

MALHOUSE THEATRE

EDUCATION RESOURCE NOTES FOR
RUBY MOON
by MATT CAMERON



Little Red Riding Hood meets the Wolf.

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INTERVIEW WITH MATT CAMERON, PLAYWRIGHT OF *RUBY MOON*

What was your initial inspiration in writing the play 'Ruby Moon'?

To some degree I was inspired by headlines in the newspapers. Sadly those sorts of headlines are a constant, but for some reason there may have been a number of them at the time which sparked me. A missing child is such a universal tragedy with a primal impact. It arouses such potent emotions in the people that it immediately affects, and then beyond that, to communities. I can read a story from the other side of the world concerning a missing child and it still has a powerful emotional effect so empathy is not just about proximity. The challenge with *Ruby Moon* has been finding a way of writing a play that told a fictional story about a missing child that was distinctive because in some ways it is familiar territory.

Did you write 'Ruby Moon' with actors Peter Houghton and Christen O'Leary in mind?

I knew from the outset that I wanted to write a two-hander and an intense performance piece. Also, in Australian theatre the smaller your cast, the more chance you have of your play being produced which is a kind of dreadful practical consideration. Peter and Christen are actors who I've worked with a great deal and I have enormous faith in their range.

At the same time I tried not to let their involvement limit me in terms of what I would write. I didn't want to write entirely to what I perceived their strengths as actors to be. In a way I wanted to write for areas of their acting abilities that hadn't been explored because they hadn't had that opportunity. So I tried to just write what I felt the story needed and in the back of my mind I knew that, because they are both incredibly gifted actors, they would be able to find all of the characters that were required of them in the play.

To what extent did your knowledge of them as actors impact on the writing of the various characters?

They definitely impacted on the writing process in so far as we had discussions and workshop readings of the play at its various stages of development where their contributions were definitely noted by me. Whether it was just listening to a rhythm in their speech or, more directly, with them offering an idea or an improvised line that I would pounce on. In the end it is hard to imagine the piece without either of them.

If Sydney Theatre Company rang you and offered to produce the play for next season can you see other actors playing these roles?

Firstly, that would be a miracle. But when you write a play you can't be precious to the point of wanting to hold onto every production that might ever be staged. I think it's really important that a play gets to go out on that journey and be produced in other contexts without the playwright grasping onto it too tightly. New productions can also be great in terms of learning about the play

by seeing other actors, other directors, designers. I think that ultimately plays have to be re-interpreted. It's always interesting for me when I see another production of a play beyond the first one because I learn more from seeing how people approached it without my direct involvement.

(Note: Heather Bolton will replace Christen O'Leary in the 2004 tour of *Ruby Moon*)

Did you have any dramaturgical input for 'Ruby Moon' and would you talk about that process?

I definitely had dramaturgical input. I feel relatively self-sufficient as a playwright, but at the same time I crave collaboration and, for me, the best dramaturg is the director of the play – assuming I approve of the choice of director. In this case that's Aidan Fennessy and I've been working with him for many years now. Aidan's contribution has been enormous. He is a wonderful writer and, to my mind, a great director. What he provides can seem so simple but it's a revelation to me. He helps to focus and distill the ideas. It can come from him talking about how he might stage a scene and just hearing that helps to clarify for me how I should rewrite it in order to make it more effective. He has also provided direct suggestions of edits and ideas that I have brazenly adopted and claimed as my own.

Would you talk about the choice of the various characters in the play. They are quite archetypal. Was this deliberate?

It was almost instinctive. Once I was dealing with fairytale motifs, and with archetypes so much a part of fairytale story telling, the characters just emerged and evolved naturally. When we started to examine and deconstruct them, it became evident that these archetypes are actually almost covering key forces in our society: religion, science, art, magic, the military etcetera. I don't remember the selection of the characters as being conscious but it was probably about trying to make them universal. And so, like in all my plays, they're generic characters but specifically generic. Part of it might have happened through trying to make this street, Flaming Tree Grove, almost like a street of the world or a street of an entire city. Of course obviously it can't capture the complexity of every realm, but it was an attempt to address a wide spectrum within the context of a very small little cul-de-sac in an unknown suburb.

One of the striking things about the play is how it touches on the notion of 'community' and the affects of Ruby's disappearance on that community. Do you have a sense that a community exists in this street?

I think so, although it seems a decimated community at its heart. It feels like there were always secrets in this street and part of the journey for the parents is realising that there were secrets and that they, perhaps in their innocence and naivety, weren't aware of them. It seems their daughter, Ruby, had these hidden little pockets of experiences involving the other inhabitants of the street and the parents lived in ignorant bliss.

In writing this play I ended up drawing a little map [see *end of notes*] of the street so that I knew who lived next to whom and where the church was and where the school was and where the little laneway at the back of the church between the houses was and all those intricacies. I didn't envisage my own childhood neighbourhood. It was a more classic and iconic picture in my mind.

What the drawing gave me was a layout, a geography, and that helped me to realise how close these people all were together in terms of distance, but with realms of space between them on other levels. That's the paradox of the suburbs really. In the suburbs people live in incredibly close proximity but often have no idea about each other. Growing up, I didn't really know that many neighbours in the street. I thought I knew them. I knew their names, some practical details of their lives but who really knows what's going on behind our neighbours' curtains.

