



Alma de Groen

# ALMA DE GROEN: AN INTERVIEW

EP: Why do you write stage plays?

ADG: People often get into theatre because they love it and want to be involved with it. I'd seen very little theatre when I started writing for it. I started, I think, simply because I found I could do it. I seemed to be able to write dialogue without the effort that it was taking me to write, for instance, a short story. I found that enormously difficult in comparison with writing dialogue. I then had to learn how to organize the dialogue into scenes and any other form of writing. When I was quite young I wanted to get into photography and I think one reason I'm interested in stage is that it isn't just language, it's visual as well.

EP: Do you feel differently about writing stage plays and about writing screen or television scripts? Like the scripting you did of Glen Tomasetti's *Man of Letters*, for example?

ADG: Yes, I do feel very differently about it. In writing for T.V. you generally have to have a pretty good idea of what the end result is going to be, because other people want to know — i.e. the producer and the script editor. In theatre I can voyage into the unknown with no questions asked, and this is important for me. In that sense theatre is much more adventurous. On the other hand it's therapeutic now and then to see a result in a short span of time as happens in T.V., but I couldn't work that way all the time. I need the long voyage.

EP: What place do you think live theatre has in Australian society?

ADG: That's a hard one. I've been worrying about that myself lately. My daughter is nineteen and she and her friends keep up with what's happening in the art world and cinema, but it doesn't occur to them to go to the theatre. That may be because it's so expensive. Then that becomes self-perpetuating. Even if they are offered cheaper tickets or pensioners' and unemployed nights, going to the theatre tends not to be part of their thinking or their routine.

EP: Is that a pity?

ADG: I think it's a terrible pity. Because a lot of the people you wish you were writing for aren't ever going to see what you are trying to do.

- EP: You are really writing for the middle-class and a rather limited section of it?
- ADG: Yes. I don't feel embarrassed about that. I used to — I used to think it was some terrible flaw in my nature that I wasn't writing Marxist plays for the workers. I write plays about women and that reflects a gender based struggle rather than a class struggle.
- EP: You've often mentioned Howard Brenton as a playwright whom you admire. Do you believe, as Brenton does, that stage drama is a moral force but that it shouldn't be didactic?
- ADG: I found Brenton interesting and helpful not because I was wildly interested in anything he had to say, but simply because I admire the way he says it. His technique for the stage interested me. I tend to think of drama as an evolutionary force in my own life. If it helps me along the path, then I hope that it eventually will help someone else who's watching it.
- EP: It wouldn't be adequate to describe you as a feminist playwright, because your work has many other concerns. But have you felt any commitment to deal specifically with female issues?
- ADG: Actually I don't mind at all being described as a feminist playwright. I think I started out as one without knowing I was one, because we hadn't quite struck the most recent wave of feminism then. *The Joss Adams Show*, which I began writing round about the end of 1968 and finally finished about 1970 — although it was only a one-act play — now seems quite in alignment with feminist writing. But I was completely unaware of that at the time. And the same goes for *Perfectly All Right*. It's only now that I consciously write as a feminist. I feel quite comfortable with the description. For a long time I used to read people like Thoreau and Marcus Aurelius for sustenance, and used to wish that there were women that one could read in the same way. Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin I would say are the people I now turn to rather than the men.
- EP: I think you said recently that you think of the stage as a picture frame? Do you first conceive your plays visually?
- ADG: First there is the reason I have for writing, whatever that is, depending on the play. But then I find I don't proceed at all well unless I do have some visual image. *Going Home* is an example of a play where I didn't have a painting or a piece of sculpture in mind when I began writing it. It was a much more literal play set pretty much in the house we lived in in Canada.

I was consciously aiming to write a “well-made” play so I didn’t need something that transcended the normal, naturalistic boundaries to kick it off.

EP: It is an image of enclosure, isn’t it, with the heroine, Zoe, enclosed with a clutter of objects and material goods?

