and throwing them to the ground].

Now, show us around.

[The visitors prod some homeowners before them at gunpoint.]

HOMEOWNERS:

If you'd just ask nicely, or perhaps even offer to properly purchase our valuable information at appropriate market value, we could tell you where the roads are. And about the energy plants. Soak the seeds in water and you get a fantastic energy drink – could outsell that WildBull stuff, for sure. Tastes better too. And you can always find water if you know which trees grow at water sources. There's a whole larder out there. Valuable knowledge that. Scientific, too. Proven through millennia of R&D.

VISITORS:

[Searching high and low for the lost child, as though on a treasure hunt.]

What are they babbling about? Oh some sort of superstition no doubt. Not rational like us, poor things. Gosh this land's dry and barren – nothing I recognise. We'll have to be making it more recognisable so we don't keep getting lost and perishing in it.

HOMEOWNERS:

It's our country. It's perfectly navigable just the way it is. Do you want to buy a map? We'll swap you. We give you a map, and you go away and leave us alone.

VISITORS:

[ignoring the homeowners, still searching ostentatiously]

Did we tell you how dangerous and mysterious this place it? It tempts us off the straight and narrow path, it does. Best flatten those forests, drain those wetlands. Put in some cows. Make it flow with milk and money. Oh look!

[Scanning the horizon.]

There's a glimpse of white petticoat! Our own little flagpost of whiteness in the wilderness! How poignant!

[The visitors split into two groups and search in different directions.]

VISITOR GROUP ONE:

[wailing, unable to find the lost child]

Aieeeee! Our little wayward child has vanished forever, swallowed by this beastly land!
Poor us, we are tragic victims. But also stoic

[drying eyes],

and brave

[joining hands],

and good mates

[backslapping each other]

oh except for you women

[they push the women to the side of the group]

we're not mates with you, we're sure it's all your fault the little ones wandered off in the first place, you haven't been training them properly to stay behind the fence and be obedient members of the occupying force, we mean destined inheritors of this god-granted-to-us wilderness. Now, let's just put up a grave here. We own this bit now, because it's got our sweet innocent white lost folk buried in it. Somewhere around here. So that makes it ours. That's how it goes.

VISITOR GROUP TWO:

[finding white petticoat, cheering, bearing up a doll dressed in voluminous white]

Hooray! We found our little lost one! We have banded together valiantly and triumphed over the nasty savage land! We own this bit now, too

[grand sweep of the arms]

because we proved ourselves worthy of it by not letting it have our child. Or our womenfolk, who as our possessions are interchangeable with our children.

VISITORS:

[To audience.]

Be sure to tell everyone the story of our twin virtues of tragic victimhood and courageous triumph in this scary hungry country, won't you? And how the noble savages sniffed the scent of our lost ones like bloodhounds and worked so generously like dogs to voluntarily help our wonderful project of white belonging. Because they too can see the rightness of us, the inevitability of our inheritance.

HOMEOWNERS:

It's our country. And you kidnapped our family to make us help you. And we didn't sniff the ground, we read the map like we'd learned in school, just like you do.

VISITORS:

[scratching heads]

We're getting a faint memory coming up of something not very flattering about our being here. Quick! Tell a white vanishing story! Paste over the nasty memory! Did we tell you the one about Little Boy Lost? So sad. Just wandered off, but fortunately the whole white community rallied together (which made a change, to be honest, because we'd been a wee bit busy drinking and bashing each other up, up to that point) and showed what strong stuff us white folk are made of and got him back. That's how it goes. We sing about it often. We've got lots of versions, lucky this Great Southern Land was a total blank page, just waiting for us to write all our stories onto. There's Clara Crosbie, and Jane Duff, and the White Woman of Gippsland.

HOMEOWNERS:

You made that one up.

VISITORS:

Oh it doesn't matter whether it's true or false, it's the *feeling* that matters – the feeling of martyrdom, because we've suffered so much. We couldn't possibly be the oppressors in all of this, anyone can see how much we've suffered.

HOMEOWNERS:

So you *do* admit we fought back, defended our home?