Were there any particular themes or concepts you wished to highlight in the play 'Ruby Moon'?

On some level, although it's probably obscure, I felt like the play was about the prevailing fear of our times. I was trying to get beyond the fear of losing a child and actually look at the nature of that unease, that *dis*-ease, that lurks and hovers in the world that we live in at the moment. In this country at present there is a climate of fear that we are being sold by our government. They claim their actions are about easing and removing that fear but I think they're nurturing it, feeding it. It's the classic ploy of corrupt power, to convince us that we are in peril and then offer themselves as our only protection. So I was quite interested in trying to explore notions of anxiety, doubt, loss and barely suppressed terror. To me anyway, it feels like the pervasive fear and mistrust that exists in Flaming Tree Grove is something of a microcosm of where Australia is at the moment. Like an ache in our collective soul that we haven't yet worked out how to heal.

How would you describe the style of your play?

Gothic, absurd, nightmarish, surreal. I make a conscious effort in writing a plays to make it theatrical and abstract. I think there are playwrights who do naturalism brilliantly, so I leave that territory to them. However, I think that playwrights who don't do naturalism well are responsible for boring theatre. So if I can't write great naturalism then I would rather not write it at all. *Ruby Moon* is written, therefore, in the style that I favour which is a type of heightened naturalism. It is still very much predicated on universal human emotions but isn't directly about topical events or specific places, but hopefully evokes them.

The way I write plays all comes back to when I was first taught at school about the metaphor and the simile. I remember the teacher saying that a simile is where one thing is said to be 'like' another whereas a metaphor is where one thing is said to 'be' another. My imagination was instantly drawn to the metaphor.

The idea is that hopefully there is room in the play for an audience to associate what they see on stage – however strange – with their own lives. To give them room to imagine and make connections and find a truth from it that is specific to them.

Did you envisage a particular space or set for 'Ruby Moon'?

This is not specifically the set that I envisaged but I love the set for this production. I certainly can't take credit for it. When I was writing *Ruby Moon*, I imagined the literal landscape, knowing that we would be *representing* that on stage, and that we'd be trying to trigger that image. So I was trying to imagine a street in my head which had these old, dark trees and street lamps, with pockets of

light and vast shadows. I was imagining a street at night even though the story of Ruby's disappearance begins on a screamingly hot summer's day.

Overwhelmingly the street felt to me like a street that probably looks picture-perfect during the day but at night suddenly becomes frightening and portentous. I grew up in the sad, bare, outer suburbs. This particular image, though, was probably more inner suburban with old deciduous trees, a really established suburb. So I imagined that real, natural world and then imagined the context for it on stage. I started to imagine a room, a room that was arrested in time because, for these parents, the loss of their child has caused everything to stop and has allowed the dust to accumulate. I imagined that everything was locked in a time warp.

The woods tend to give the play a fairy tale aspect – Little Red Riding Hood goes into the woods but, in this case, doesn't return. Is this what you were thinking?

It's strange with the 'woods' because the play takes place in a street called Flaming Tree Grove, one that is lined with flame trees and, I have a confession to make, I'm sure I have seen flame trees but I really can't picture specifically what they are. Typical of my lack of research and wilful ignorance, I preferred not to know. I just like the name of them. In a way I'm not even literally imagining a street with flame trees, it's more the idea of them – that when the sun sets on this street the trees look as if they've caught on fire. I was trying to imagine a pastiche rather than a specific landscape, one that was poetically evocative.

Were you involved in the design process at all?

In preliminary discussions on the design I was there with Christina Smith (designer) and Aidan Fennessy (director). It's very important that the design process happens between the director and the designer. As a writer I can suggest or drop hints as to the kind of world I imagine the play takes place in but it's crucial that they own the set design. If it's written into the play in an overly prescriptive manner then I think that gives a designer no room to create. I love Christina's set design and, apart from whatever is in the script that triggered her mind into creating it, I can't – unfortunately – take any credit.

What do you see as being the role of playwrights in our society?

I think it's about demanding our own relevance. I have no belief that playwrights are intrinsically important and that they should be listened to. That privilege needs to be earned and demanded by the quality of the work. To me, playwriting is about telling stories in a way that is distinctive from other story telling forms. It's about making the theatre a place people feel compelled to go to in order to hear a story told in a way that they could not find in a book or on television or in film. So I see the role of the playwright as being one of trying to tell stories distinctively and using all the virtues of the theatre to do it. Beyond that I think the role of the playwright is to challenge the homogenisation of thought. I write for television as well and in writing for television there are so many more people putting their fingers into the pie. Often the result is diluted and diminished. So, the theatre to me is still this pure world where you can actually tell the story as you would like to tell it.

Does the playwright's role create a potentially powerful opportunity?

Absolutely. Sometimes the most dangerous aspects of ourselves are revealed in the theatre. Beyond that, in a more general sense, I strongly feel the role of the playwright is to move audiences, to deeply move them. Because in the theatre the audience is sharing the same space as the storytellers there is such potential for connection. It's a waste if you're not trying to work at the most extreme and powerful ends of the spectrum. There's no point being timid in the theatre because it's just a wasted opportunity.

