

Shooting the War Game

By Michael Percy

Characters:

George Pickering
Jean Morgan
Lily Webb
Alf
Frank
Kate Watson
Newscaster (voice off)

Shooting the War Game

(The play is set in 1964 during the filming of the BBC drama documentary *The War Game* directed by Peter Watkins. It begins with five actors involved in filming a dramatic rescue scene in a bombed building.)

(The setting is envisaged as black box with minimum props to indicate piles of burnt and blasted wreckage – brickwork, blackened wood, pieces of furniture. It must be possible for one of the actors to lie unseen by the audience within these props. The intention is to indicate the interior living room of a ruined house that has been wrecked by the blast from a nuclear bomb and blackened by a burst of flame. Hidden from view there must be a metal bucket of water.)

(George and Jean are casualties of the blast. They lie like rag dolls downstage amongst the wreckage. They are both dead. Lily, a seriously injured casualty, is in the room but upstage and hidden from view among the wreckage. The lighting is low and gloomy. Perhaps flames flicker off stage. Smoke effect if possible.)

(Alf and Frank enter having broken into the house. They use torches to search the ruins.)

Alf: (Catching Jean and George in his torch beam.) Frank, Frank, over here. There's two of them. You take the woman, I'll have a look at the bloke.

Frank: (Feeling Jean's pulse.) She's gone – nothing.

Alf: Be sure.

Frank: (Tense.) I know what I'm doing. There's nothing.

Alf: (Feeling George's pulse.) Mine's a gonna too, looks like.

(Alf and Frank start to leave after shining their torches around the room.)

Frank: **(Pausing to survey the wrecked room.)** Christ, would you look at this? And we've only done half the street. There's nobody left.

Alf: It's bad boy, bad. Just remember your training. We can only do our best.

Lily: **(Unseen, in a feeble voice.)** Help, help me.

Frank: Listen.

Alf: They're gone. We'll take a quick look upstairs and...

Frank: Shush. Listen.

(Lily groans.)

Frank: Over here.

(The men uncover Lily from beneath the wreckage by moving parts of it.)

(Lily groans.)

Frank: She's got a wound in her side, lost a lot of blood.

Alf: She's alive. **(Applying a dressing to Lily's side.)** I don't know how long she'll last. We'll have to get the stretcher bearers back here pretty quick.

Frank: Family after family, just wiped out. They don't deserve this – nobody deserves this.

(Enter Kate with a clip board and a polaroid camera. She begins to take polaroids with flash showing the positions of the three bodies.)

Kate: Nobody move. Continuity stills. We're breaking for lunch. That's fine. Just a couple more. Good. You can relax now. (She makes notes on the clip board.)

George: **(Sits up scratching his back.)** Thank God for that. It feels like I've got itching powder down my shirt. I don't think this costume's been washed.

Jean: **(Sitting up.)** You're lucky, one of those buggers stood on my hand. One of you two stood on my hand.

Frank: Sorry lady, it's not easy climbing around in the dark.

Lily: **(Sitting up and addressing Kate)** Excuse me.

Kate: **(Making notes.)** Yes?

Lily: Can I have more blood for the next shot, I think I would have bled quite a lot more – I am going to die after all.

Kate: That's special effects love. I'm continuity.

Frank: I think you're wrong there, I think it's make-up she needs.

Jean: Not sure about that, I think blood would be more special effects than make-up.

Lily: We'll wait for the crew to come back from lunch – I'll ask the director.

(Jean has produced a handkerchief and threatens to wipe the grime from her face.)

Kate: **(To Jean.)** Don't do that. You need to match in the next shot. You'll have to leave the make-up. The make-up girls have got to do fourteen serious burns cases by three o'clock – they won't thank you for giving them something else to worry about.

(Frank moves to sit on a piece of wreckage next to Lily. They exchange a smile.)

Jean: Am I expected to go to lunch looking like a chimney sweep?

Kate: That grime is a badge of honour to an actress like you.

