

**The Visitors by Larry Thomas**  
(An unpublished play and video film)

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This review is derived from the video of the play and the script given by the author to me to view. *The Visitors* premiered in American Samoa in 2008 during the 10<sup>th</sup> South Pacific Festival of Arts. When Larry Thomas was asked by the Fiji Arts Club to take Fiji's contribution to the dramatic arts, he decided to take *The Visitors* because he had just completed writing it. Since it was produced in American Samoa, neither the play nor the film itself have been seen by a Fiji audience. All other plays of Thomas are well known whereas this one is not. It is important that we know about it. The play is still in a draft form yet to be published and the video has limited circulation because it wasn't commercially produced.

Directed by Ian Gaskell, *The Visitors* is set in a house owned by the couple Vishwa (Shailesh Lal) and Manju (Michelle Reddy). It is late at night and the couple is asleep. There are sounds *offstage* signifying that what is on stage is only the tip of the iceberg. An ominous air surrounds the setting. There is a 'missed call' which creates the desired effect.. Darkness outside is punctuated by the sound of dogs barking. Suddenly the light on the stage shines on two hooded 'visitors', Man 1 (Samuela Rabukawaqa) and Man 2 (Apete Marayawa) who arrive to 'visit' the couple. The playwright's choice of time and occasion heighten the psychological turmoil and the physical brutality that is to follow.

The place Thomas has chosen is the couple's bedroom representing comfort, security, safety and intimacy that becomes a prison, their privacy brutalized. It appears the two thugs have been hired to do a 'job', that is, search the house and retrieve certain stolen goods - money, gold and jewellery. We learn that Vishwa is a hard-working businessman with a pretty wife, plus three mistresses who he pays to hide his stolen goods. Manju, the wife, is traumatized by the experience of the night. The episode is horrible enough; she also discovers her husband's fraudulent activities

and his immoral life. The bedroom is a microcosm of the larger society. Obviously the violent drama that lasts for two hours proves to be overwhelming for any audience. The packed audience in Samoa shown in the video were on the edge of their seats throughout the performance. Thomas staged this drama of brutality to draw our attention to violence, corruption, and generally people's insensitivity towards each other.

*The Visitors* poses a clever play on words. In iTaukei culture when a 'vulagi' or a visitor arrives into the village, he/she comes to 'kerekere'. In contrast, the 'visitors' in Thomas' play are unwelcomed intruders. The two thugs are not traditional 'visitors'. They happen to be iTaukei nevertheless. They are thieves who come into the house of the unsuspecting couple. The actions of these men represent an inversion of values. The play can be interpreted in historical terms. Historically the Indo-Fijians are regarded as the 'vulagi' (visitor). Although they have been brought by the British as indentured labourers, the iTaukei accommodated them in the ancestral land and gradually the Indo-Fijians have become less the vulagi and more citizens. Obviously Thomas is making a complex statement here and asking the question who is the 'vulagi' and who is the proper citizen. In the play, it's a couple of iTaukei criminals as visitors into the house of the sleeping couple. But Vishwa himself is not innocent. He's in illicit trade. There are layers of ironies in the play. Thomas is not interested in making simplistic judgements. Two thugs themselves are victims and part of a larger plot. They are being used by the invisible mafia. Although Vishwa is corrupt and immoral, still he is protective of his wife when he shouts: 'Don't touch her!'. Manju can be loyal and supports her husband but she has a mind of her own as is evident when Vishwa says he will settle abroad, she says she will live and die here. This experience has changed Manju profoundly, and she is now empowered to make bold decisions for herself.

The style Thomas has adopted is that of an interrogation. Some of the sparkle in the play comes from the exchange between the hosts and the visitors. The following is an example: 'This is my house!' 'Your house? Your house? This is my land! You hear?' The interrogators are dominant in the questions and the responses are passive and evasive until pushed to the edge when Vishwa begins to shout back: 'Where you taking her? Leave her alone'.

The characters in the play are well drawn. The intruders are violent and brutal. They are in haste to do what they must do – retrieve the stolen items without killing anyone. Both are sophisticated thieves. They are smart, gifted with language. Vishwa is married with children. He is hard-

working and a bit of a thief and a scoundrel. What is more, he supports the coup. He employs people like the thugs for his underworld business. He tries to persuade his wife to migrate to Australia, but she is bent on staying. They do not share the same values.

Manju is different. She is responsible, dutiful to her husband, honest and wants her children to make better decisions. She is a teacher, wife and mother. She is also rooted in this country and works hard to contribute to its welfare. She is well educated. Manju is the positive force in the play. Thomas has often made women positive and Manju works hard, is loyal to her country, husband and children and its people and it is people like Manju who make a difference.