What would you like the audience to be thinking as they leave the theatre?

It's not that I don't think of the audience, but I never presume to dictate what they might think at the end of the performance. All I can do is take responsibility for what I want to convey. How they interpret that and how much it impacts upon them is out of my hands. I would, however, love the audience to feel like they've made a deep emotional connection and the fact that they might leave the theatre even thinking about the play is enough for me.

**INTERVIEW WITH AIDAN FENNESSY, DIRECTOR OF
'RUBY MOON'**

As a director, what were your first impressions on reading the text of 'Ruby Moon'?

Well it has had a few incarnations and it has changed considerably. I suppose my first impressions of the script we're working with now were about the physicality of the language, the challenge involved within the script and I think, more pertinently there was a particular pitch in this story. It reads very differently to how it flows.

I think, as well, I was fairly excited about working with this type of language. Matt Cameron writes purely from a kind of poetic aesthetic, one which he places into his work and this then has to be ingested and played out by characters. He writes very specific sorts of characters as well but the text itself is like an overwriting character, the invisible character in the whole plot. So many Australian and overseas plays are naturalistic. The playwrights try and create a natural 'ear' for the piece but Matt works completely against that so it is always a big challenge as a director.

You have collaborated frequently with Matt in the past. How does this affect your working process as director?

It means we have a pretty good shorthand but that doesn't mean that we're in cahoots or in agreement with every decision. In having a history with a particular writer it means that you've seen their tricks before and you want to push them a little bit. So it doesn't mean that the working relationship is any smoother I don't think. I think the collaborative process means that at the end of the day you walk away, you put it down, and you're still friends. I suppose having a history of working together gives me some sort of advantage in terms of getting the inside track on what

Matt's doing because he can be quite an obscure writer I think, more so than what he'd like to admit. But he writes very eclectic work and I suppose knowing him helps me understand where that comes from.

Were you involved in any dramaturgical process in regard to 'Ruby Moon'?

Yes I was. Matt and I do work on the script a lot together before we hit the rehearsal room floor and that process is basically about reading it and kicking around ideas. Matt is probably the most workable writer I've ever worked with. He's very open to ideas, he's very open to taking them on board and putting them within the text.

In the case of *Ruby Moon* it's been a slightly different process. The text is very dense and quite difficult in terms of achieving a logic for the actors. Matt and I came into this production with an agreement that we'd try and render what was already written, and then go through a process of editing because we decided that the script that was there was pretty much right. If anything, what we'd need to do was a type of surgical editing process. As director of this production I wasn't prepared to edit before we'd seen what we had, mainly out of respect for the writer.

How have you worked with the actors in rehearsal to help them develop all their different characters? Have you used any particular acting techniques or approaches?

Not particularly. I'm not a director who has a particular method or a process, at least not a formal one. In this production, however, I'm pretty hands on, and I've been directing probably more than I would normally do. As a director I often take a lot of offers from the actors and run with them but because of the density of this particular text I've found that it does need someone directing with a pretty heavy hand so that the actors see the logic within it. I am lucky in that I have worked with Peter and Christen before so I have a type of shorthand with them. I've been throwing cultural film references at them, for example, and saying, 'What about that?' They then try it out and we'll extract bits and pieces from what we find and then move on.

In a four week rehearsal process it's very hard to impose a methodology on it. You've got a deadline and you've got to have a show at the end of it so it's whatever works best. As a director you are going to work with many different actors and you've got to learn how to get something out of each one of them. Walking into the room with one process isn't good - you've got to walk into the room with about twenty.

How would you describe the style of 'Ruby Moon'?

That's a difficult question. I think it's more ambitious in its style than anything I've ever done. It crosses genre all over the place which can be a complete disaster or it can be a real revelation. All the best sort of plays and films and books – you know, the ground breaking ones - have always been ones that have melded genre. *Ruby Moon* has got musical elements in there, it's got song, it's got almost Busby Berkeley type routines. It has straight out horror in it and a lot of comedy. So, I would call it a gothic-comic-tragic-psycho-drama. And it's a pastoral as well – a pastoral gothic play.

Are there any particular themes that you are wanting to highlight in your production of 'Ruby Moon'?

I think the play is principally about how two people cope with loss and that's what it's chasing in a very eclectic sort of way. The play is about feelings. It's about what we do with these terrible feelings that we often have, that we can't digest. Do we reinvent them as stories? It's all about people writing their pain and giving it a shape and making it a story. So I suppose those aspects are thematic. The other thematic element within it is about people not seeing the world for what it is; people putting faith in the community, being accepting or trusting of people, believing they are fundamentally good and not being able to see that perhaps they're not.

Could you describe your collaboration with the designer Christina Smith. What particular choices have you made with regard to the use of the space?

I've worked with Christina before. She is fantastic and she's a great antidote to me because I'm a messy sort of person in terms of ideas. I tend to throw everything up against the wall and then she sort of has to peel off, take it away and she comes back with a design that is beautifully rendered and wrought, one with very crisp, clean ideas. So as a designer she's very good at being able to instinctively say what can work. Christina really works in a collaborative sense. She's not someone who comes to the first meeting with all of her ideas. She'll come to the first meeting with virtually nothing and we know that the first meeting is always going to be just talking about the design and throwing up cultural references and other ideas.