Jean: Oh, do you think so?

Kate: Yes, absolutely.

(Exit Kate busily.)

Frank: **(To Lily.)** I suppose you are *teenager with serious side wound*?

Lily: Yes. I'm Lily. Are you young civil defence rescue worker?

Frank: That's me. My name's Frank. We've got the first scene after lunch.

Lily: Okay. Fab.

Frank: We could rehearse a bit if you want. There won't be much time later. You have to lie with your head in my arms.

(Frank sits next to Lily on the floor.)

(Lily tentatively rests her head on Frank's shoulder.)

Lily: What, like this do you mean?

(Frank moves Lily's head onto his chest and puts his arms around her.)

Frank: More like this. You don't mind do you

Lily: No, we have to rehearse.

(Frank snuggles closer.)

Frank: That's it. Perhaps a little higher up so I can get my arms around your...

Alf: Frank!

Frank: We're only rehearsing.

Alf: I know what you're rehearsing my lad.

Lily: If I snuggle in like this...

Frank: Nice and close.

Jean: Shall we leave the room, is this going to get saucy?

Alf: It better not....

Lily: What about this. **(Teasing the older people she groans and sighs as if making love.)**

Frank: Oh yeah baby, now you're in the groove.

Alf: Well my lad, you can just climb out of that groove.

Jean: She's supposed to be at death's door. All that sighing sounds wrong to me.

George: Not bad though – You're not long out of drama school are you young lady?

Alf: **(To Frank, sternly.)** Up you get my lad – it's lunchtime.

(For a moment Lily and Frank look intently at each other.)

Alf: **(Pulling Frank to his feet.)** Save it for later lad, you'll wear yourself out.

(Alf is pulling Frank away.)

Frank: (To Lily.) What are you doing tonight, when we wrap?

Lily: Ask me later, after our scene together.

Frank: Cool.

Lily: Far out.

Jean: God protect us from young people.

(Exit Frank and Alf.)

Lily: (Stretching out and getting comfortable lying down on the floor.) He's nice. I like him.

(George delves into the rubble of the room and comes up with a packed lunch and a transistor radio.)

George: May as well get comfortable – they'll soon have us spread all over the floor. **(He begins to tune the transistor radio.)** I sometimes think there is a distinct streak of sadism in film directors.

Jean: I do hope you're not going to inflict that ghastly Workers' Playtime on us.

George: Well, I quite enjoy it.

Lily: **(From the floor.)** Can you get Radio Caroline?

Jean: What on earth is *Radio Caroline*?

Lily: It stands for freedom. Taking power from the establishment and giving it back to the people. Music belongs to the people!

Jean: **(Baffled.)** Oh.

George: **(To Jean.)** Radio Caroline: they call it a pirate radio station. It's on a boat in the channel. Pop music.

Jean: Oh please, not that – not pop music. Find something soothing from the BBC please.

(The radio picks up a news bulletin.)

Newscaster:will be making an announcement in the house this afternoon regarding the increasing tension between China and America regarding the Chinese threats to invade South Vietnam. A spokesman said the seriousness of the situation cannot be overstated....

George: **(He tunes out of the news bulletin.)** All I seem to be able to get is The Home Service.

Lily: **(Sitting up with urgency.)** What was that? Get it back.

George: **(Still trying to tune in)** It was only the news.

Lily: But what was that about China invading Vietnam?

George: Something and nothing – it always is. They'll be doing the weather forecast by now.

Jean: **(Standing)** Listen to what you like, I'm off to the canteen. It had better be something good. I was doing a public information film last week and the buggers tried to palm us off with pies and those horrible baked beans. Pies! Can you believe it? I got straight on to Equity about that.

George: **(Putting the radio down and beginning to eat from his packed lunch.)** No mobile canteen, not on this one. Didn't you read the call sheet – it said cast and crew have to collect packed lunches at the start of shooting. Didn't you get one?

Jean: (shocked.) Don't be silly.

