

CHAPTER FIVE

The Development of Australian Theatre

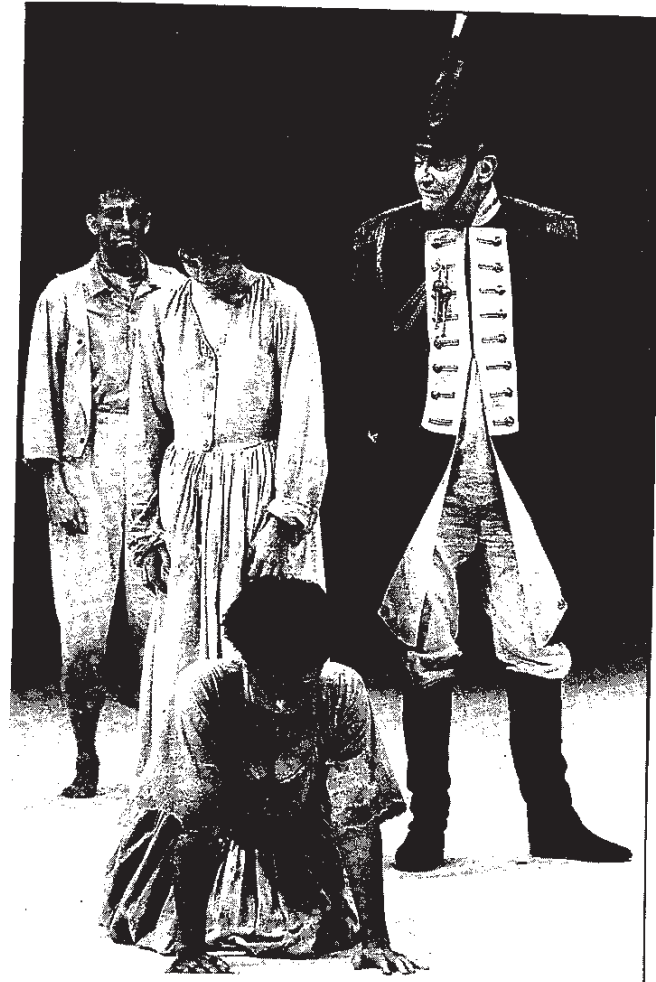
THE BEGINNINGS

The first theatrical performance in Australia was given on 4 June 1789, just eighteen months after the First Fleet arrived. It was a production of a comedy which had recently been successful in England, *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar. The performance was acted by convicts in a mud hut with an audience of about sixty people. Admission was paid with whatever the convicts could afford, including wheat, rum, tobacco and fowls. If you are interested in discovering more about this first theatrical performance, read Thomas Keneally's book *The Playmaker*.

There is also an outstanding modern play based on Keneally's book. This play, *Our Country's Good*, was written in England by Timberlake Wertenbaker, and performed in Melbourne in 1989 and subsequently in other states. Ms Wertenbaker's play shows us the convicts rehearsing *The Recruiting Officer*, and explores the way their involvement in theatre changes their lives. See *Our Country's Good* if you get the opportunity; it is a fascinating account of the beginnings of Australia's theatre, and our society, and a profound reflection on the relationship between them.

The first theatre in Australia was opened in 1796 by Robert Sidaway, a convict. The theatre seated 120, and admission was one shilling. It was closed two years later by order of Governor Hunter, probably because of the pickpocketing and burglary associated with it. Sidaway opened another theatre in 1800, but it did not survive.

The first Australian play did not appear until 1829. There were some very early plays about Australia, but these were written in France and



Robert Menzies, Jo Kennedy, Bob Hornery and Kim Trengove (kneeling) in the Melbourne Theatre Company's production of *Our Country's Good*.

England by people who had never been to Australia, and included lions, tigers and hyenas in their portraits of the wildlife. It is interesting to note that there were two separate plays about the same bushranger, the

Tasmanian convict Michael Howe, who was shot in 1818 in Van Dieman's Land. For more than a century, bushrangers were one of the favourite subjects of Australian plays.

The very first Australian play written by an Australian resident was *The Bushrangers* by David Burn. However, it was performed in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1829, and was not published or performed here until 1971.

In the early days of Sydney's development, Aboriginal corroborees were performed regularly, and they became the first form of public entertainment in Perth after it was founded in 1829. This ancient form of dance drama was therefore part of the birth of theatre in Australia.