The set design for *Ruby Moon*, though it's got a few craggy elements, principally it's very neat which is great because the play is so cluttered. In terms of the design we did initially start off talking a lot about curtains. There is quite an undercurrent in the play about curtains - people looking through curtains and opening curtains - and we did discuss how we could use them but we decided that it was probably a bit too tricky so we had to let that go. In terms of space, we've gone for a very tight acting space. It's a two hander so we didn't want to put the actors in a void. We've included a few tricks as well, and have taken a few fairy tale ideas and placed them within the set and spatial design.

The play is a single setting and it becomes evident towards the end of the play as to why we've selected that. As a result of the single setting, some of the staging choices have then involved other design elements. When a character moves from their house to the neighbour's house there are little transition elements such as a bit of walking accompanied by sound effects like dogs barking and wind blowing to indicate that they're moving. But then, when they arrive at the next house it's still the same generic lounge room, the one that everyone lives in.

So has there been a fairly strong collaboration with the lighting designer, Philip Lethlean, as well?

Yes. Phillip has worked for a vast range of companies including Handspan and he really knows how to light in order to isolate people and places on the stage. His work is just beautiful and I think he is the best lighting designer in Australia.

So it sounds like you are all having a good time!

I think so. It's a very tricky play but I also think it will be good.

INTERVIEW WITH PETER HOUGHTON & CHRISTEN O'LEARY
RUBY MOON: An actor's process

As an actor how have each of you worked on developing all the distinct characters that you're playing in Ruby Moon?

CHRISTEN

That's always really hard for me to put into words, but when I had a think about this question, the easiest way for me to answer it is to say that I've tried to push things to extremes very early on. I've tried to grab a kernel of an idea for each character and to really push that to be as big and as bold as I can get it. I've tried to make each character as different as possible and then over the weeks of rehearsals, I've slowly tried to fine tune each one so that they may get a little bit closer in subtleties but the big colour of them is very different. I think at first you have to get out there and be bold; to go – she's red, she's blue, she's yellow, and then you start fine tuning. That's how I'm doing it.

When you talk about the kernel of the character, could you give an example of what that might be for one of the characters?

CHRISTEN

Well, one of my characters is a woman called Dulcie Doily who owns a parrot and she is very religious. I grabbed the idea of the parrot and I thought, because Dulcie owns one, I might try and make her parrot like. At first I thought Aidan Fennessy, the director, might say no to that idea. But I just tried it for a bit so that

Dulcie's physicality became a bit clawed, and we started developing a parrot-like way of rocking - things like that. That was an idea that I just ran with for a while. Dulcie's also old, so that gave me a big colour to work with; she's sixty plus, she's not twenty plus and that immediately put her into a particular field. I also tried to develop a "parrot" kind of voice. Now admittedly over rehearsals that is being ironed out a little bit, but in the beginning that's what I tried to grab on to, just to get an idea of her.

PETE

Like Christen I suppose, I've been looking for the biggest thing that I can do with each character, something obvious I can get a handle on. We've got these base characters as well - Sylvie and Ray - who are almost "normal", except they also have these modes of theatricality that are a little bit bigger than normal as well. They were originally the hardest things to find because those base characters have got to be feasible but they're also telling lies, as people who've read the play will know. So we had some trouble with them in the beginning. Then going into the broader characters,

it's all about trying to find something strong and also trying to make them all different from each other too, which is the hardest thing.

You sometimes find yourself going "Oh my other character does that, I can't do that with this character." The differentiation of things is very important, so you're often thinking quite practically about making sure that people can recognise the differences, and that you're not doubling up anywhere.

Do you have the benefit of costume change to assist you?

PETE

Yes we do have a minor costume change with one or two elements between each character. The hardest thing to differentiate I'm finding is age, to shift between young and old characters. I'm always going to have dark hair and be a slender kind of youth, so to try and be an old man is difficult! But changing the shape of your body and moving your voice around a bit and using props and costumes - all those things are useful. It's not so much about "method", it's more about the externals I think, so it's a bit clownish in that way.

Do you use any acting techniques or strategies that you might have learned at acting school or elsewhere, such as Stanislavsky etc?

CHRISTEN

I've always found this really difficult to pinpoint, my process as an actor. I can say that Stanislavsky has been quite absent in this rehearsal room! It's a very particular type of style; we are going right out on a limb with things. Matt's work is always like that. But I have found that because it's a particular kind of style you can really get into trouble. For instance with Ray and Sylvie, I've always believed that if we get to a point where we don't care about them, well, what's the point? Months ago when I was looking into the play I tended to do a lot of reading and research on the subject matter on a very naturalistic level. Ray and Sylvie are dealing with the loss of a child so I did a lot of reading about people who've lost children. I find that stuff really helps me, informs the head space that I'm in, even though ultimately when it comes to performance I'm never concentrating on that. But for me, that stuff tends to really fuel things.