Lily: It's true. **(Produces her packed lunch.)** That's what it said.

Jean: That's ridiculous – this is the BBC.

George: Well, Aunty's not cooking for us today.

Jean: Outrageous – that's simply outrageous. We have to eat – it's in the contract.

George: Apparently we are working on a very tight budget. Using a lot of non-professionals – amateur actors and such like.

Lily: This is an important piece of work – something that shows the true futility of war. I'd give up more than my lunch to make sure it gets made.

Jean: You'll learn young lady – as professionals we have to have standards. You mention amateurs, who are these amateurs?

George: I met a chap yesterday who's a policeman in real life.

Jean: What does a policeman know about acting? What use can he possibly be?

George: He's playing a policeman I believe.

Jean: Well I suppose he has the uniform – saves money on costumes.

Lily: Have you seen any of the director's other work? He's fantastic. He did a film last year about the battle of Culloden. He works in a documentary style – interviews, reporters talking to camera, just like the real reports from the Vietnam war – so *now*, so *immediate*. And he has a wonderful way of using black and white. Very gritty and realistic.

Jean: **(Horried.)** Black and white. **(She appeals to George.)** Black and white. Nobody said anything about black and white. Nothing to eat and we're going to end up in some second rate black and white... documentary!

Lily: **(Leaping to her feet.)** This film is going to be a work of art. Peter Watkins is set to lead the revival of British Cinema. A British François Truffaut. A Claude Chabrol.

George: **(Enthusiastic to Lily's theme)** Oh yes, yes. Did you see Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* – brilliant. He lets the actors take their time to develop the characters: so rare, especially in television. I love French cinema.

Lily: Exactly. The way he handles the relationship between the two men....

Jean: Excuse me- I'm sure French films are wonderful but what about my lunch?

Lily: Here, have my lunch. I don't want to eat anyway – my character wouldn't have had a packed lunch – she's lying on the floor bleeding to death, her parents sacrificed on the altar of war. A war our government led us into, a nuclear war that nobody is going to win - the destruction of civilisation as we know it.

Jean: **(Snatching the lunch pack.)** This is uncivilised. We are artists you know. We should be treated with respect – not like... cattle. **(To Lily.)** Sit down dear, have a little bleed, you'll feel better for it.

(Lily makes a 'V' sign at Jean and lies down on the floor.)

George: She's only young.

Lily: **(From the floor.)** You'll see, I'm right. This will be a landmark

movie.

Jean: What would it cost them to lay on a hot meal? I'm going to speak to my agent about this.

Lily: **(From the floor.)** It's an honour to appear in this film.

Jean: I'm signed up for two more days next week. I'm doing Woman with insane glare. **(She gives an insane glare to George.)**

Lily: **(From the floor.)** Type casting then.

Jean: Don't be so rude. It's acting dear – more demanding than lying about being a corpse.

Lily: **(Sits up.)** I'm not just a corpse. I have lines: Help, help me. And I have to groan (She groans). And in the next scene I cry out and writhe in pain before dying in my rescuer's arms. So romantic. **(Lies down again, but sits up immediately.)** But, more importantly, so anti-war. **(Lies down.)**

Jean: **(To George.)** I don't call that real acting. Not your actual, real dialogue is it? No call for characterisation. Next week I have to do incoherent mumble. **(Acts to George who responds.)** Have you seen my son? Have you seen him? Freddie, that's his name. Seven years old. Have you seen him? Have you seen my little boy?

George: That's really very good.

Jean: Thank you. Even a few lines can show character. Do you see now young lady: dialogue, that's what real acting is all about, creating character through dialogue.

Lily: **(From the floor.)** Yes, well today you're only a corpse.

Jean: I am required to keep my features hidden from the camera to avoid any continuity issue in my next role.

Lily: **(Sits up again.)** What, Issues like: woman with an incoherent mumble and an insane stare comes back from the dead? **(Lies down.)**

Jean: **(To George.)** She'll learn. Do you know anything about our director? Some kind of innovator it seems.