In 1833, the first permanent theatre was built in Sydney by Bernard Levey. It seated one thousand people, and Levey presented nearly 400 shows during the theatre's lifetime, mainly melodramas and farces, with occasional operas and Shakespearian plays. As many as five different plays were performed each week. However, the only Australian play was a short piece staged in 1835.

Meanwhile, overseas plays were staged in Hobart from 1833 onwards, there were amateur theatricals in Perth during the 1830s, the first play to be staged in Adelaide opened in 1838, and Melbourne saw its first plays in 1842.

Melodrama

Like the rest of the world, Australian theatre was dominated by melodrama throughout the nineteenth century. These plays were written very quickly to a formula (just like TV soapies today) and included sensational happenings, stereotyped heroes and villains and tragic events resolved by happy endings. Most of the plays presented in Australia between 1840 and 1870 were imported melodramas that had been successful overseas.

There were some strong Australian melodramas and comedies written in this period, particularly by convicts. Edward Geoghegan in Sydney wrote *The Hibernian Father* and an operetta, *The Currency Lass*, whilst James Tucker, convict and drunkard, created the comedy *Jenny Green in Australia*, about an innocent London lass who suffers terrible misfortunes in Australia. There was even an early attempt at tragedy: Charles Harper's *The Bushrangers* (1853), the first Australian play published in book form in Australia. The play portrayed the notorious bushranger Jack Donohue as a tragic figure, and was written in blank verse in imitation of Shakespeare.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Australian plays became

increasingly popular, but theatre managers in this country were unwilling to stage them unless they were successful in London first. Nevertheless, Walter Cooper's *Colonial Experience* (1868), Arch Murray's *Forged* (1873) and Francis R.C. Hopkins *All For Gold* (1877) were all popular. *All For Gold* toured Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada, and was the first play of Australian origin to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain in England.

Hopkins went on to write a number of successful plays, as did George Darrell, whose play *The Sunny South* was immensely popular in Australia and England. Alfred Dampier, who produced and starred in Hopkins plays, was one of the few managers to consistently stage Australian plays in the 1880s and 1890s, in particular the stage adaptations of the novels *For the Term of His Natural Life* and *Robbery Under Arms*.

The largest producer of plays in Australia at this time was J.C. Williamson, who had moved to Australia from America in 1874. His company staged plays throughout Australia and New Zealand, and by 1906 employed 650 people, including 187 actors. However, almost all the plays staged by J.C. Williamson's came from overseas, and had been successful, especially in London.

As the twentieth century began, theatre was alive and well in Australia. There were five theatres in Sydney, five in Melbourne, three in Brisbane, two in Adelaide and two in Tasmania. The Theatrical Holiday Book for 1885 listed 62 playwrights in Australia, each averaging two or three plays to their credit, and a number of Australian plays had been successful overseas. The main problem was to get theatre managers in Australia to stage Australian plays.

EARLY THIS CENTURY

With Federation in 1901 there were increasing demands for a national Australian theatre which really reflected Australian life. *The Bulletin* had been running a campaign for years, and the emergence of a school of Australian painters, the development of a political consciousness through the trade union movement and the establishment of the ALP all encouraged the supporters of Australian theatre.

A number of Australian writers were inspired by the growth of a national theatre in Ireland and the emergence of a new realism in the theatre through the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov and Shaw, and the work of Stanislavski. A group of these writers, including Louis Esson, attempted to create a distinctive style of Australian drama—without

success. The most popular plays early this century were light comedies, such as *On Our Selection* by Steele Rudd and *The Sentimental Bloke* by C.J. Dennis. Whilst these plays provided amusing, popular entertainment, they relied on caricature and exaggerations of Australian speech to generate laughter.

However, an increasing number of amateur theatre groups around the country were attempting to stage serious and experimental Australian plays, including the Adelaide Repertory Theatre, the Pioneer Players in Melbourne, and in 1930, the Community Playhouse in Sydney. The 1920s and 1930s also saw the emergence of the socialist New Theatres in various states.

Another interesting development in this period was the appearance of playwrights in different parts of the country who wrote specifically about their own local events and concerns. Alexander Turner in Western Australia created definite characters in a particular environment, whilst George Lander Dunn in Queensland wrote about the problems confronting Aborigines in his state. *Fountains Beyond* was the first Australian play to have an Aborigine as its hero, and to deal with the situation of Aborigines as fringe dwellers in a serious drama.