VISITORS:

[ignoring the homeowners]

Suffered at the hands of this dreadful place – no land wars or anything, of course, seeing as there were no homeowners to war with, just wars *with* the land. The treacherous land! Ambushing our innocents at every turn! And then after the feeling of victimhood, when one defeats the land and snatches one's loved ones back into one's victorious arms, comes the feeling of belonging, of rationality and civility stamping our white presence all over the place, imprinting our special white stories everywhere you turn. Every state's got them, our lovely white vanishers, and the memorials to them whether they lived or died.

HOMEOWNERS:

You're just a bunch of squatters telling tall tales. Exaggerating. Embellishing. And it's *our* country. The High Court said so!

VISITORS:

[To audience.]

Did we tell you the one about the schoolgirls? Virgins, they were. White bloomers and kid gloves and slowmotion hairbrushing of golden locks and all. Positively titillating. So tragic and mysterious when they all disappeared.

[Holding up the rescued doll in white petticoats
and wagging it.]

That's right, look this way, focus on the dolly.

HOMEOWNERS:

You definitely made that one up.

VISITORS:

Well yes, but it serves its purpose. This is *our* sacred site now. Pilgrims will come. Movies will be made. Academic articles will be written. That's how it goes.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

[rushing onstage, wringing hands]

Listen, you've got to stop telling these white vanishing stories. They aren't healthy. I've been studying them, turns out they're actually quite toxic.

VISITORS:

Oh, but they're very addictive. And useful.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

[throwing hands in air]

Oh I give up. Nobody reads academic articles anyway. It's too late, the damage is done. I'm packing up my white guilt and moving to New Zealand. At least they have a treaty. Nothing can be done for Australia. That's how it goes.

HOMEOWNERS:

Gee, thanks a lot.

VISITORS:

Are you still here?

HOMEOWNERS:

Yes. We're not going anywhere.

ARTIST:

[stepping into the spotlight from the wings]

Er, actually, there's loads we can do.

[To white academic.]

You said so yourself.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

Pardon?

ARTIST:

You said so yourself: "Narratives of nation-building contain the seeds of their own destruction."

WHITE ACADEMIC:

Did I say that?

ARTIST:

Yes. Let's do it. Let's destroy one of the narratives.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

But it'll cause a ruckus among us visitors. You should have seen the fuss when someone tried to restore the homeowners' place names south of here – the visitors wrote to the paper, complaining, that not only would their ridiculous new place name imported from some completely different mountains in Scotland vanish, but that they themselves, would also cease to be. Truly. They wrote that.

[To audience.]

Uninvited visitors tend to do that when the ropes of story that they've woven as desperate anchors to a place are threatened – they get all bizarre and strident.

HOMEOWNERS:

[Among themselves.]

And they call *us* irrational.

ARTIST:

That was nearly 30 years ago.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

So?

ARTIST:

Well I like to think that things have changed. We're going to get rid of the most notorious white vanisher from this site. Miranda must go. We'll hoist her up on a big crane and lift her right out of the place. Then maybe there'll be room for some of the original stories to be heard.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

Ooooh!

[Jumping up and down.]

You're a genius! Peel back a layer of the palimpsest. Perform a symbolic decolonisation as the first step towards creating mental space to imagine an actual decolonisation. It's brilliant!

VISITORS:

[Gloomily.]

It's nuts.

WHITE ACADEMIC:

It's not nuts, it's absolutely crucial.

[Pompously.]

I'm going to quote myself, if I may. "Fantasising about white vanishing and converting historical white vanishings into narratives of anti-conquest, hyperseparation, and

hierarchy is part of the discursive violence that white settlers have done (and continue to do) to Indigenous peoples in Australia.”

[Pause for effect.]

But now Amy here is backwards engineering the symbolic violence of white vanishing. That’s magnificent. She gets it! She recognises that landscape myths directly shape the possible relationships in any society. So if you want to change the relationships, you have to tackle the landscape myths.

ARTIST:

Er, thanks. I think. But that’s a bit wordy. Definitely a bit gratuitously complex. Could you maybe put it into a creative form?

WHITE ACADEMIC:

I’ll write you a short play. It’ll be a satire. And it’ll also be completely true, every word of it. And it will be totally inadequate and contain all kinds of new discursive problems of its own. But at least it might contribute to the conversation.

ARTIST:

Done. Let’s see how it goes.

[They shake hands. Curtain.]