The other thing I do is to try and just listen to anyone else's ideas really. One of the greatest things I learnt early on in my career was to try and balance a healthy confidence with the thought that there's always somebody who's going to be able to teach me something and that might be another actor in the room or the director. I think the more you can keep your ears open and take people's ideas on – to me that will always feel like it's helping me grow and form my process.

PETE

The challenge of Matt's work is putting truth underneath a cartoon and that can be a bit tricky. I'm often in plays where you can be reasonably subjective as an actor; you can carry a kind of strong reality with you. In Matt's work you've got to have this almost directorial sense all the time about how you're actually presenting the story, because it's such a confusing sort of narrative. You've always got to be a hundred percent sure about exactly what you're telling at any one point. The base characters of Ray and Sylvie flip between a particular 'mode' when they are supposed to be

acting, and then another 'mode' when they are being truthful. Then there is a third 'mode' when they are halfway in between. The characters then drop out of these characters to become the base characters again. So there are these very particular modes and I think if the play is going to work, we need to be quite certain when the moments are when those modes change from one to another. I've often skidded through plays as an actor where I've thought, "If I sit here and look serious then I'll last for four or five pages and I'll be fine". Or, "If I'm roughly engaged here or emotionally truthful or reasonably relaxed, then this will carry me through for a couple of scenes". But in this play you have to keep changing every few lines and that's very taxing, but also challenging.

Do you think it is important that the audience empathises with Ray and Sylvie?

PETE

Yes, I think it's vital.

CHRISTEN

So do I, because you are taking the audience on a roller coaster and if they don't care, you're going to lose them. It's going to be a big struggle just to keep the story alive and to keep it mad and interesting and funny, but also to keep the audience interested and concerned, thinking "What's going on?" You don't want them to think, "I don't get it and I don't care." An element of mystery and confusion is okay if you're still holding the audience.

PETE

Ray and Sylvie are the sort of people who don't feel sorry for themselves, which is probably good in a way. Sometimes they do express some more meaningful stuff, but they're actually quite prosaic about the game that they're playing to try to bring back their child, which is quite a useful device for them. If they feel sorry for themselves, the audience may get sick of them, but they are actively chasing something and I think the audience will identify with their attempt. There are a few moments when they both crack and you do get to see inside them a bit and to understand what they're trying to cover.

CHRISTEN

At the other extreme if you keep the characters of Ray and Sylvie too strong, too cartoon-like and too alive in their game, the audience could get to a point where they think, "Why should I care because these people aren't real. There's nothing really fueling them; there's no real emotion or real loss". But the minute you start getting indulgent with them, it starts to turn into "Days of our Lives" and you don't care then either. So as actors, it's a real knife edge to walk.

How do you work on achieving the transformations between the characters?

PETE

I'm still working that out actually! At the moment I feel like I'm oozing into character...

CHRISTEN

Yes, bleeding in rather than diving in.

PETE

As we rehearse I'm finding that what I can see visually is helpful. For example, there is a moment when I walk up to the back of the stage to a filing cabinet and I have to grab a prop and turn around and come back down stage and I know that about 12 lines after that I have quite an emotional speech. If I'm not ready for that speech when I get to the box on the filing cabinet, then I won't find the emotional pitch. So I need to program in my mind: that speech is coming up. There's a sort of photograph in my mind so that when I see my hands on the box I know what I have to do otherwise I might simply forget.

So a visual image can become a trigger to change to a new emotional state?

PETE

Yes. Little triggers like picking up the walking stick of a particular character and then knowing that I have to make a particular physical shift, making cues for myself so that I know what is coming up.

You talked about the idea of 'bleeding' from one character to the other - do you think that is okay sometimes or do the transitions always need to be sharp?

PETE

They need to be sharp.

CHRISTEN

Especially because we've got those base characters of Ray and Sylvie and then the other characters that they become. You often see those other characters once and once only, so if you spend the first 30 seconds of a scene 'bleeding' into them, the audience is going to think, "What's going on?" You've got ten minutes with that person so you have to go 'bang' - this is who we are dealing with. With Dulcie, for instance, I am finding in rehearsals that if I just stoop into her physicality that helps me to take a step into that character.

I have a problem where I can end up thinking about everything still to come. I can be in a moment and then suddenly think, "I've still got all this to go. I've still got that moment and that scene and that character" and I can end up seeing the whole lake flooding out. I have to force myself to think, "Just be here, in this moment and listen to that line and then eventually you'll get to the other side of the lake".

'Ruby Moon' is written in quite a poetic style. How do you approach Matt Cameron's particular style of language in your work?

CHRISTEN

It's difficult because it is very poetic, and yet you have to play against it. I feel like I have to treat it as if it's not poetry, as if it's the way that people really speak to one another. I try to find what is driving the character and what she is trying to do to the other character in a moment, in a line, underneath the poetry. Matt often writes his subtext as dialogue and sometimes you think, "How do I play that?" It is interesting working with Aidan Fennessy who is directing the play, because whenever I get bogged down he always finds a way to flick it on its ear. He finds ways to keep the characters active, to keep them enacting upon one another, rather than spinning into a personal

reverie which you can tend to do. So I think I'm finding that you have to find the character's intention: she's intending to do something to him and she just happens to be saying it like this. It has to be based in something real.