The popularity of radio in the 1930s also led to a number of Australian dramas being broadcast, and the ABC encouraged new playwrights to submit radio plays. There were a number of Eureka plays at this time—both on radio and on the stage—just as there had been bushranger and Ned Kelly plays fifty years earlier.

WOMEN WRITERS

In the first half of the twentieth century, women writers in Australia had a much greater influence on the development of their nation's theatre than did their sisters in England or America. As a group, Australia's female playwrights contributed a number of significant plays to our theatre. As individuals, they provided a range of fresh insights and varied perspectives on our drama and our culture.

Betty Roland's play *A Touch of Silk*, first performed in 1928, tells the story of Jeanne, a French girl who meets an Australian soldier in France during the First World War, and comes to live with him on a farm in Australia after the war, in the middle of a drought. She buys some silk underwear from a travelling salesman named Osborne. Her husband makes her life intolerable because of this 'waste' of money, and she goes off to a dance with Osborne. Her husband follows and kills him. To save her husband, Jeanne publicly confesses to adultery with Osborne, which is not true.



Celia de Burgh and Peter Curtin in the Melbourne Theatre Company's 1988 production of *A Touch of Silk*.

Jeanne is an interesting, believable, complex character, and her dilemma in the play tells us a great deal about Australian attitudes to women in the 1920s. Betty Roland wrote a number of other plays, including *Are You Ready Comrade?*, a powerful piece of political theatre, and *Granite Peak*, a play set in central Australia.

Catherine Shepherd, another significant writer, lived and worked in Hobart. All her writing deals in some way with the need for self-realisation. *Daybreak* is set in Hobart in convict times and explores an attempt to rebel against the establishment of the day. *Jane My Love* is another historical play set in Tasmania with Lieutenant-Governor Franklin and his wife as central characters.

A third playwright, Dymphna Cusack, went to Sydney University before becoming a teacher. Her plays are sharp social commentaries which support the underdog, and therefore have a very Australian flavour. *Morning Sacrifice* is set in a girls' high school, with an all female cast: the staff of the school. The school is revealed as elite, snobbish and hypocritical. This play was successfully revived by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1991.

Cusack's plays *Shoulder the Sky* and *Eternal Now* both deal with experiences during the Second World War; not the experiences of the soldiers, but those at home who had to cope with the traumas and dislocations caused by war.

Two important women writers associated with the left-wing New Theatres were Oriel Gray and Mona Brand. Gray's play *Had We But World Enough* deals powerfully with racial discrimination in a small town when a school teacher casts an Aboriginal girl in the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in a Easter play.

Brand won international success with her play *Here Under Heaven* in 1948, which also deals with racism, this time on a sheep station in Queensland during the Second World War.

THE BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION

Rusty Bugles

This play by Sumner Locke-Elliott was first performed on 21 October 1948, and marked the beginning of a revolution in Australian theatre. It is set in an army camp in the Northern Territory in 1944, and shows a group of soldiers waiting for the war to end, bored, frustrated and stressed. The play is very strong on character and the conflicts between characters, and the dialogue is free-flowing, authentic Australian speech, superbly structured. The play was immensely popular and influential, and was also prosecuted by the police for the use of obscene language!

As a result of the increasing interest in Australian theatre generated by plays such as *Rusty Bugles*, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was set up in 1954. The Trust raised £90,000 from donations, and received a grant of £30,000 from the Commonwealth Government. The aim of the Trust was to establish a distinctively Australian artistic scene in drama, opera and ballet. In its first year of operation, the Trust achieved an overwhelming success with its presentation of the play *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.

AUSTRALIAN THEATRE COMES OF AGE

'The Doll'

On 11 January 1955, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust presented its first Australian production, Ray Lawler's play *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. The play had shared first prize in The Playwrights' Advisory Board 1954 competition with a play by Oriel Gray called *The Tempests*. 'The Doll' went on to become the most celebrated and influ-

ential of all Australian plays. *The Tempests* disappeared into obscurity.

The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll still stands today as one of the most important plays of the twentieth century. It explores one of the major concerns of modern, realistic theatre; the need of people to have dreams to sustain them, and the way these dreams can also destroy. Roo and Barney, the two cane cutters who come to Melbourne every year during the lay-off season in Queensland, are genuinely original creations, as is Olive, the woman who waits for Roo. The end of Olive's dream, when Roo wants to settle down to work in a factory, is treated with compassion. It also marks the end of the Australian myth of the powerful, independent, outback Australian male. The play has universal meaning as well as a distinctively Australian significance, and yet the characters, the situation and the events of the play are completely believable and fascinating. The language is colourful and amazingly effective, yet entirely appropriate to the characters.

