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## Developments in Recent Australian Drama

By PETER FITZPATRICK  
& HELEN THOMSON

It took a depressingly long time before the Australian theatre could lay claim to a tradition in local drama that was lively, distinctive, and lasting. The last two-and-a-half decades, in which that development has at last occurred, provide a concentrated and very suggestive instance of that process in an urban postcolonial society: there is the quest for cultural definition, characterised by a strong reaction against the received values of the "parent" culture; there is the creation, through a complex set of factors, of a theatrical mainstream confirmed by the repertoire of the establishment theatre and by publication; and there is the reaction, once that mainstream has been identified, of those antiestablishment interests which would subvert it as it once subverted the colonial power. Observers still occasionally wonder whether the strength and momentum that marked Australian theatre in the early 1970s has petered out, as so many promising movements did before; but what has been evident in the last fifteen years has been a series of quiet but significant little revolutions, small by comparison with the transformations of that period, but involving the kinds of challenges to the audience that make a living theatre.

Two important elements coincided in the late 1960s to create the revolution that began at the alternative seasons at the Jane Street Theatre in Sydney and, especially, at the La Mama Theatre and the Pram Factory in Melbourne, which was quickly dubbed the "New Wave" of Australian theatre. One was the opportunity for writers to work closely with a performance company, which the playwrights of previous decades had mostly lacked; in the case of Melbourne's Australian Performing Group, the collaborative model was underpinned by the radical political commitment which has been characteristic of innovative companies throughout the world and which might have sustained earlier swimmers against the

tide like the Pioneer Players. The other new factor was the very noisy arrival of the *ocker*.

The *ocker* rode in on the back of the breakthroughs in censorship which occurred in Australia and elsewhere in the late sixties; those new freedoms coincided happily with a period of relative generosity in funding for the arts. The *ocker* was brash, crude, and a violator of all decorums, big in his talk and his drinking, and (by his own graphic but questionable account) an accomplished sexual performer as well. He was mostly young and middle-class, and he was always self-advertisingly male. For the first time the theatre had found a stereotype which represented cultural distinctiveness in a form that urban audiences could recognize as corresponding to aspects of their own experience.

The mythology of the wide brown land, in which so many playwrights had in earlier decades sought to locate their sense of Australianness, had proved fairly remote to that audience. It had also been hostile to the conventions and assumptions of naturalism, the mode which dominated the theatre of the time. The stridently local theatre of the early 1970s fitted the social-realist frame quite snugly, though its manner was mostly satiric caricature. And while the new audiences might not always want to be identified with the figure of the *ocker*, he came from the suburbs as they did, and everyone knew somebody a bit like him.

The *ocker's* particular attraction for the "New Wave" theatre lay not only in his uncouthness and comic vigour, but also in his complexity as a speaker. For the first time Australian theatre presented a style of talk which reflected the shifts in conversational register so striking in a culture where idiom has very little to do with regional variations and a great deal to do with the class to which one belongs or aspires. Kenny Carter, the motor mechanic in David Williamson's play *The Removalists* (1971), who defines himself as "just a beer-swilling slob," makes it clear that he is crude by choice and not by necessity. His first scene in the play, in which he rationalises his violence toward his wife on the previous evening as a "love pat" which she had earned because of her sloppy housekeeping, shows him moving through a number of conversational roles ranging from quite complex and polysyllabic ironies to deliberately shocking crudity. When he stuffs bread into his mouth and swigs beer from the bottle in a calculated affront to his pretentious sister-in-law, his challenge, "Don't you like my manners?" might stand as a motto for all the *ockers* who followed him onto the stage. The challenge was directed against the decorums of a

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parent culture defined as not only stuffy but no longer relevant. Even for those in the theatre who didn't like his manners much at all, there was a sense of liberation and of nationalist assertion which was exhilarating.

The affluent graduates of Williamson's drama *Don's Party* (1971) are even more sophisticated players of the game of verbal affront and represent the beginnings of a journey in which the ocker moved very rapidly up-market. It was not long before he resembled quite closely the educated elite which patronised Australia's subsidised theatres. Williamson set the pace in the development of the ocker figure, as he did in the not unrelated progress of Australian theatre satire from the antiestablishment alternatives into the theatrical mainstream. But there were other distinguished variants on the theme: Barry Oakley and Alex Buzo took the ocker to new heights of self-protective irony, and John Romeril in *The Floating World* (1974) dramatised Les Harding's almost successful suppression of the atrocities of war and imprisonment beneath his mask of comic assertiveness; even the octogenarian Monk O'Neill in Jack Hibberd's play *A Stretch of the Imagination* (1972) can be seen in the vulgarity and virtuosity of his talk as a very senior affiliate of the ocker tribe.