George: Well, I saw the film about the Jacobite uprising on the BBC last year. Very well received. Got a very bold style.

Jean: Actually, I haven't seen the full script of this one. Usually do but I've been so busy. Are we second world war? It looks like it. The blitz or something?

Lily: **(Lily pops up again.)** Third world war actually. This film is a searing indictment of the insanity of nuclear weapons.

Jean: What do you mean: third world war?

Lily: The one after the second – third world war.

Jean: Have they shown you the full script?

Lily: I never take a role unless I know what the project is about. **(She lies down again.)**

Jean: **(To George.)** Have you read it?

George: Yes, I have actually. In this scene we are a family caught by the blast of a thirty megaton bomb twenty miles away over Chatham.

Jean: Oh, poor Chatham. Twenty miles you say?

Lily: **(Sits Up.)** First there is a searing flash of light that melts your

eyeballs and sets fire to your clothes. Then there is the blast that will smash buildings, throw people around like rag dolls...

Jean: Please, please – I lived through the blitz you know. I know all about what it's like to be bombed.

Lily: **(Exasperated.)** But you don't know, you don't. This will be far worse than the worst bombing raid in the war - ever. That's exactly what Peter wants to expose – the full horror of nuclear warfare.

Jean: It's Peter now is it? Suddenly we're close friends with the director.

Lily: It's only a couple of years since the Cuban missile crisis. Have you forgotten how close we were to all-out nuclear war: they were ready to do it – press the bloody button and see us all blasted to hell.

Jean: I don't think we need a history lecture from a... from a teenager.

Lily: It's not history, it's now. Those missiles are still there and they are ready to use them. I may be young but it's your generation that got us into this mess. The Cold War. The four minute warning. When the sirens go we have just four minutes to live. Four minutes. You've had your life – what about mine?

Jean: I don't think you can say that I've had my life just yet – I'm not quite ready for the grave.

(Lily sinks back onto the floor with a loud sigh of despair. She is now out of sight.)

Jean: **(To George.)** I'm not, am I – past it I mean?

George: Of course not. You are in your prime I'm sure.

(Enter Frank nervously carrying his packed lunch. He grins sheepishly at George and Jean.)

Frank: I was, erm just looking for... You know, somewhere to eat my lunch.

Jean: Really. That's nice. **(She winks at George.)**

Frank: **(He looks around the room for Lily but cannot see her.)** Okay the... Not to worry. I won't bother you. **(Turns to leave.)**

Lily: **(Still lying out of sight.)** What did you get in your sandwiches then?

Frank: **(Spinning round, surprised.)** Oh, er... haven't looked yet. Are you... where are you?

Lily: **(Popping up.)** I gave my lunch to a good cause.

Frank: You could share mine. If you like.

Lily: Oh that's really nice of you. **(Stands up to join Frank.)**

Jean: I thought you didn't want to eat – something about getting in tune with the character if I remember correctly. **(Now to George.)** Am I right here?

George: **(Not wanting to be drawn into a row.)** I couldn't say. There was something. That's very generous of you young man. Well done.

Lily: **(Leads Frank away from the other two.)** What have you got?

Frank: It's, let's see, cheese in one, and...eer...corned beef. There's an apple. Just up the street there's a van with tea and coffee... If you wanted.

(Lily sits on some rubble. Frank seems to want to go out to the refreshment

van.)

Lily: Let's go half and half. Thanks for this.

Frank: Oh, Okay.(He sits.) It's not much. **(They share the sandwiches and eat.)** Are you a proper actress, professional I mean?

Lily: I'd love to be. I work in a shop in Maidstone. I saw something about this in our local and... well, here I am. Walked out on my job. Mum went mad. But I love all this – it's so exciting. Are you?

Frank: No, not me. I'm learning to be a motor mechanic, college, here in Dover. Summer holidays so this gives me something to do. Do you think it's a bit... you know, boring. All this hanging around and waiting for something all the time.