The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was a world-wide success, and awakened an interest in Australian drama not only in this country, but universally. It was followed by another extremely successful play, Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart*, which seemed to confirm that Australian drama had come of age.

Like 'The Doll', *The Shifting Heart* is set in a Melbourne suburb—this time Collingwood instead of Carlton—and deals with an Italian immigrant family. On Christmas Eve the son, Gino, goes to a dance and gets into a fight. He comes home, but goes back again, this time carrying a knife. He is badly injured and rushed to hospital, but dies. Maria, his sister, blames all Australians—including her husband Clarrie—for Gino's death, because of their prejudice against Italians. However, the play ends with Maria and Clarrie being reconciled and naming their new son Gino.

The Shifting Heart is a devastating attack on Australian racism and attitudes to migrants, but it is also full of warmth and humour. The characterisation is excellent, and even the more stereotyped Italian characters seem interesting in an Australian setting.

A number of interesting plays followed, including the musical, *Lola Montez*, and *The Slaughter of St. Teresa's Day* by Peter Kenna. Plays dealing with Aborigines also emerged at the end of the 1950s, including Oriel Gray's *Burst of Summer*, which was first staged at the Little Theatre (now St. Martin's). The central character is Peggy, an Aboriginal girl who returns to her small country town after starring in a film. The play deals powerfully with racism and its effect on the victims. Other plays to confront the issue of the treatment of Aborigines at this time were Barbara Stellmach's *Dark Heritage*, set in Queensland, and David Ireland's *Image In The Clay*.



The original cast of *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.
From the left: Ray Lawler, June Jago, Carmel Dunn (at the piano), Roma
Johnston, Noel Ferrier and Fenella Maguire. November 1955.

Workshop

The most challenging task in exploring a major play is to create a scene which does not exist in the play but which is true to the characters and the text. Turn to Chapter 11, Character and Text: 'The Doll', for a full explanation. If you have already used this play in your work on character, then apply the approach in Chapter 11 to another significant Australian play, for example Michael Gow's *Away*.

THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES

In 1960, the Adelaide Festival of the Arts was staged for the first time. It has gone on to become a major festival, held every two years. Most Australian cities now run regular arts festivals, such as Melbourne's International Festival, formerly called Spoleto.

Television began in Australia in 1955, and by 1960 was firmly established. From the very beginning, the ABC regularly broadcast TV drama plays, whilst ABC radio continued to support the writing of new drama.

A play rejected by the Board of Governors of the Adelaide Festival in 1960 became the first major play of the 1960s to achieve international acclaim. *The One Day Of The Year*, written by Alan Seymour, opened at the Palace Theatre in Sydney on 26 April 1961. Set in the Cook household before, during and after Anzac Day, the play is a powerful study of attitudes to Anzac Day, to war itself, and to the whole myth of the 'bronzed Anzac'. It is also an exploration of family relationships, which gives it a universal appeal.

The 1960s saw the appearance of a number of significant Australian writers.

Patrick White was renowned as a novelist before he turned to writing plays, producing four plays in the early 1960s. *Ham Funeral*, his most effective work, is an interesting piece of anti-naturalism with effective and often stunning use of language. All his plays achieve moments of striking, non-realistic drama, challenging our attitudes to sexuality and life, but are often sketchy and undeveloped as drama.

In 1968 Thomas Keneally, another renowned novelist, wrote *Childermas*, a symbolic play dealing with the plight of children in Vietnam. This was one of the first plays to confront the topic of Vietnam.

Born in Perth in 1923, Dorothy Hewett attended university in Western Australia, and was a member of the Communist Party until 1968. Her first play, *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, is a drama of family life, containing a moving, affectionate portrait of the alcoholic Laurie, wife and mother. In 1969, Hewett's play *The Chapel Perilous* caused a furore in Perth with its rebellious, sexually-liberated central character, Sally.

A Melbourne doctor, Jack Hibberd's first play was *White With Wire Wheels*, a savage comedy about four young Australian males and their sexist, materialist attitudes. Hibberd's wedding comedy *Dimboola*, where the members of the audience become the wedding guests, has been enormously successful.

Born in Sydney in 1944, Alex Buzo wrote his first play in 1967. In 1968 *Norm and Ahmed* was staged at the Old Tote Theatre in Sydney.

