



Source: David Crowe, 'A vote of confidence for Iraq troops', *The Age online*, 18/03/07.

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The house lights are up. Voices mingle with background music, a gentle hum that occasionally bursts with random notes of laughter. Backstage the actors rub each others' shoulders and backs. They stand in a circle and breathe deeply, exhaling with harmonic drones up and down the various scales.

It's a mixed cast. Some of the actors are well versed in the alchemy of becoming another person: younger or older, more lost or more found, turning their skins into animals and birds, sometimes disappearing into mist. These actors sit around the table in the green room, casually drinking coffee and telling stories about this show or that show, the tour, the flop, the success.

Others in the cast have never been on stage before, at least not in front of a live audience. The new performers pace up and down repeating their lines as if in this last moment the transformation will take place and they will enter the life of their character once and for all. One woman is in tears. 'What if I become that character and can never return to myself?' she weeps.

They recite the mantras of stage craft they have soaked up over the last few weeks.

'Use your nerves. Drag them up from your belly, to reverberate in your voice box, and hurl them out into the dark pit that is the audience', whispers one nervy man.

'Draw on a real experience' someone else mumbles, as they all huddle backstage. 'Use your feelings of a real event to bring emotion into the role.'

Her role is the knife thrower. She must be nasty and spiteful, betray her friends and throw knives at her enemies. She finds this very difficult.

'Louder', the director had shouted in rehearsal. 'Show me your anger.' Like a thick lump her anger had stuck in her throat.

'Think of someone you hate and then say the line,' the director had yelled. 'Surprise me with your hate.'

She thinks now: Whom do I hate? I roam through my life, scanning the episodes for loathing. The stuff that sticks to my tongue is too bitter. It tastes sour, fermented in my stomach. My mother refused to let me use the word hate. She said 'say you "strongly dislike."' If I throw my knife with my hate it may kill someone.

There are many things a knife thrower could hate. They could hate the smell of sawdust spread on the ground beneath the stage. Or the taste of their own sweat. Maybe they hate the daylight and only feel awake under the bright theatre lights. They hate the tremble in their fingers and the rapid rhythm of their heart beat. Hate their destiny, to sharpen blades, to play a dangerous game. They hate the way they become, narrow, hard, ground down to the edge.

The knife thrower takes her position, right foot forward, steady and true. The drum rolls, stops, and she flings herself forward. The plastic dagger remains in her hand. It is the sharp idea of the knife that must fly through the air, miss the target and splinter wood.

Then the knife thrower has to metamorphose into a bird. Backstage she hastily pulls on long black gloves and a black wig, to become a crow that will fly down and attack a lost and vulnerable child. The director has told her she must not be an actor playing a crow. She must be a crow.

Many of her mornings have been filled with crow music. Crows that land on the shed roof and clatter their footfalls across corrugated iron. Crows that swoop to steal a baby duck from the nest and fly cawing into tall trees. Crows that hop too close with sharp beaks begging. The sound of birds calling is almost deafening.

She crouches on the raised platform upstage, a flight gathering in her belly, waiting for another surprise. On cue she leaps from her perch. She flies above the stage, sees the child far below, the audience holding their breaths. With a flapping of wings she descends in free fall, the crow song crackling from her throat.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nandi Chinna.*