Like many a source of theatrical liberation, the ocker stereotype had its own capacity for oppression. The ocker was a triumphant product of the quest for cultural definition, but in his loquacious way he recapitulated a number of the theatrical problems raised by the inarticulate heroes of those early attempts to put the outback on the stage. His value system and verbal style dominated the plays he was in, leaving no room for the experience of women or of men who happened not to share his habits or his Anglo-Celtic heritage; and the strategic effectiveness of his bid for conversational power meant that there could be very little analysis of what, if anything, lay beneath his very practised surfaces.

David Williamson and Stephen Sewell, in very different ways, are the dominant playwrights in contemporary Australian theatre. Williamson has enjoyed an astonishing popularity, but although he remains concerned with satiric observation and with manipulative strategies in familiar social situations, he is certainly not a playwright who is standing still. The increasing readiness to experiment with episodic structures is one sign of a more obtrusive interest in dramatic form which has also, in plays like *Top Silk* (1989) and *Siren* (1990), produced particularly shapely plots. More interesting, though, are Williamson's use of music to broaden the emotional range of his fine and compassionate comedy about death and decay, *Travelling North* (1979), and his reference to the wonderful world of Oz to tighten the mythic framework of *Emerald City* (1986). Like Michael Gow, whose *Away* (1986) similarly achieves a mov-

ing reconciliation with the grimmer facts of life with the help of Shakespearean parallels and Mendelssohn's music, Williamson finds ways in these plays to engage in a different kind of mythologising. Rather than discovering the materials for distinctive cultural emblems wholly within the culture itself, this tactic locates Australianness within a larger story and a wider humanity.

Sewell's Marxism has always insisted on that broader context, and in early plays set outside Australia like *Traitors* (1979) and *Welcome the Bright World* (1982) there is a historical framework as well to channel the lives of the participants. *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* (1983) and *Dreams in an Empty City* (1986), his panoramic plays about the terrible power of despair and the necessary possibility of some form of belief, do more than place their Australian actions within an international network of influence. Both works draw on received mythologies (Faust and Christ) to shape and substantiate their passionate moral concerns. Even in the more intimate world of *Hate* (1989), the archetypal symbolism of the land as maternal principle and the invocation of familiar tragedies from Sophocles to Shakespeare give deeper resonance to the plot.

However, it does seem that becoming part of the mainstream involves a loss of political focus. Williamson has always found his material primarily in the moral dilemmas of the middle class. Usually the treatment is compassionate, even indulgent; there are still traces of the tension between satiric exposure and celebration which marked a lot of his earlier work and in *Don's Party* produced an interesting ambivalence of tone. When the moral analysis is largely preempted by the rush to general forgiveness, though, as it is to some extent in *Top Silk* and even in the painfully recognizable complications of his marriage play *The Perfectionist* (1980), the result can be a less productive kind of ambivalence. *Money and Friends* (1992), though its people are mostly as likably hollow and sophisticated as the other self-deceivers who mostly crowd his recent plays, has a tougher edge; in a world where people have become too smart or jaded to pursue matters spiritual or political, failing a friend is about the ultimate sin, and the vision of the play is correspondingly clearer. That has implications for the shape of the plot too. There is less need to turn to literary archetype, like the journey to Oz in *Emerald City*, to confer a structure on ideas which are all negotiable.

Even Sewell's recent work shows signs of this turn to the values constructed in private relationships. His two-woman play *Sisters* (1991) is hardly a cosy affirmation of the joys of family, but its recurrent rhythms of wounding and healing point to a kind of emotional fusion between the sisters which is finally a source of comfort in an otherwise dark and lonely world. *The Garden of Granddaughters* (1993) takes this develop-

ment further; the reunion of the expatriate parents with their three daughters in Australia takes great risks, not this time in confronting or challenging its audience, but in reinforcing and sentimentalizing ideas of meaning which can be fairly glib. Not everyone has come so painfully to hope against the powerful reasons for despair as Stephen Sewell.