This one-act play shows two men meeting on a street at midnight; Norm, a middle-aged Australian, and Ahmed, a Pakistani student. The play ends with Norm attacking and bashing Ahmed, a violent reaction to Ahmed's foreign reserve and alien attitudes.

Alongside the appearance of new playwrights came a rapid growth in theatre activity. By 1965, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was sharing out more than \$2 million amongst the arts in Australia, although only \$374,000 went to the theatre. At the same time, the Australian Council For The Arts was established by the Federal Government to distribute money to the arts. A number of new theatre companies were formed, including the Australian Performing Group, based at the Pram Factory in Melbourne, and the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation, which was established in 1969 to encourage cultural traditions and arts amongst Aborigines. The Canberra Repertory Society staged a number of new plays, including Ric Throssell's *For Valour*, a tragic portrait of a forgotten hero of the First World War.

In 1966 over a dozen new Australian plays were given professional productions, the most in any year this century. One was Alan Hopgood's *Private Yuk Objects*, a comedy about the prospect of going to fight in Vietnam. Hopgood had previously written a very popular comedy about Australian Rules football, *And The Big Men Fly*.

THE NINETEEN-SEVENTIES

The year 1970 saw the appearance of the first play by Australia's most successful playwright, David Williamson. Born in Melbourne in 1942, Williamson lectured in engineering at Swinburne College of Technology. *The Coming of Stork* depicts four young people sharing a flat, and was first performed in 1970 at La Mama Cafe, where many new Australian plays were first seen.

In 1971, two of Williamson's major works appeared. *The Removalists* concerns an experienced, cynical, police sergeant, Simmonds, and his new young constable, Ross. They agree to help Fiona separate from her drunken husband, Kenny. However, Kenny is attacked by Ross and so badly beaten that he dies. The play ends with the two policemen bashing each other so that they can claim that they were injured by Kenny and killed him in self-defence. This play is Williamson's most serious piece of social reflection, a powerful indictment of violence and misused authority.

Don's Party, on the other hand, is a cynical, black comedy about the

failure of dreams and the breakdown of the institution of marriage. It depicts a group of people at a party on the eve of the 1969 Federal Election. Both plot and characterisation are sketchy, but the language is flexible, hilarious and revealing.

Juggler's Three, staged by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1972, deals with a returned Vietnam veteran. Violence and the disintegration of marriage are again Williamson's concerns.

Williamson wrote prolifically during the 1970s, producing more plays about family relationships, such as *What If You Died Tomorrow?* and *Handful of Friends*. There were also some biting comedies on the way different kinds of administration work. *The Department* satirises the workings of a college department, whilst *The Club* is an hilarious, cutting comedy about an Australian Rules football club. All Williamson's plays were popular successes, and a number have been performed overseas.

Meanwhile, a number of playwrights who had emerged in the 1960s went on to become major writers. Alex Buzo produced a number of plays which dealt with the dominance of brute force and materialism in Australian society. In *Rooted*, the rich, virile Simmo never appears on stage, yet he dominates the play. In *The Front Room Boys*, the bosses control the lives of the office workers in the twelve scenes, one for each month of the year, while in *Tom* the real villain is big business. Buzo also wrote *Coralie Lansdowne Says No*, a much more individual psychological study, while *Martello Towers* and *Markassar Reef* both deal with groups of Australians on holiday.

Jack Hibberd's play *A Stretch of the Imagination* was a daring piece of theatre, with just one character on stage, the eighty-year-old Monk O'Neill, reminiscing about his life. First performed in 1972, this play is often revived, creating an effective portrait of the end of an Australian myth. The year 1972 also saw Hibberd's play *Captain Midnight VC*, about a part-Aboriginal army officer. *A Toast to Melba*, premiered in 1976, was an episodic biography of Nellie Melba, the famous opera singer.

New playwrights also emerged in the 1970s. John Romeril, who became writer-in-residence at the Pram Factory, wrote a number of plays, most significantly *The Floating World* in 1974. Set on a cruise ship travelling to Japan, the play evokes the horrors of the Second World War through the memories of its central character, Les Harding. Romeril also created some satirical work, much of it improvised, for the Australian Performing Group.

Born in New Zealand, Alma de Groen lived and wrote in Australia from 1973 onwards. Her play *Chidley*, premiered in 1976, was based on

the life of William Chidley, an eccentric reformer, and is an adventurous, amusing piece of theatre. On the other hand, *Going Home* examines the failure of a group of Australians living abroad to find success or happiness.

