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SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE?: *THE PERFECTIONIST*

David Williamson, *The Perfectionist*. Introduction by Rodney Fisher. Sydney: Currency Press, 1983. 96 pp. RRP \$5.95.

Shirley Gunn says of her son Stuart, the perfectionist of David Williamson's title, that he was 'the most clinging little brute a mother ever had.' The need for approval and the fear of rejection set the pattern of Stuart's life, from the jokes he doesn't finish lest no one should laugh, to the economics thesis which he has still to complete after nine years.

Stuart's insecurity shows itself in the first act when his wife Barbara announces her intention to return to work on her sociology thesis, and to employ a babysitter to take care of the children. The Gunns are in Denmark on Stuart's sabbatical, and he objects to Barbara's plans on the grounds that his work should have priority, that Barbara is slapdash and self-indulgent, and that sacrifice (on the part of the wife) is an unwritten clause of the marriage contract. The Perfectionist of Act One is not a very attractive character, but Peter Carroll in the Sydney Theatre Company's premiere production of the play managed to make him sufferable, emphasising the vulnerability rather than the petulance of Stuart's childlike nature. He first enters agitated, peeling off layers of winter clothing to emerge slight and tousle-haired, reporting the disasters of his shopping expedition. His equanimity is gradually restored, and his complaints about Denmark – the cold, the cost of living, his classes at the University – are the comfortable complaints of a visitor who knows it's better at home. Stuart is never so relaxed again, as Barbara's determination to work forces a change in the basis of their relationship.

Stuart and his doubtful self-esteem are at the play's centre; the other characters give perspective to his problem. In the Sydney production, the other male characters physically diminished Stuart. Hugo Weaving, as Erik the Danish babysitter, strode confidently around the stage, taking over Stuart's space as well as his roles as father and lover. Noel Ferrier, as Stuart's barrister father Jack, was superbly bombastic, always

appearing, and dominating, in his own house. The senior Gunns' house was represented on the spare set by a formal carpet and occasional furniture, and Stuart's returns to this territory were tentative and dutiful, as the son who had still to prove worthy of the father.

In the performance, the play's interest in Stuart and in the male perspective on professional success and on marriage overshadowed its interest in the female characters. Stuart's mother: Shirley had given up a career as an actress for Jack's legal ambitions, and has retreated into alcoholism. Diana Davidson made the most of the script's suggestions of Shirley's wit and verve, and did not allow alcoholism or an overbearing husband to overwhelm her. Robyn Nevin's Barbara was exasperated and determined rather than domineering (as the character has apparently been played in a Canberra production). Barbara goes about organising her life to accommodate her research in a purposeful way which denies Stuart's claims that she is 'slapdash' and 'a dabbler'; but the play is more interested in the effects of this on Stuart, than in the cost to Barbara. Her anxieties about her children are given little attention, by comparison with that given to Stuart's problems with adjusting to the role of active parent.

The appearance of the Currency text, with Rodney Fisher's introduction, reinforces the insistence of the Sydney Theatre Company's programme notes that *The Perfectionist* is a play about marriage. Fisher's account of that first production, which he directed, and of Williamson's involvement in it suggests that his is a view the playwright would endorse:

What eventually emerged was *The Perfectionist*: an intense study of the institution of marriage, its chances of survival in modern society where current marriage failure averages around fifty per cent, and the obstacles on the path to success: sexism; feminism; the pressures of parenthood; the debilitating effect of habitual self-doubt; the plethora of conflicting theories and panaceas in the wake of the sexual revolution of the seventies.

Fisher's comment accurately reflects the play's perspective on marriage – a male perspective that assumes the attitudes to sexuality promulgated by the 'sexual revolution' of the seventies. The play's concern with marriage is overtly stated in Barbara's first speech, when she tells the audience that they are about to see the result of her attempt to apply the theory of 'open' marriage to her situation with Stuart. But the play's

use of Barbara in this intermediary role is misleading, for her perspective on the marriage and the obstacles Fisher enumerates is displaced by the play's interest in Stuart's personality. The play's episodic structure recalls Bergman's 'Scenes from a Marriage' and, whether he intended it or not, Rodney Fisher's use of lighting contributed to that impression in his attempt to achieve a cinematic effect:

The Perfectionist brings a kind of cinematic technique to the stage; a rapid succession of short scenes between different characters in a variety of locations. . . Shaun Gurton's spacious set design and John Rayment's skilful lighting enabled me . . . to create the sensation of a filmic close-up on a very wide theatre stage.

But the subject of the close-up is Stuart, rather than 'the institution of marriage.' From the first act the play moves through a series of scenes in which Barbara's need for 'personal growth' is perceived as professionally and personally threatening by Stuart. Further, it is her need for intellectual achievement which disturbs him most, rather than her brief affair with Erik (not achieved until late in Act 2). It is the knowledge that his economic theory does not work which is the catastrophe for Stuart: the proof of his intellectual limitation causes this extreme reassessment of his domestic role. But both Stuart and Erik see role reversal as a threat to virility. The Danish husbands of successful wives, says Stuart have 'cotton wool pricks' and Erik refuses to become 'the wife' of his dentist girlfriend because

After a year or so I would be sitting at home thinking 'why is she coming home late?' 'Am I attractive to other women any more?' 'Have I got a brain?' and all that sort of shit, and I start popping valium because there is nothing I can do, because Kirsten has the economic power. Eventually she meets some other young spunk and smokes a few joints and says to him, 'Wow, this is the real thing, but you can't move in till I kick out old Erik at home.'

What the play examines is not 'the institution of marriage' but how Stuart copes with the partial role reversal which his damaged professional pride and Barbara's new found independence bring about. What he finds is that domestic routine and parenting are exhausting and demanding, but do not draw on intellectual energy. Whether his discovery of the substance of Barbara's dissatisfaction will lead to an improvement in their

relationship is uncertain. Barbara agrees to go on with the marriage, rather than leave with Erik, but with depressingly low expectations of the outcome: 'you just have to hope there are enough good moments to make the whole hassle worthwhile.' In the absence of any evident 'good moments' in the Gunn marriage the audience is left to wonder at Barbara's decision, particularly since her idea of perfection is to live alone. The generation who lived through the 'sexual revolution' of the twenties seriously questioned the value of marriage. Have their perceptions of the institution changed or have they become more conservative? There is evidence, in Stuart's comments about Danish students, that he has become more conservative, and it could be inferred that the stability which marriage offers is attractive to him. From Barbara's point of view however the play raises more questions than it resolves and on this basis cannot be taken seriously as "a study of marriage."