Sewell's *King Golgrutha* (1991), a grotesque and surreal comedy which thereby escapes the dangers of dealing in sage observations that may have become slightly shopsoiled in soap opera, is a most unusual piece to have been borne along in the mainstream. Perhaps in its reliance on visual images for the communication of some of its central intuitions it suggests a way to write plays with happy endings without rubber-stamping the attitudes of establishment audiences. It generates its own myth for our times in the capitalistic monster Golgrutha, and finds in it an equivalent for the mythic and historical framework which informed and appraised private relationships in his earlier plays.

The major plays of the establishment theatre in the last few years have tended to affirm modest certainties and to rely heavily on explicit discussion of issues which are dangerously big and perhaps even more dangerously old; the questions range from the value of a life and the meaning of Life at one end of the spectrum, to the nature or possibility of Australian identity at the other. One play which offers a superior instance of this line of concern is Hannie Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento* (1991), in which the very Chekhovian three sisters find, like their counterparts in *The Garden of Granddaughters*, that the things which unite them are far greater than the superficial differences which drive them apart. Rayson's play is strong enough emotionally to avoid simply reinforcing some domestic complacencies, but this remains a potential problem for the largely depoliticised repertoire of the mainstream.

In one area the mainstream has continued to dramatise significant sociopolitical change in Australian society. The developing consciousness of Australia's Asian context has been reflected in the subjects and structures of a number of plays. Mostly it remains a strategy of defamiliarisation, a way of redefining Australian attitudes from another perspective; but even when the understanding of an alien culture is not in itself a priority, there is an implicit analysis of the forces which have shaped or obstructed the imagining of Asia in the Australian consciousness. Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* (1969) and Romeril's *Floating World*, with its entry into Les Harding's paranoia about the Japanese, his old enemies and former captors, were distinguished early instances. These attempts to put old Australian attitudes into a new and revealing context, however, were not concerned to draw on the resources of Asian theatre forms; neither were Buzo's *Marginal*

*Farm* (1983) and Tony Strachan's play *The Eyes of the Whites* (1983), which examined Australia's role as postcolonial culture in the role of virtual colonial power in Fiji and New Guinea respectively. More recently, plays like *Sex Diary of an Infidel* (1992) by Michael Gurr and *The Emperor Regrets* (1992) by Therese Radic have appropriated versions of those "alien" forms as an intrinsic part of their treatment of cultural otherness.

Still, the establishment theatre in any complex society is probably not the place to look for the things that characterise a lively national drama. The fact that for a considerable period in recent Australian theatre history it has been a reasonable place to seek such a thing has been a consequence of a number of factors. Partly it is a product of the ambiguous concept of the mainstream theatre in Australia; the 1970s muddied the waters by bringing the suddenly commercial iconoclasm of the "New Wave" into the essentially conservative structures of the large subsidised theatres. Partly, too, it is a reflection of a relatively small marketplace; the processes of publication are very closely linked to the repertoires of those theatres, and the ephemerality of initiatives outside them is compounded by distances, real and metaphorical, between the major Australian cities.

The process by which audiences have come to hear the voices which were not heard, or hardly heard, in the theatre of the first wave still involves the establishment theatre to a degree. Writers like Alma de Groen, and occasionally Hewett and White, have found a place in its repertoire. But the energies of developments in women's theatre and black theatre have largely been encountered outside it, and a strong, distinctive grass-roots movement in community theatre has happened elsewhere altogether.

OTHER INITIATIVES. Almost as soon as the "New Wave" became a cliché, it began to be fashionable to speak of Australian theatre as though it were drowning, not waving. But there has been much to wave about. The preoccupation with language as culturally self-defining at once shaped our drama and placed constraints on it; it was, for a while, a rich if narrow vein, and it was almost certainly, in retrospect, a necessary line of interest in a culture preoccupied with establishing its difference. The recent move to a dramatic mythology on a larger scale and of a more analytic kind provided some ways in which that difference can be questioned, measured, and redefined. That too is probably a necessary stage on the path of postcolonialism, and it might well reflect the passage from nationalist assertiveness or defensiveness to a proud if skeptical maturity.

Much of the most recent Australian writing for the stage has attempted to redress this imbalance and retrieve areas of feeling and forms of expression that were largely excluded by the dominant mode of satiric observation and the models of social realism to

which it referred. It is almost axiomatic that the articulation of previously marginalised experience requires the abandonment, or at least the adaptation, of those artistic structures which have expressed the perceptions that marginalised them. Certainly in contemporary feminist theatre in Australia, and even more strikingly in the dramatization of black experience, the audience is consistently made aware of a radical revision of form. Jack Davis, the most widely performed of Australia's Aboriginal playwrights, handles naturalistic domestic interplay very comfortably but challenges it continually with the perceptions that can only be communicated in verse, music, and dance. His plays formally enact the intersection of different cultures and different ways of knowing.