Jim McNeil wrote a number of plays about life in prison—from prison. Sentenced to seventeen years jail for armed robbery and wounding a policeman, his plays about jail included *The Last Cuppa*, *The Chocolate Frog*, and *The Old Familiar Juice*, all one-acters, and the full-length plays *How Does Your Garden Grow*, and *Jack*. All his plays deal with believable, interesting characters, and show prison as a reflection of society itself. Sadly, McNeil died soon after his release from jail.

Other playwrights of the 1970s include Barry Oakley, whose work was performed at the Pram Factory; most notably *The Bedfellows*, a 1975 domestic comedy about marriage. Ron Blair's monologue play *The Christian Brothers* is a marvellous portrait of a Catholic teaching brother, whilst Peter Kenna returned to Australia from England to create another Catholic play, *A Hard God*. This work examines not only the gulf between man and God, but between the different generations in a family.

The 1970s saw a tremendous growth in drama in Australia both in the size of established theatres, and in the appearance of new ones.

It was the decade of major expansion in the building of new theatres in Australia. The Adelaide Festival Theatre had been the first state arts centre to open, and during the 1970s the Sydney Opera House was completed and arts centres opened or buildings were begun in every state and territory. These new 'palaces of culture' were occupied by heavily subsidised State Theatre, Ballet and Opera companies, receiving funding from the Arts Council and from state governments, with sums of close to \$1 million to the largest companies by the end of the decade.

At the other end of the scale, small theatre companies blossomed and began performing in a range of buildings which were converted into theatres, including churches, halls, schools, and cafes. In Ipswich, Queensland, an incinerator designed by Walter Burley Griffin became a lovely, intimate little theatre seating about 80 people, opening in 1969 and still in operation.

Children's Theatre and Theatre-In-Education (TIE) also became an important part of the theatre scene, with individuals such as mime artists and small companies of actor-teachers visiting primary and secondary schools.

In Sydney, The Black Theatre Arts and Culture Centre staged a number of Aboriginal plays, including *The Cakeman* by Robert J. Merritt in 1975, about life on an Aboriginal mission, and *Here Comes the Nigger*

by Gerald Bostock in 1976, about a blind Aboriginal poet in love with his white teacher.

Playwrights were encouraged by the development of the Australian National Playwright's Conference, which began in 1973, and took place each year in Canberra, giving rehearsed readings of a number of previously unperformed plays.

There were some theatrical casualties during the 1970s as well. The Old Tote Theatre Company, the largest in Sydney, went into decline, and was finally replaced by the Sydney Theatre Company. The Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory, the actor's co-operative responsible for staging so many new plays during the 1970s, was spent force by the end of the decade. However, Anthill, the Australian Nouveau Theatre under the direction of Jean Pierre Mignon, had already emerged to balance this loss. All-in-all, the 1970s was the most vibrant decade in the whole development of Australian drama.

THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES

The decade of the 1980s saw two major developments in Australian drama. The established theatres and the well-known playwrights continued to flourish. At the same time, a whole range of new theatres emerged, and there was an upsurge in new writing for the stage.

The large, subsidised theatre companies in each state and territory continued to expand and increase the number of plays presented and the size of their audiences. As well as presenting 'classic' plays such as a yearly Shakespeare and a regular diet of successful, contemporary, overseas plays, the state theatre companies also showed an increased interest in staging new Australian plays, and in re-discovering plays from earlier decades. The Melbourne Theatre Company for example, successfully revived Betty Roland's play *A Touch of Silk*.

The standard of acting, direction and design also improved dramatically in the established theatres as new directors, many with overseas experience, were appointed, and visiting overseas companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company challenged levels of local performance. The vitality of the smaller theatres in each state also had a revitalising effect on the larger companies.

As the established theatres continued to prosper in the 1980s, so did the well-known playwrights. David Williamson continued to be Australia's most successful playwright, with *The Perfectionist* (1982) being performed throughout the country. This was another of Williamson's

savage comedies about marriage, but with a refreshingly feminist viewpoint. *Sons Of Cain* in 1985 focused on newspaper journalists, with the menace of drugs—such as heroin—to Australian society as the central concern of the play.

Alex Buzo continued to write, with *Big River* in 1980, an historical play set at the beginning of the century, and *The Marginal Farm* in 1984, set in Fiji and dealing with Australian colonialism there and also, more universally, with growing up.