PETE

Yes, I agree. There is a useful collaboration between Matt and Aidan where you can always tap into the 'authorly voice'. I presume Matt likes working with people like Aidan, Christen and myself because we fight against the 'authorly voice' a lot. Matt's material can be emotionally didactic in a way so he likes to work with people who have an allergy to that and can find ways of chipping away at it. It's like working in a more classical style which is quite stiff and has its own rules but you have to make it as truthful as you can. I think Matt's work is revealed at its best when people have not been strict about obeying the subtext. The characters are always being active in what they are *doing* to each other.

CHRISTEN

The interesting thing is that as much as it's difficult, that heightened sense of language and performance actually can release you into a state where all bets are off. You're not restricted by the naturalistic or, for want of a better phrase "Blue Heelers" style of acting. You can actually put your hand on the door of a huge statement and if you open that door it means you can pitch your performance to a more heightened state, to a more emotionally vulnerable or more dangerous place.

PETE

It's a bit like Beckett in that way in terms of what people are aware of and what they're not aware of. Beckett-like characters can say the world has ended with no emotion or they can become highly emotional about the loss of a hairpin. It's all about what the character's attitude is towards what they are saying, and that is not entirely prescriptive. The exciting thing about Matt's writing is that you can have a monologue which ostensibly looks on the page like a 'me' type of monologue and it will actually end up being almost completely emotionally unaware from the character's point of view. The audience sees somebody talking about their emotions as though they are talking about a shopping list which creates the conflict in the monologue. That becomes interesting to the audience. As an actor you are always looking for ways of counter-pointing the obvious or making something that's not obvious, clear. Very tricky but satisfying in a similar way to cracking a classical text. There's no prescription really. Matt doesn't write many stage directions. He establishes the scene in detail at the beginning of the play through initial stage directions but there are very few throughout the rest of the play.

Would you say that the play has a particular style?

PETE

It can probably be described as 'expressionistic'. It's definitely a style that is designed to be played out to the audience rather than for an audience to peer in on. It's about the audience *hearing* it rather than *listening* to it if you know what I mean; a kind of 'surround sound'. Physically it's all about getting it right. It's not a subtle or a quiet, reflective style; it has the muscularity of classical texts. It reminds me of writers like Beckett and some of the pre-war German playwrights.

Also, there is a real cruelty in the play. There is something quite nasty at the heart of Matt's plays. A lot of the characters are quite persecuted and tortured. There was a review that said Matt's work was like 'Bill and Ben the Flower Pot Men' meets 'David Lynch' (creator of Twin Peaks). There is this 'cute' thrust to his work with these inoffensive clowns who suddenly stab somebody to death or bite their tongue out or something.

How does the set and the shape of the space affect your work in the play?

CHRISTEN

Well it absolutely is going to affect it because you can only move within the space you have been given, but I'm finding in this work in particular that the space is a real help. There was a time the other day in rehearsal where Pete and I were both at a point where we had no idea what we were doing anymore. Aidan, the director, turned around and said, "Whenever you get bogged down and confused as to what world you're in, go and look at the set model because Christina Smith's design is so extraordinary that it's absolutely going to *place* you". It was a very wise thing for him to say to us because when you're working in a rehearsal room where you can hear traffic and people working in other rooms it can be quite distracting. Then you look at this extraordinary set and it absolutely can place you in the non-naturalistic world that the play functions in. It is wonderful because sometimes sets can be quite restrictive. Sometimes you get into a theatre and you feel like the set is fighting your work and that you are just a little puppet in a grand vision. But this is a situation where everybody's disciplines have come together to work cohesively with one another so you don't feel that the set is working against the direction or the direction is working against the music - everything's just helping you to establish the world of the play and I'm finding it a great help. Every time I hear some of the music or look at the set or listen to the sound I feel that it really helps me. All these elements are like cushions beneath me.

PETE

At the side of the set there are these big trees that overhang the space that represent the flame trees that run down Flaming Tree Grove. They also create the sense of a dark fairy tale forest. Then there is one arm chair and that's about it really. Up the back there is all this refuse like bits of furniture and chairs and things; it's a very actor friendly acting area that we run around and go crazy in.

Is there anything else you would like to say about your work in 'Ruby Moon'?

CHRISTEN

It's great, it's incredibly challenging. Some days I get up and I start to come to work and I think, "I just can't do it today, it's too hard." It's one of those terrible things where, as an actor, you're always searching for a challenge; so often you are typecast and placed in safe little boxes. Then every so often when a challenge comes along, you start moaning and thinking, "What if I can't do it?" This is an opportunity for us to excel.

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA SMITH, DESIGNER OF 'RUBY MOON'

Christina how did you initially respond to the script of 'Ruby Moon'?

My initial response to the play was in many ways quite similar to what we have now, but also very different. My first scribbles were directly from the play only at that stage I hadn't yet had the chance to talk to Aidan Fennessy (the director). Matt Cameron's (the playwright) writing is very 'illustrative' – there are many visual clues and symbols that are hard to ignore. My first response centred heavily on the notes from the initial draft of the play, in which Matt was quite prescriptive. I've never asked him, but I'm sure he visualises his plays strongly as he writes them - his notes are so detailed.