Patrick White and Dorothy Hewett never had much time for the mainstream conventions anyway, and both writers have focused primarily on female experience and on cultural myths that reflect the dark and irrational underside of social experience; their plays are characterised by an exuberant theatricalism that makes an awareness of the play as poetic construct always an aspect of the piece. Louis Nowra shows a similar disdain for the exploration of surfaces, and his charting of the human capacity to inflict and suffer cruelty has been very distinctively organised in terms of a series of indelible visual images. Ron Elisha has also pursued some of those larger, presocial subjects, though his frankly philosophical interests place a larger emphasis on talk as the means of analysis; like Nowra's, though, Elisha's kind of conversation is never centred on locally recognisable sliding registers.

The postcolonial problems of marginality and national identity have proved fruitful areas of dramatic conflict for many contemporary playwrights. First-generation Australians with parental, linguistic, and cultural loyalties to Europe have articulated the grief of dislocated lives not always fully compensated by material prosperity. Janis Balodis's first two plays of a planned trilogy, *Too Young for Ghosts* (1985) and *No Going Back* (1992), move away from Latvian/Australian contrasts toward the mysterious intersection between physical place and personal identity. The second play's introduction of an Aboriginal character signals its postcolonial awareness of the complications of serial imperialisms.

The migrant woman's extreme marginalisation, her falling victim to the sexism of both Greek and Australian masculinist cultures as well as her displacement from preindustrial domesticity to Australian country town or suburban alienation, preoccupies Tess Lyssiotis. The Greek/Australian dialogues she creates in *A White Sports Coat* (1989), *The Forty Lounge Café* (1990), and *The Journey* (1985) convey to English-speaking audiences something of the strain and anxiety of language-isolated newcomers. The fully assimilated Australian-migrant writer

increasingly records the isolation of that position, islanded between cultures and languages, heir to a romanticised past and a reality-modified future, without valid claim to either Anglo-Saxon or Aboriginal constructions of identity. Writers such as Lyssiotis and Balodis are newcomers to the dramatic arena of alienation previously occupied by writers such as the Jewish Ron Elisha, yet their voices have a particular pertinence and urgency in the postcolonial project of subverting the "New Wave" Australian voice, particularly that of the stereotypical ocker.

Nothing has proved more difficult than articulating a female voice, the feminist imperative of recognizing multiplicity only adding to the complications. Dorothy Hewett's plays, particularly *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), *The Tatty Hollow Story* (1974), *Joan* (1975), and *Bon Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1972), depict a disruptive female sexuality and subvert female sexual stereotypes with a corrosive irony. Hewett's plays gender the Dionysian/Apollonian conflict, heroicising not only female desire but also its near-anarchic expression. Shocked audience reaction to the explicitness of her writing of the female body in previously censored or silenced forms, such as the sexually active menopausal woman, attests to the effectiveness of her iconoclasm. Her appropriating of episodic cinematic techniques as well as musical disruptions to naturalistic dramatic forms puts her in company with Louis Nowra and Patrick White.

Nowra has persistently explored the area of language acquisition and the ways in which a human subject is inserted into a culture through language. *Inner Voices* (1977) dramatised the psychological mutilations brought about by language deprivation, *The Golden Age* (1985) the primitivism uncovered by language erosion, and *Visions* (1979) the collapse of sanity when a tongue is traumatised into silence. These plays were also metaphorical satires on Australia's history. More recently in *Summer of the Aliens* (1992) Melbourne audiences were intrigued to see the author playing himself, commenting on the fictional, early adolescent self who is the play's protagonist. The autobiographical story was enlarged by the tragically alienated Aboriginal girl whose irrepressible vitality is her only defence against a threateningly hostile world of prejudice. *Cosi* (1992), the second part of Nowra's still incomplete autobiographical trilogy, mirrored the moratorium days of the 1960s but centred its action on a group of insane drama-therapy clients, consistent with Nowra's repeated employment of madness to satirise the dangerous, irrational underside of Australian society.

These latest plays continue the satiric bent of Nowra's writing, but the autobiographical direction has lessened the intensity of the metaphysical searchings. Instead of using symbolic settings such as Paraguay and Russia to embody the bizarre in Australian life, a far less intellectually and artistically

challenging naturalistic reflection of recent history seems to have lowered the emotional temperature of his drama, a direction Sewell's drama also seems to be taking. Even the psychology of language acquisition, put to such effective use in Nowra's *Visions* and *Inner Voices*, with its symbolic potential for a post-colonial reading of the painful process of the development of a national voice speaking for an authentic Australian self, seems, for the time anyway, to have been left behind.