Ron Blair wrote *Marx*, a dramatic biography of Karl Marx, as well as a number of other plays, while Patrick White, who had contributed *Big Toys* in the 1970s, wrote *Signal Driver* for the 1982 Adelaide Festival, and followed it with *Netherwood* in 1983. Thomas Keneally continued his concern with the plight of Aborigines in Australia, and in *Billie's House* examines the huge gulf between white society and Aboriginal life and traditions.

Two other established playwrights completed plays which linked in with earlier successes to create dramatic trilogies. Ray Lawler's *Other Times* follows on from *Kid Stakes*, written in the 1970s, telling the story of Roo, Barney, Olive and Nancy up to the beginning of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. However, these later plays are slight pieces of work in comparison with 'The Doll', written more than twenty years previously.

Peter Kenna, whose play *A Hard God* had been so successful in the 1970s, produced two more plays about its central character, Joe Cassidy. *Furtive Love* and *An Eager Hope* are both bitter plays about human isolation and the nature of sexuality, and in particular, Joe's homosexuality.

The 1980s also saw a growth in new theatres, new companies and new writers, characterised by a real variety and diversity. A large number of experimental, TIE and alternative theatre companies came, and often disappeared, during the decade, all across Australia. One of the most interesting is *Handspan* in Melbourne, a company which utilises puppetry, black theatre, music, acting and multi-media. Their production of *Four Little Girls*, a Picasso play directed by Arietta Taylor, was one of the highlights of Australian drama in the 1980s, and of world-class significance.

Of equal interest and importance has been the emergence of new playwrights. Ron Elisha, born in Israel in 1951, came to Australia as a tiny boy and became a doctor. His plays deal with the Jewish experience of suffering, persecution and the search for identity. His most powerful play so far, *Einstein*, depicts the life of the famous scientist through a

series of flashbacks remembered by the old man just before his death, in particular his involvement with the development of the atom bomb. This play had a profound impact on audiences, both here and in America.

Jack Davis, an Aborigine, was born in Western Australia in 1917. He lived on native settlements as a boy, worked as a stockman and later became involved in Aboriginal welfare. His plays are a significant contribution, not just to an understanding of Aboriginal perspectives, but to Australian drama. *Killack*, meaning 'home', deals with the early settlement of Perth, and the way the treatment of Aborigines today still reflects some of those early attitudes.

The Dreamers shows us modern Aborigines living in squalor and despair as the tribal past is lost. *No Sugar*, set in the 1930s, depicts Aborigines being forced onto reserves. It was first performed at the Perth Festival in 1985 on open ground, with the audience moving with the actors as they performed the forced removal of the Aborigines. Davis subsequently wrote *Barumgin*, which was combined with *The Dreamers* and *No Sugar* to become a trilogy of plays performed together over two nights, and titled *The First-born Trilogy*. This trilogy was one of the most important theatrical events of the late 1980s.

Melbourne-born and educated at Melbourne University, Louis Nowra wrote a stream of plays in the 1980s, all of them concerned with power and violence, yet often lyrical and romantic in part. *The Golden Age*, first performed by The Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 1985, deals with the discovery of a lost group of people who have been living in the wilds of Tasmania for many years. The analogy with the Tasmanian Aborigines is explicit. Francis, the central character, chooses to stay with the last of the forest people, rather than return to 'civilisation'.

Stephen Sewell, a Sydney-born playwright, wrote a number of plays set in other countries, including *Traitors*, set in Russia in the 1920s, and *Welcome the Bright World*, located in post-war Germany. *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, first performed in 1983, is set in Australia, and deals with a number of major issues in a huge, rambling play. His next play, *Dreams of an Empty City*, is a savage attack on the greed and corruption in modern Australia.

It would be impossible to list all the new plays and new playwrights of the 1980s. The richness and variety of the work, and the diversity of new and innovative theatre companies which presented them, was evidence of the vitality of Australian drama.

INTO THE NINETEEN-NINETIES

As has happened so often in the past, a worsening economic situation has seriously affected the theatre. The Nimrod in Sydney and The Church Theatre in Melbourne have been major casualties, and many small companies have disappeared or are struggling for survival.

On a happier note, the Playbox Theatre finally moved into its new home at the Malthouse in South Melbourne in 1990, after years without a theatre. Playbox continues the policy of all-Australian seasons of plays which has made it a vital force for so long. New plays by established writers continue to emerge, including the latest David Williamson play, and Louis Nowra's *Capricornia*, adapted from the epic Xavier Herbert novel.