This violent play portrays that Thomas is moving into greater complexity. He is moving towards greater boldness in bringing out the ethnic conflict, but more importantly he reveals the decadence in larger society. Although the play is grim and unsettling still there is an element of hope that is always there in Thomas' works

Tension mounts as the intruders begin their operation. Man 1 comes to rob well prepared. He brings a bag with strings and pieces of cloth to tie up the hosts. He has a violent temper and readily uses his pocket knife to threaten the couple. Manju has difficulty in following his perverted logic as he attempts to rape her. He alludes to injustice regarding the coup while at the same time he himself is inflicting physical and emotional pain upon the Singh family. He has no qualms in gagging and tying Mr and Mrs Singh and he throws his weight around specifically when giving orders.

Man 2 is smarter than Man 1. He has lots of information about the couple. He knows their home address, their landline and mobile numbers. He also knows that there is gold hidden in the house. He is racist and threatens to kill the Singh family if they do not co-operate. He has a university education and tries to elicit information from Manju by trying to be friendly. But he is cold, calculating and uses blackmail to persuade Vishwa to his own advantage. When all the techniques of interrogation fail, he gives the couple space and time to rethink their situation. When the businessman continues to withhold information, Man 2 sends him behind the stage where he is brutally beaten by Man 1. He is astute and he knows he has a bad name and implies that people like Vishwa employ him to do their 'dirty work'. Man 2 is also ruthless. When an iTaukei responds to Manju's scream for help, he threatens to wipe out her entire family if she jeopardizes his plans. Man 2's last speech is pertinent and sad. He knows he is a 'vulagi' in his own country. He does not know his history and while they expect him to know it, there is no time to learn it

because he is busy trying to survive. His history is not feeding nor looking after him. He doesn't hate Indians. He just has to do what he does because in his own country he is 'nothing' and that Indians are better off than him even though what he does is very hard work especially in the city where not everybody can make it. No matter how hard one works one gets nothing out of it. All one wants is to get the 'hell' out of it because the 'natives have gone wild'. Man 2 has many stories, none of which he likes because they are either broken, incomprehensible, or just left alone because the stories need to be erased. There is no point in remembering them because 'I am who I am. I am who they tell me to be'. Man 2 is totally enslaved to forces beyond his control.

Vishwa is married with children. He is a hard-working businessman who wants to migrate with his family to Australia. He is deliberately obtuse. He is involved in illegal activities. He employs men who sell gold which he buys, melts and resells in the streets. The money he banks in Australia. While he is trying to migrate he supports the cause of the 2000 coup by supplying goods. He also puts his family in danger when the thieves arrive to claim the stolen goods which he categorically denies. The unwelcome visitors are some of the men he employs to do his underworld business. When they arrive to attack him, his family members are inadvertently involved. He tries to persuade his wife to migrate but she is bent on staying because they do not share the same values. He is dishonest and cheats on his wife. He has three mistresses who he pays to hide his stolen goods. For one who is crooked, he believes in justice. He is an opportunist who makes irrational decisions. Despite his wife's pleas to tell the truth, he shows a flagrant disregard for her feelings.

Manju, on the other hand, is different from the three men in the play. One might say she is a seer who recognizes the value of good deeds of the past and can see that the future depends on what people do now. She has the wisdom to discriminate momentary decisions that make the difference. She is responsible, dutiful to her husband, honest and wants her children to make better choices for a better life. She is a teacher, a wife, a mother and a descendent of the indentured labourers. While loyal to her family she is also rooted in this country and works very hard to contribute to its welfare. Manju is realistic and challenges her husband and the thugs whenever they confront her. Unlike the other characters in the play, Manju is perceptive and likes to get to the root of things. She is well educated and is shocked to hear that her husband is involved in illegal activities. She is prepared to fight for the cause of justice and has a holistic view on how to contribute to the land she calls home.

The conclusion of this play/film ends on a very positive and hopeful note. Manju is symbolically representative of all children, teenagers, women, men, well-wishers of this country, those near and far who have worked hard to nurture this country. Fiji, we call home. The Manjus are those who toil without looking for recognition and without counting the cost out of sheer love of this nation. The Manjus who have migrated and have returned because they know that Fiji is home and that its spirit can only be experienced authentically right here in these beloved Islands called Fiji. For, Fiji though small and limited in its resources, has its own magic and charm despite its warts and problems. If we really believe in this country then Thomas has a very strong and hopeful message for the citizens of this land. That is to build on our differences and examine the different kinds of 'jobs' we are involved in so that instead of hurting others we choose to do good and utilize all we have to build a society that is just and free from the pervasive inequality that does exist in this nation so we may bring peace and harmony and unity. Finally, both 'jobs' employed in *The Visitors* cannot solve anything. The 'jobs' will breed contempt and more violence. The path forward is clearly exemplified by Manju, the visionary, the prophetic and the wise person who is convinced that Fiji is home and where 'I would rather be in a country I know, a country where I know I have friends and family than be in some suburb living alone in obscurity'. It is apparent Larry Thomas is saying that if there are more Manjus around the table-making decisions, then may be there will be hope for this beloved country we fondly call home.