Lily: No, it's fascinating. I'm staying with my aunt so, when I've finished my bit, I'm gonna hang around and just watch. It's fascinating. I love all this. Filming and drama. I'd like to take it up properly, maybe go to drama school. I was in the drama club at school – I played Kate in The Taming of the Shrew. Just a school play.

Frank: That's Shakespeare right? How do you remember all the words, the lines.

Lily: I just do. Just a gift I suppose. **(She stands.)**

(George and Jean take note at the start of Lily being Kate.)

Lily:

The more my wrong, the more his spite appears.
What, did he marry me to famish me?
Beggars that come unto my father's door
Upon entreaty have a present alms;
If not, elsewhere they meet with charity;
But I, who never knew how to entreat,
Nor never needed that I should entreat,
Am starv'd for meat, giddy for lack of sleep;

Frank: **(Clapping.)** Oh yes, that's brilliant.

George: **(Joining the clapping.)** Well done girl, that was splendid.

(Lily Takes a bow.)

Jean: She appears to have all the words in the correct order but really, Shakespeare?

George: No, fair play to her, I'm impressed.

Jean: And I suppose the boy is about to start spouting Hamlet at us.

Frank: No, I'm a motor mechanic – training to be.

Jean: Where do they find them? And I suppose you're another member of the CND.

Frank: Well, not actually...

Lily: He supports our aims. **(To Frank.)** These two support the arms race – can you believe it? As if anybody is going to survive another war. The world would be in ruins.

Jean: If she'd gone through the war like we did she would understand – we have to make a stand. If they have a missile we have to have two.

Lily: **(Groans.)** Oh dear God.

Jean: **(Appealing to George.)** But that's right isn't it?

George: Yes, I'm afraid to say. We fell behind in the arms race with the Germans in 1939 – we can't make the same mistake with the Russians. Certainly not.

Jean: No. That's right.

Alf: **(Off Stage.)** Frank, where are you lad?

Frank: I should be... Going. (Begins his exit.)

Lily: But I don't want to live my life like that. I don't want my children to grow up like that – frightened of being blown to pieces because some maniac might press a bloody button.

Frank: I'll see you later – our scene together...

George: Nobody is going to push the button. Kennedy made Khrushchev back down over Cuba. The Ruski's wouldn't dare try anything again.

Frank: **(Frank exits slowly, unnoticed during Lily's next line saying unheard:)** Maybe tonight, after... We can... Maybe.

Lily: Oh sure - because if they do try anything we will destroy the whole world and leave a devastated nuclear wasteland. That'll show 'em.

George: You are entitled to your opinion but to be honest, I sleep better at night knowing we can stand up for ourselves – trade punches with the best of them. Remember the war!

Lily: Oh God! I really do give up. **(She sits on rubble away from the other two.)**

Jean: Good. You have a little rest dear – you've got some difficult dying to do later.

(Lily's makes a 'V' sign at Jean.)

Jean: Young people today are so rude.

(Jean and George eat in silence for a few beats.)

Jean: I'm Jean by the way.

George: George, nice to work with you Jean.

(A few more beats of eating.)

George: I've got the script with me, would you like to have a look?

Jean: I have my own copy, naturally – just haven't had the time to read it all... You know.

George: Of course. You're busy I'm sure.

Jean: What's this documentary called?

George: The War Game. It's going to be a Wednesday Play on the Beeb.

(George starts fiddling with the radio again and a news bulletin comes through:)

Newscaster: ...is deteriorating rapidly and appears to have taken Western leaders by surprise. Mr George Brown, the Foreign Secretary, gave a statement in which he made it clear that Great Britain fully supports the

American demands that the Chinese army should make an immediate withdrawal from South Vietnam. Failure to do so will incur the wrath of the civilised world. Other world leaders are joining America in condemning the Chinese invasion. We will interrupt programmes with any further reports.