Talented new writers have appeared. Michael Gow, whose plays



Bradley Byquar and Lydia Miller in the Melbourne Theatre Company's 1990 production of Capricornia, a play written by Louis Nowra and adapted from Xavier Herbert's epic novel.

Europe and *Away* established him as an interesting new talent, has emerged as a significant writer. Darryl Emmerson, the creator of *The Pathfinder*, an exquisite musical biography of John Shaw Nielson, continues to produce original, appealing work.

There is a continuity in Australian drama as well. The New Theatres continue to present radical and left-wing drama as they have done for more than half a century. A number of Australia's oldest theatres have been restored or are undergoing restoration. A number of the plays which formed part of the development of Australian drama since the 1950s, are now regarded as modern classics and are studied in schools and universities, not only in Australia, but in many parts of the world.

Australian drama has come a long way since that day in 1789 when a group of convicts stepped onto a makeshift stage in a mud hut. Its present vitality and diversity are a promise for the next two hundred years.

Workshop

To develop an appreciation of a range of Australian plays, and the ability to express this appreciation in performance, an effective approach is to work in pairs or small groups and choose a scene each from three or four different plays which have something in common—either the characters are similar, the settings are the same, or the themes or concerns of the plays have elements in common.

Work on the chosen scenes, applying the appropriate dramatic styles and theatrical techniques, and present them as a unified performance.

Chapter 15, Reflections, gives a detailed example of this approach.

Research

Explore one element of Australian drama—a play, a playwright, a period or a style.

- Collect appropriate research material.
- Interpret the material.
- Attend theatre performance relevant to the research.
- Submit a research report of approximately 1000 words with accompanying resource materials.

THE BEGINNINGS

1. Describe the first theatrical performance in Australia.

2. What is the name of the modern play about Australia's theatrical beginnings? Who was it written by?

3. When was the first theatre opened in Australia? By whom? Why was it closed?

4. The first play appeared in 1829. What was the problem with the earlier plays about Australia?

5. What style of plays dominated the Australian stage in these early days? Why would theatre managers not stage Australian plays?

THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

1. What was being demanded by Australians during the year of Federation in 1901?

2. The early Australian play wrights were inspired by the realist plays like that of Ibsen, Chekhov and Stanislavski. However Australian audiences were fond of what kind of plays?

3. What are the three other notable developments in Australian Theatre at this time?

WOMEN WRITERS

1. What influence did women writers have on Australian Theatre?

THE BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION

1. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was established in 1954 to help establish and support a distinctively Australian artistic scene in response to the success of *Rusty Bugles* by Sumner Locke-Elliott in 1948. *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was its first production. What was so successful about it? What other issues have been explored?

THE 1960'S

1. What were the two significant events that occurred in the late 1950's and early 1960's that influenced theatre?

2. Fill in the table below:

Play Name, Year of Publication	Themes Explored
<p style="text-align: center;">The Ham Funeral Patrick White 1948</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Childermas Thomas Keneally 1968</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">This Old Man Comes Rolling Home The Chapel Perilous Dorothy Hewett 1968</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">White With Wire Wheels Dimboola Jack Hibberd 1969</p>	

Norm and Ahmed Alex Buzo 1968	
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3. Several theatre companies were formed during this period. List them.

THE 1970'S

The 1970's was the most vibrant decade in the whole development of Australian drama. New theatre companies and new works were being produced at a rapid pace.

David Williamson is the most prolific Australian playwright whose work was born out of this period.

1. What is his most well-known work and what is it about?

2. Where were theatres popping up in Australia? Who were the casualties?

THE 1980'S

1. Theatre companies and playwrights continued to flourish. What kinds of works were the companies producing each season?

2. Australian playwrights like David Williamson, Alex Buzo, Peter Kenna and Ray Lawler continued to write. Two new playwrights came onto the scene. Their names were Jack Davis and Louis Nowra. What were some of the themes that they explored in their plays?

INTO THE 1990'S

1. What affected the closure of the theatres in the early 1990's?

2. What types of works do they continue to produce?

REFLECTION TEMPLATE

Consider the following questions:

What image do we have of Australia? What is the role and function of Australian Drama today? What audience does it reach? What do audiences expect? How potent a force is it? What does it reflect?

1. Answer the questions in a sentence or two.
2. Elaborate on that answer by explaining it.
3. Use a workshop example in a quick recount.
4. What insights does that example provide?