ADG: Yes. It is very literal and I don’t find that form helpful for what I have to say now. I don’t know what it is, but some aspects of modern art or very old art give me a kind of lift-off for my writing. There was the Italian pop artist, Adami, whose work was the basis of *The Joss Adams Show*. *Perfectly All Right* came from Claes Oldenberg’s Ray Gun Theatre and other things he was talking about and presenting visually.

EP: Are these realistic paintings you have to start off a play?

ADG: They’re usually figurative. I’ve never derived anything from looking at Albers or Rothko or anybody like that. They tend to be fairly dramatic art works in themselves — rather theatrical perhaps.

EP: What attracted you to write about the life of Arthur Cravan and William James Chidley?

ADG: I decided I needed to write about men because writing about women was natural for me, and easy. I think a lot of male playwrights don’t make that connection, but they need to put themselves inside a female consciousness if they can, and get inside the female character. I felt that I had that need from my point of view to become Arthur Cravan if I possibly could. I chose him because his life was fascinating. Also because he embodied such extremes of maleness. He was a poet and he was also a champion heavyweight boxer who fought Jack Johnson. Another reason I chose it was that it gave me a chance to use language in a way I hadn’t been able to with things like *Joss Adams* and *Perfectly All Right*, or my first play, *The Sweat-Proof Boy* which were very domestic. This was a different level of subject matter entirely, and it gave me enormous freedom in how I could use language to get ideas across. *Chidley* I think I probably shouldn’t have written! It was something that someone suggested as a subject, and it sounded impossible — and I thought, well, I’ll have a go. It’s the only play I’ve written fairly quickly in a few weeks. I looked at it again recently and rather liked it. Also it was to do with needing to get a balance between the sexes because in *Cravan* almost all the characters are male. So I needed to do something which had more balance in the relationship of male and female characters.

- EP: *Chidley* was printed in *Theatre Australia*, but I believe it's being published again?
- ADG: Yes. In Yackandandah Playscripts.
- EP: You commented in an interview with Jennifer Palmer that you used some ideas from the mystic philosopher Gurdjieff in writing *Going Home*. Could you say something more about that?
- ADG: Everyone says that drama is about conflict. And one of Gurdjieff's notions was that people fall into seven different types. The first three are on a particular level. They are emotional man, instinctual man and intellectual man. And there is a fourth stage, which is a transitional stage, and a fifth stage with represents the person who is more fully realized and is on the way to some kind of spiritual attainment. Six and seven I have no concept of at all, because they are beyond my understanding. But I thought that since the theory is that people fall into these different types, what happens is that they are unable to make connections with one another because there is no understanding between and this creates conflict. I suppose I was thinking of where I fell in his evolution scale, and therefore I tended to think of the characters in the play I was writing in the same way. And they tended to fall into the first three types. Molly was emotional man, Tom was intellectual man and Mike was instinctual man. I decided that Zoe was number four and in a transitional stage, and I put Jim way up there on number five. Which I think now may have been wrong!
- EP: J.D. Salinger used some of Gurdjieff's ideas in his early novels that made such an impact in the fifties: *Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooey*, for example. Were you ever interested in his work?
- ADG: Yes, *Franny and Zooey* in particular, though it's a long time ago now. I remember — is it Buddy? — having trouble with his novel and the mother saying: "Write the kind of novel you would like to read". I try to live by that precept in writing for the theatre the kind of plays I would like to see. It requires me to be pretty tough on myself because I'm hard to please. But then being my own judge and jury is necessary anyway in a country where there is no ongoing critical analysis of womens' playwrighting.
- EP: Is Jim or Zoe the central figure in *Going Home*?
- ADG: When I wrote it I thought that Jim was, because at that point I wasn't writing with any kind of feminist consciousness. I

tended to think that the male role was the selling point, so he had the rather flashy dramatic male role, which was wonderfully interpreted by Max Cullen at the Melbourne Theatre Company. It's only now that I think that Zoe may have been Gurdjieff's man number five, rather than Jim, because she is the one capable of change and development, and I'm not sure at all that he was.

EP: He thought he was, but Zoe seems to have reservations about his capacity to change at the end of the play?

