

DIRECTIONS IN POST-WAR AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

Our approach to Australian drama begins with the frank acknowledgment that it is for the most part Melbourne oriented. It is not that we lack respect for what has happened and is happening in Sydney and in the other theatre centres, quite the reverse. It is merely that we have taken a conscious decision to write as far as possible from our feelings about a theatre which has come out of a community which we know. We refer the reader at the end to several books which treat the Australian scene as a whole.

Recent surveys of theatre in Australia tend to see the main turning points as 1955, when Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was first performed and 1967 when La Mama, followed by the Australian Performing Group (1970), were established. Sydney's Jane Street, Old Tote and Nimrod, belonging to the same category of alternative theatre, were a few years after the Melbourne groups. Australian plays written before World War II by respected authors such as Louis Esson and Katharine Susannah Prichard, for example, had no established ensemble theatres to support them and consequently lacked the audiences to appreciate them.

The *Doll* was unique in Australian theatre history in that it achieved general acclaim from the Melbourne theatre-going community, was received enthusiastically in Sydney, and only then gained the ultimate accolade of a London success, which even today is usually necessary before Australians are convinced of the standing of a local writer or artist. A number of factors was operating to achieve that acceptance. It was not only that it was a good play which was at the same time Australian in its ethos, setting and idiom, it not only linked the bushman and the (sub)urbanite, but it did so in a way which cleverly united the contemporary with the traditional and the nostalgic. There was that pleasant shock of recognition, the sight and sound of one's own society celebrated on stage. True, the society shown in the play was working class and the audience inevitably middle class, but the Australians have always nurtured the thought that they are not too far removed from working class origins.

To realise why in this case the stage as mirror had such a profound impact one has to remember that all Australians who grew up in the thirties and forties had experienced a sharp sense of double belonging. The immediate world of family and broader community simply did not meet with what was studied at school as history and literature nor with what was experienced in the cultural sphere generally. The dedicated few who created and encouraged local art and writing had no support from institutions, and least of all from the theatre, where only the safest classical repertoire, staged with unflinching accuracy to produce what Peter Brook called «deadly theatre», and the proven commercial successes from overseas were permissible. Hence, one went to the premiere on that night in November 1955 with all those

inbuilt prejudices which have since been summed up as «cultural cringe». What one experienced was not just shock of recognition but also an overwhelming feeling of release, almost of a sudden licence, when one realised that the language, the gestures and the comportment of the kind of people one had mixed with in the playground and grown up with could produce both tension and entertainment.

In retrospect, part of the excitement which the *Doll* engendered lay in the hope that Australia's status as a cultural colony, dependent mainly on second hand notions of what the London theatre had to offer, was beginning to change, especially as the end of World War II had brought a new national assertiveness. However, the following decade brought little that was intrinsically new, and there was no real progress towards a theatre which could be both intrinsically Australian and break new ground. The two most successful plays to follow the *Doll*, Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* and Alan Seymour's *One Day of the Year*, which dealt respectively with the migrant and the generation problems and contained much sharper social criticism, were still basically in the naturalist mode. Like the *Doll* they were light years away from the new developments in Europe. Moreover, the policy of the established theatres still imprisoned the director and the actor in a pale imitation of the way an English actor spoke and moved.

The new direction came largely from the universities. It is no coincidence that Lawler's *Doll* was first performed at Melbourne University, and it was there, as in Sydney, that the European avant-garde was introduced into Australia. There was, for instance, one glorious week in the early sixties loaded with absurdist theatre running sometimes till well after midnight which, though it brought a thundering financial crisis down on their heads, created an enormous impression among the students. The Emerald Hill Theatre, started by Wal Cherry in the early sixties in an endeavour to interest the theatre public in the kind of work which was gaining ground in Europe and America, a theatre which has been described as «the right theatre in the wrong place at the wrong time», had its origins in Melbourne University.

The late sixties brought also to the universities the ferment of the Vietnam war together with the anti-authoritarian and anti-traditional revolt shared with the entire western world, and that of course made itself felt in the theatre of the young. But theatres within a university campus do not make an impact on the world outside. A different focus is needed. In Melbourne that was found in La Mama, only a stone's throw from the campus but quite demonstrably in a lively community influenced but not dominated by the university, and it was there that the most inventive playwrights, directors and actors from both the nearby university and from Monash University, about 20 kilometres distant, found a place in which to try out their ideas. Writers such as Hibberd, Williamson, Romeril and Oakley made their effective start there, and others who became especially prominent later in film and on stage include Schepisi, Cox, Adams and Gillies.

The model for La Mama came, however, from New York via the Australian Betty Burstall who had been impressed by the Greenwich Village coffee-house theatres and who set up in a small two-storey house, a space which still retains a domestic atmosphere with fire-place, stairs and kitchen

sink. La Mama itself has never constituted an ensemble but provides a venue for groups to stage their own work and a forum for new playwrights. As a result, this kind of small theatre was and is an invaluable and essential asset, because new plays can be tried out with a minimum of risk and without the temptation and indeed the need to play safe, without the inhibitions which plague the larger theatres so that they can afford only one or two plays per season which might offend or bore their regular subscribers.