It was only when I started talking to Aidan that the idea emerged, and it came from Aidan's vision on how the play could be done, which was different to Matt's idea on the initial draft. The great thing about working with Matt and Aidan is that their differences complement each other so well – it's a little ying and yang!

What was your design brief in regard to the play?

I'm not really given a brief as such. The discussions I have with Matt and Aidan during the design process are not really briefs, but do give me boundaries. For example, Aidan may tell me he sees the world of Sylvie and Ray as colourless, or that the house needs to 'lived in'. From here this gives me a good framework from which to start – it ensures we're both on the same page fairly early on.

What concepts and themes are you hoping to highlight in your design?

I don't know if I can outline the design concept or it may give the story away if readers haven't seen the play yet ! (Matt did swear us to secrecy). In a broader sense, the design hopefully incorporates themes of grief and memory – that's certainly what I was thinking about when designing it.

How would you describe the style of your designs?

Problematic (that's a joke...) I'm not sure if I have a style yet. I'm still fairly young. I'm also not too sure I want to be 'put in a box' so to speak ie. "She only does *this* type of play or *that* type of set". I'd like to keep my options fairly open, as I enjoy doing a wide variety of shows.

The style of design is also often dependent on the rest of the team you are working with - the director, the writer and lighting designer to name a few - and also primarily related to the requirements of the text. Therefore, if I feel a show requires a minimalist approach, and it's something the director will embrace, then that's the style. It has to be something that serves the text and the team, nothing that is 'imposed' onto the work.

Would you talk about the design of 'Ruby Moon' in relation to:

(a) How you feel it assists the actors to tell the story

This design fundamentally creates a world for Sylvie and Ray to exist in - in fact they exist ONLY in this world - whilst also becoming a 'heightened' place in which the various characters appear. It's very much an environment with many textures – it can be 'spooky' when we need it to be, but also bland like the living room or filmic for the transition states. In terms of assisting the actors to tell the story, I actually think the lighting and sound lend more support in this sense - the set is the container, not the spice so to speak! The concept of the design does, of course, relate completely to the major plot 'spike' in the story, but again, I don't think I can go into that for fear of death via Matt!

(b) How you believe it establishes a particular time and place for the audience

The design for Ruby is actually deliberately timeless – it does have an air of 1940's/post war about it, but we didn't want to tie these people to modern day or contemporary occurrences. I guess one of the questions we wanted the audience to ask was, 'How long have they been there for?' and to produce a feeling that is a little like time standing still. For instance, the use of natural materials could be now, but could also be fifty years ago. The style of Sylvie's dress is faintly 1940's, but still seen today.

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

Content and Themes

1. The 'missing child' has long held a place in the Australian psyche.
 - can you think of any examples of stories of missing children, both historical and contemporary?
 - how do you respond to these stories?
2. Playwright, Matt Cameron, says that he wanted to make Flaming Tree Grove 'like a street of the world':
 - what do you think he means by this?
 - how does the community of Flaming Tree Grove represent a wider community?
3. Matt Cameron says that archetypes are 'so much a part of fairy tale story telling':
 - what is an archetype?
 - what are some of the classic archetypes in fairy tales?
 - what are some of the archetypes in *Ruby Moon*?
4. Director, Aidan Fennessy, suggests that thematically *Ruby Moon* is about 'people writing their pain and giving it a shape and making it a story'.
He also suggests that the play is about 'people not seeing the world for what it is':
 - how do Sylvie and Ray 'write their pain'?
 - what are some of the things that the characters in the play are 'not seeing'?
5. The playwright talks about one of the themes that he wants to explore as being 'the unease...that lurks in the world we live in at the moment'
 - how is this 'unease' evident in *Ruby Moon*?
 - how is it evident in the world we live in at the moment?

Style and Language

1. Matt Cameron believes that the role of the playwright is 'one of trying to tell stories distinctively and using all of the virtues of the theatre to do it':
 - what do you think Matt means by telling stories 'distinctively'?
 - what do you believe are the 'virtues of the theatre' as distinct from film, television or literature?
2. The playwright says in his writing his imagination is 'drawn to the metaphor':
 - what are some of the metaphors at work in *Ruby Moon*?
3. Director, Aidan Fennessy, suggests that 'the text itself is like an invisible character in the whole plot':
 - what do you think he means by this?
4. Aidan Fennessy describes the style of *Ruby Moon* as 'gothic-comic-tragic-psycho-drama':
 - can you think of examples of each of these elements in the production of *Ruby Moon*?

Dramaturgy and Direction

1. Playwright, Matt Cameron and Director, Aidan Fennessy both talk about the dramaturgical process for the text of *Ruby Moon* in their interviews:

- what do you understand by the term 'dramaturgy'?
 - in what sorts of ways did Aidan Fennessy provide Matt Cameron with dramaturgical assistance with the text of *Ruby Moon*?
2. Aidan Fennessy says that with *Ruby Moon*, he has had to direct with a 'heavy hand, so the actors can see the logic' in the play:
- why do you think *Ruby Moon* specifically has required a 'heavy hand' from the director?
 - what are some of the clear directorial choices that Aidan has made?