George turns off the radio. Jean has carried on eating, oblivious to the news flash. George shows concern. Lily moves closer to George.

George: Thank God the Chinese don't have the bomb.

Lily: But they have, at least they've tested one.

George: But it takes years to perfect a nuclear bomb.

Lily: They don't need to, the Russians are on their side.

Jean: Can we get some decent music on your radio George? The BBC play some beautiful music.

Lily: **(To George.)** Leave it – we need to know what's happening.

Jean: Not more news, please... So depressing.

George: I'll play it low and hold it to my ear.

Jean: It's the Chinese dear – nobody cares about the Chinese.

Lily: **(To Jean.)** Do you read the papers?

Jean: Of course I read the papers.

Lily: Then you will know all about the Vietnam War.

Jean: That's the other side of the world dear, nothing to do with us.

Lily: The Americans won't stand aside and let China invade South Vietnam. This is going to be a war between superpowers. **(Now directed at George.)** And the Russians do have nuclear weapons.

George: Listen, listen.

(George turns the volume up.)

Newscaster: ...President Johnson went on to say that he regrets bringing the world to the brink of nuclear conflict but the Chinese must face the full consequences of their actions. The American response will be limited to the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Chinese military positions in North Vietnam.

(George turns the radio down and holds it to his ear.)

Jean: Serves them right.

Lily: Serves them right? But the Russians are bound to back the Chinese. Don't you get it?

Jean: But it's on the other side of the world.

George: What she means – sorry, I don't know your name.

Lily: Lily.

George: What Lily means is it could spread – that's right isn't it?

Lily: Exactly. It could spread to Europe. It will spread to Europe. Do you see? I mean, look at Berlin – the Berlin wall; half the German nation held captive by imperialist Russia. NATO versus the Warsaw Pact. It's a war waiting to happen.

Jean: But it's on the other side of the world.

George: What she means – sorry, I don't know your name.

Lily: Lily.
George: What Lily means is it could spread – that’s right isn’t it?
Lily: Exactly. It could spread to Europe. It will spread to Europe. Do you see? I mean, look at Berlin – the Berlin wall; half the German nation held captive by imperialist Russia. NATO versus the Warsaw Pact. It’s a war waiting to happen.
Jean: Of course I see, but the Government won’t let there be another war.
Lily: Our government does exactly what the Americans want – every time.
Jean: Of course they don’t. Don’t be silly.
George: I have to say I’m with Lily on this one – we depend on the Americans to stand up for us in Europe. Without the Yanks the Russians would be in Downing Street by tomorrow lunchtime. The Russians have grabbed half of Europe and enslaved the people (George’s attention goes to the radio) Hang on...
Lily: That’s right – the Russians want to control the whole world.
George: Listen, listen. (George turns the radio up.)
Newscaster: ...in view of the level of international tension. The state of emergency comes into effect immediately. All police leave is cancelled and members of the Civil Defence Corps are required to report for duty. Hospitals are to cancel all non-urgent treatment. The general population is advised to keep calm and stay indoors. All shops have been ordered to close until further notice. The population is assured there is no need for the hoarding of foodstuffs. Details of petrol rationing will be announced later today.

(George turns the radio down.)

Lily: It’s happening. Those bastards are going to do it.
Jean: I don’t understand, what’s happening?
Lily: World War Three.

(Jean stares at Lily in confusion.)

Jean: I think we should all... I want to go home...
Lily: They must have been preparing this – I bet they’ve known the Yanks were going to attack China for days, weeks even.
George: **(Standing up, authoritative, a stern parent.)** We’ve been told to stay indoors. We don’t want to be caught out in the open if... if anything happens. We are fully prepared: all we need to do is follow the advice given by the government.
Lily: **(Scornful.)** You mean the *Protect and survive* booklet? For God’s sake – CND say...

(An air raid warning siren sounds and continues. The women stand, looking shocked. The siren continues.)

END OF SAMPLE. Full script available at Lazy Bee Scripts