In 1970 a number of those who began with La Mama founded a company of their own, the Australian Performing Group, which found a location only a street away from La Mama in an old factory, affectionately known to playgoers as the Pram Factory. They were group oriented, created much of their work out of the street theatre and were radical both in their politics and their theatre style. There are observers who maintain that the group was too distrustful of the single playwright, even those of their own number, too satirical and too prejudiced against traditional theatre forms to assist in the long term the development of an important Australian theatre. But out of this group and similar groups in Sydney have come some of the most interesting plays of the last twenty years. It was in the Pram Factory that Hibberd's play *A Stretch of the Imagination*, widely regarded as the most significant play of the seventies, was first performed in 1972.

It is one of the plays most strongly opposed to naturalism, it is Hibberd reacting against the earlier dramatists, Hibberd reacting against his contemporary Williamson, since for him «the great disease of Australian dramaturgy is a pedestrian naturalism. Firstly he dispels the romanticism of the earlier naturalism through the only character, an old man, Monk O'Neill, who lives as a recluse in the outback, though his origins and thinking are totally urban. It is a situation which is used to satirise all the old outback and male myths, though it is a part of Monk's charm that he celebrates them at the same time. Where Williamson would ask the audience to join him in laughing at recognisable types on stage, Hibberd lets Monk reconstruct his own life, laugh at and commiserate with the self he creates and re-creates on stage. Similarly, where Williamson has a wonderful ear for Australian speech *as it is*, Hibberd exploits the language by setting up absurd incongruities, overstating and deflating the rhetoric, playing off the old against the new. Again Monk is the spectator of his own use of language, he *plays* with the idea of being Australian.

A Stretch of the Imagination is a delight for anybody who is interested in language, and it is partly for that reason that it has attracted so much critical attention. Practically all commentary centres around Monk, his theatricalisation of himself and the characters he conjures up, and his relationship to language. But Monk is not just locked in an interplay between mind, memory and language. There is also a highly ambiguous space, a curious mixture of outback and suburb, of the limitless and the limited, and Monk *uses* that space. There is also a constant interplay between him and the many objects of an often surreal nature which surround him. But their dramatic potential in the script and their actual translation onto the stage seem always to pass unnoticed. The treatment of this play is a good example of a one-sidedly literary treatment of theatre, which is very general and often

seems to be accepted even by practitioners. The informed and wide-ranging discussions which surround the work of such figures as Brook and Vitez are not present so far in this country, and it is the practical theatre which suffers from that lack as much as dramatic criticism itself.

With the decline of the Australian Performing Group (it eventually disbanded several years ago) a new company, Playbox, came into being in 1976. It had and has the avowed aim to bring Australian plays to a wider public and in more orthodox surroundings. It has maintained this policy with considerable success. One example which, while not precisely typical, gives insight into the present situation is its current production of a play by a young writer and actor, Patricia Cornelius. The play was performed over the past year in three different experimental theatres, including La Mama, and, based on that experience, has been revised for its appearance at a more prestigious location. It may be that this kind of symbiosis is necessary in order to bridge the gap between the call for Playbox to take greater risks and the temptation to play safe in order to nurture regular subscribers.

For some time there has been a consensus that theatre in Australia has entered the doldrums and that, despite the increasing number of plays written and performed all over the country, nothing really new and exciting has emerged. But it is important to note that theatre centres apart from Melbourne and Sydney, though they developed somewhat later, are very active indeed. In the section which follows, two of the three plays discussed come from Queensland and Western Australia respectively, and Adelaide has an excellent tradition of innovative work. These three plays represent, as will be emphasised, also a break-through of another and very significant kind, for they provide evidence that the dominance of male, white Anglo-Celtic writing is no longer so overwhelming.

Three recent plays suggest much about the present state and possible future of Australian theatre, *The Journey* by Tess Lyssiotis, *Too Young for Ghosts* by Janis Balodis and *No Sugar* by Jack Davis.

The Journey is actually a trilogy and brings together three plays written by Lyssiotis over the last ten years. It depicts three stages in the lives of an interconnected group of Greek, Italian and German families as they arrive in Australia to settle. In the first, we see them in the «migrant camp» at Bonegilla in the Victorian countryside, the place where newly arrived immigrants were, in the 1950's, accommodated before settlement at places of work. The second shows the families now resettled in the outer suburbs of Melbourne and working in factories there. In the third, set much closer to the present, the families are more firmly established, more affluent, building local churches and clubs and bringing up families who are now young Australians, with all the tensions that that implies.

Janis Balodis' play traces another assorted group, this time of Latvians, as they make their way through the refugee camps of war-torn Europe and are relocated in Australia where they find themselves sent to work in the sugar-cane fields of Northern Queensland and living in shelters provided for such people. Their story is intercut with that of the exploration of outback Australia by the early explorer, Leichhardt.