Acting and Actor/Audience Relationship

1. Matt Cameron says he wrote *Ruby Moon* with Peter Houghton and Christen O'Leary in mind:
 - can you think of any other actors who you believe have the versatility to play the characters in *Ruby Moon*?
 - as a student of theatre and performance, can you imagine playing the diversity of roles in *Ruby Moon* in one play?
 - what do you think would be the particular difficulties and challenges?
2. Christen O'Leary talks about trying to find the 'kernel' of each character:
 - what do you think are the most distinctive characteristics of each character?
 - could you try to identify a 'kernel' for any of them?
3. The two actors describe Ray and Sylvie as their 'base characters':
 - why are Ray and Sylvie the 'base characters' in the play?
 - how are they different from the other characters both in terms of their function in the plot and their character portrayal?
4. Peter Houghton says that Sylvie and Ray 'have got to be feasible, even though they are telling lies':
 - what do you think he means by this?
 - what would this mean for Peter and Christen as actors in their portrayals of Sylvie and Ray?
 - did you find these characters to be 'feasible'?
 - did you empathise with them?
5. Actor, Peter Houghton talks about working with 'the externals' in terms of his acting approach to this play.
Christen O'Leary says that 'Stanislavsky has been quite absent from this rehearsal room!'
 - what do the actors mean here?
 - what is similar about what they are both saying?
6. What does Peter Houghton mean when he says 'the challenge of Matt Cameron's work is putting truth underneath a cartoon'?
7. The two actors believe it is very important that the transitions between their characters are sharp:
 - do you think they achieve sharp transitions in the play?
 - what techniques do they use to make those transitions?
8. Christen O'Leary says that director, Aidan Fennessy, helped the actors when they became bogged down in their work, to find ways 'to keep the characters active, to keep them enacting upon one another':

- what do you think she means by this?
 - how might this approach differ from trying to analyse the characters' feelings or motivations?
9. Peter Houghton describes the style of *Ruby Moon* as one that is 'designed to played out to the audience rather than for an audience to peer in on':
- what do you think he means by this?
 - what form do you think the actor/audience relationship takes in *Ruby Moon*?

Monologues - Sid and Sylvie

1. Describe in detail the world that the character of Sid inhabits.
Describe in detail the world that the character of Sylvie inhabits.
 - Are they same world?
2. List three props/set items that you feel would help create the world of each character and justify your choice.
3. What is each character's relationship to the missing child, Ruby?
 - In what ways could this impact on interpretation?
4. Each of these characters appears with another character in their monologue.
 - What is their relationship with the other character?
 - Do Sid and Sylvie directly address the other character they are with?
 - As an actor, how will you *imply* the other character?
5. If you were to re-contextualise the play, what choices could you make in this regard? Where would you set it? Why?
6. If you have seen a production of 'Ruby Moon' what influence has this had on your interpretation of the characters of Sid and Ruby?

Stagecraft

1. The Director, Aidan Fennessy, and the Designer, Christina Smith, have decided to set *Ruby Moon* in the same generic lounge room, 'the one that everyone lives in':
 - how does this work to convey the worlds of all the different characters?
 - how does it work to convey meaning to the text as a whole?
2. Aidan Fennessy talks about adding 'a few fairy tale ideas' to the set:
 - what are some of the fairy tale aspects of the set?
 - how do they contribute to the mood and atmosphere of the play?
3. Actor, Christen O'Leary, describes the stagecraft elements in the play as 'like cushions beneath me':
 - what does this comment suggest to you?
 - can you think of examples where the stagecraft elements support the actors in their work?
4. Designer, Christina Smith, says that her design incorporates themes of 'grief and memory': in what ways does the set suggest 'grief' and 'memory' to you?

RESOURCES

The following websites may provide some useful background information to the play.

MYTHS AND FAIRY TALES

'The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever present peril; both joy and sorrow sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of the traveler who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gate should be shut and the keys be lost'

- J.R.R. Tolkien 'On Fairy Stories' in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*.

1. <http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~spok/grimtmp/>
A complete list of Grimms Tales - all 209 of them - that you can dip into in order to immerse yourself in the genre.
2. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folklinks.html>
A site of Folk and Fairy Tale links including stories, history, and folklore surrounding a range of fairy tales from many countries.
3. <http://www.legends.dm.net/fairy/>
Lists classic fairy tales on the net and some wonderfully insightful quotes about what it means to take the fairy tale journey.

WHO'S WATCHING THE CHILDREN ?

'For it could be argued that the further people retreat away from community and into isolated families and behind picket fences and locked doors, the less safe, on average, children become...In our desire to keep children 'innocent'. We disrupt their freedoms, warn them against strangers and incite adults to watch them more carefully... But who's watching the watchers?

- C. Beth Spencer, 1997

1. <http://lin.cbl.com.au/~beth/beaumonts.html>
A history of the Beaumont children all three of whom disappeared on Australia Day 1966 in Adelaide
2. <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/07/04/1057179154768.html>
Article outlining the investigation of the disappearance of Eloise Worledge from Beaumaris in 1976.
3. http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/60/stories/2000_08_27/story_224.asp
The infamous disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain at Uluru in August 1980.