Australian history emerges as a very different story from Aboriginal dramatists. Jack Davis's trilogy of plays, *No Sugar* (1985), *The Dreamers* (1982), and *Barungin* (1988), and his earlier *Kullark* (1979), have disturbed audiences, black and white, right across Australia. Covering nearly 200 years of disastrous white-contact black history, from poisoned flour bags to deaths in custody, Davis's plays work in two dimensions. Song and dance evoke dreamtime culture while the messy, often alcohol-confused present lives of suburban black Australians mirror a reality no one is proud of. Only a black writer could depict with such credibility and honesty the feckless self-destructiveness of male Aboriginals and the malaise of alcoholic excess which marks their despair. It is Davis's women who represent his plays' source of optimism, their moral and physical strength promising a future of more than mere survival on the demoralised fringes of white society.

Younger Aboriginals (Jack Davis is now seventy-five) have a different vision. Jimmy Chi's musical *Bran Nue Day* (1988) joyfully celebrates difference and a hybrid national character. No longer mongrels or bastards, as defined by racial and legal prejudice, mixed-race Australians are happily prepared to appropriate the future on their own terms. Chi, himself a northwestern Australian of mixed descent like so many people in that area, product of a multiracial culture of several generations where Chinese, Timorese, Indonesians, Indians, and Malays have merged with both indigenous and white Australians, gives *Aboriginal* a new and complex meaning. His play mixes music and spiritual beliefs in a liberating non-hierarchical manner where country-and-western joins didgeridoo and rock 'n' roll, and Lutheran and Catholic beliefs adapt themselves to dreamtime myth. The comic sophistication of a shifting series of ironic self-representations on the part of indigenous Australians represents a profound rejection of both Otherness and victim status. National identity becomes a simple matter of self-election: the barriers are down, most hilariously and succinctly demonstrated in the line "Ich bin ein Aborigine," spoken by a tourist whose journey comes to replicate the wanderings of all the Australians whose walkabout feet make maps in the red dust of northern Australia.

The tragic other side of what used to be called

miscegenation preoccupies Richard Whalley in *Munjong* (1990), which tackles the seemingly intractable force of racial prejudice, particularly among white police officers. The play's technique of presenting white characters in terms of stereotypes and black ones as complex individuals quietly signals its awareness of one pattern of implied inferiority as it reverses it. Jimmy Chi's intoxicating, optimistic version of interracial and intercultural richness is much harder to imagine in the country towns and suburbs of eastern Australia, where kooris suffer more profoundly the double alienation from an indigenous culture now often only a memory and a modern economy where social justice barely impinges either in theory or practice.

Meantime, the feminist agenda continues in the hands of women who have followed Dorothy Hewett. Alma de Groen's recent *Rivers of China* (1988) and *The Girl Who Saw Everything* (1991) brought an intellectually challenging dimension to the debates about sexual identity. *Rivers of China's* sex-reversed dystopia revealed the need to break out of sterile binary oppositions, whereas *The Girl Who Saw Everything* continued the earlier play's analysis of the importance of art as a transformative tool, both socially and personally. Both de Groen and Hannie Rayson, in her *Hotel Sorrento*, have put the New Man on the Australian stage, suggesting at least a softening in the national sexual divide. Unlike David Williamson's similarly well-educated middle-class men, the women writers' male characters are feminist practitioners, not just theorists.

A younger generation of women writers is well represented in Tobsha Learner, whose *Wolf* (1992) probes the psychosexual drives of the obsessively priapic male in terms of both the sexual revolutionary sixties, seventies, and eighties and the archetypes of the fairy tale. Unfortunately, its central male character, circled by a group of women, antihero though he is, does little to help bring women in from the margins of dramatic action. De Groen and Hewett have made more strenuous and complex challenges to that persistently male heroicising which has characterized so many efforts at a culturally distinct Australian character.

The Outsiders club has members other than women, migrants, and Aborigines. Sam Sejavka in *In Angel Gear* (1990) gives dramatic form to the alienated subculture of drug addicts in a play that might be set in any large city in the world at present. The efforts of those on the margins to claim ground in the centre represents the most lively source of dramatic action in Australia at the moment, just as it does in all national literatures in process of postcolonial self-definition.

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