Jack Davis is a senior and distinguished Aboriginal playwright who has, for a number of years, worked with the National Theatre of Western Australia in collaboration with director Andrew Ross. *No Sugar* deals with a group of aborigines being evicted from their tribal lands and resettled in a specially designated Aboriginal Reserve. It shows their movements between the two sites, their experiences in the Reserve and a final departure into a new future.

None of these writers is of white Anglo-Celtic origin. All of their writing deals, at least in part, with their own experience or that of their families. Together they share characteristics which provide interesting markers on the pathway of Australian theatre.

Firstly in the Australians that they depict. We are still young enough in Australia to remember the first excitement of seeing real Australian characters on the stage, rather than Australian actors imitating foreigners in foreign plays. Actors are still alive who can talk of the struggle to relearn the Australian accent for performance on the stage. But in those early days there was still fairly finite bounds to who Australians were. They were working-class and Anglo-Celtic, recognizable expressions of a national ethos in a country that longed to be assured that there really was something nationally distinctive about it. The first play which signalled the possibility of a renewed Australian theatre - Ray Lawler's fine *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* - also depicted workers in the cane-fields of Queensland but they came from a Melbourne working class suburb, to which they returned each year in the off-season for a rendez-vous with barmaids Olive and Pearl.

After the *Doll*, which was first performed in 1955, an accelerated renaissance of Australian theatre took place in the late 60's and early 70's. In those years the characteristic Australian stage *persona* became more and more recognizeably «ocker», young, male, beer-swilling, sport-loving, sexist. It would be a caricature to say that these were the only characters represented, but they were the vanguard, a battering ram for the possibility of a viable Australian stage. They were energetic, entertaining, eloquent, but the claims they made to represent a nation were limited.

Now that is seemingly changing. All the characters in the plays under review are outsiders, whether original inhabitants, or recent arrivals. Women play an important and integral role in all of them. The definition of who is an Australian is expanding. We are recognizing, or being helped to recognize, that Australia is many countries, many nationalities, many experiences. From the layering and sharing of these, our experience as a nation is made.

Secondly, the language of the plays. Here we talk principally of *The Journey*. Until now most plays in Australia have been written in English. This in a country in which the instructions in telephone boxes are written in at least three languages. In our local High School 42 different first languages are spoken. Tess Lyssiotis' play is written almost equally in Greek, English and Italian and is almost equally understandable - and amusing - to native speakers of any of those three languages. In her plays, some of the many languages of our country are brought into dialogue and come together to form a new language for the stage, a language of a new country. In the plays

of Balodis and Davis there are also smatterings of other languages but, just as important, a keen ear for the many different ways that people talk in a country with only one official language.

And if we broaden the definition of theatre language, the palate becomes richer. In *No Sugar* we see the language of ritual dance and hear the music of the didgeridoo. And we see in the way his characters behave towards each other new languages of human action - for example in the exchange of valued and useful objects at turning points in characters lives. New ways of being become new forms of acting - the language of new theatre, a contribution to our sense of what it is to be alive. Each of the plays works differently and has a different form of theatrical imagery from the standard form of Australian theatre. They point towards a more composite and cosmopolitan Australian theatre of the future.

Thirdly, *No Sugar* and *The Journey* are linked by the spaces in which they were performed, *No Sugar* in the Town Hall of the inner suburb of Melbourne that has one of the highest concentrations of urban Aborigines and *The Journey* in La Mama, a former shirt warehouse and in many community venues around Australia. These plays come from outside and find their situation of performance outside the conventional sphere of theatre. By doing so they expand the context of theatre in this society.

Finally, and perhaps most suggestively, each of the plays gives a sense of departure. The characters are in transit. In *Too Young for Ghosts* they move across Europe and Australia, further and further north into Queensland. In *The Journey* they live in a series of locations and erid the play seeing their children grow up in a new society. *No Sugar* closes with the departure of the two central characters, the young man and his wife, with their new born child, away from the settlement, towards, the city, towards us, towards a future as unknown as is our own.

This is surprising because this is not evidently a time of departure or adventure in Australia. At best it is a time of consolidation: at worst, of creeping conservatism, and the return to provincial values. Somehow these plays suggest that below the surface this is a time to set out again to test, and create, our identity by taking it in to the unknown.

James McCAUGHEY
Hector MACLEAN

We append an incomplete list of books which provide surveys in the field:

Fitzpatrick, Peter, *After «The Doll»: Australian Drama since 1955*, Edward Arnold, Melbourne, 1979. (Contains the best critical insights).

Holloway, Peter (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Drama: Perspectives since 1955*. Currency Press, Sydney, 1981. (Specific and general essays by a number of critics, including playwrights and directors).

Rees, Leslie, *The Making of Australian Drama: A Historical and critical Survey from the 1830's to the 1970's*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973. (Useful for its encyclopedic coverage).

Rees, Leslie, *A History of Australian Drama*. Vol. 2. *Australian Drama 1970-1985*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1987.