ADG: Yes.

EP: It's often said that theatre has exhausted the possibilities of naturalism or realism; but the naturalistic play refuses to go away and it remains a favourite form with audiences. What forces are involved in this rather contradictory situation?

ADG: I'm not sure that it's true to say that naturalism remains a favourite with audiences. Perhaps writers are simply more at home in it and so you tend to see it more than other forms of drama. I did notice recently, although it sounds peculiar, in one naturalistic production I saw I felt quite a strong sense of alienation that I recognized that I've often felt in the theatre. I think it's partly due to the way plays are interpreted, and they are all interpreted pretty much from the male point of view. So you're constantly looking at things that are not relevant to your own life as a woman. But I think that another thing that traps us in naturalism is something Eamon D'Arcy talks about and that is the lack of a visual aesthetic in Australian theatre. Because we don't have that, we tend to think naturalistically because we are trapped in the visual mode that sees things absolutely literally. We tend to illustrate our plays on the stage, instead of transcending them in some way and making more of a metaphysical statement about them.

EP: Andrew Ross makes a distinction between the naturalism of *Going Home* and the realism of *Vocations*. Do you yourself distinguish between those two levels of imitations of life?

ADG: I don't think I do, in terms of my own work. I've since discovered their limitation and I've pulled myself out of the trap of naturalism or realism. I think I got into it by writing *Going Home*, and having found myself in that mode I couldn't escape from it.

EP: Then you don't think it's a mode particularly suited to women, as has been suggested?

ADG: No! Absolutely not! Women's theatre nowadays is so often about transcending the barriers of time and place and natural-

- ism is of very little help there.
- EP: What do you hope audiences will get from your most recent play, *The Rivers of China*?
- ADG: There's something that I was striving to get to in *Vocations* and didn't get near. It's a blending of form and content that I achieved earlier on with *Joss* and *Perfectly All Right*. It's the reason I've looked at paintings so much and tried to get some of that wholeness on stage.
- EP: The wholeness of a painting?
- ADG: Yes. In the way that Jung says a mandala has a kind of psychic wholeness. A lot of paintings have that. Especially some mediaeval paintings and some 17th century. Spanish painters like Zurbaran. I call it theatrical quietism. That feeling of a psychic wholeness which I think you cannot get — or at least I cannot get — through naturalism. I didn't get it with *Going Home* and I didn't get it with *Vocations*, although some of the content of the play is about that, without actually being able to encapsulate it in a complete stage experience. It's referred to, rather than actually presented as a complete entity. But in *The Rivers of China*, finally, form and content are absolutely blended, so that what comes out is a kind of — well, I can only think of it as existential feminism! I mentioned that to someone the other day at yum cha and they almost choked all over the table.
- EP: It seems a perfectly reasonable concept!
- ADG: It seems the best way of describing what I'm after. In the audience's experience of watching the play, they enter into it in a way that is absolutely paralleled in what is happening on stage and what the message of the play is.
- EP: Did you feel that this was happening when you saw it workshopped at the Playwrights' Conference?
- ADG: I had a wonderful director, Peter Kingston from the Griffin Theatre in Sydney, who concentrated on the actors' understanding of what was happening, so that when it did come time to put the whole thing together it was actually done in a day. But we couldn't know for certain the effect it might have until we had an audience at the actual presentation of it. And it really was quite extraordinary — it worked! It didn't work for everybody. There were a couple of men in the audience who said, "Well — what is *this*?" I'm grateful to the Playwrights' Conference for presenting the play, because it's a play that people who've had a lot of experience in the theatre

have read and haven't understood. I could tell that it needed to be seen so that people could understand the purpose of it. It's an example of the Playwrights' Conference really coming up trumps as far as the playwright is concerned.

EP: And *The Rivers of China* is about Katherine Mansfield?

ADG: Yes, Katherine Mansfield and Gurdjieff. That's been an ongoing interest for me. In the last few months of her life she went to Gurdjieff's Institute in France after she'd seen about twenty doctors who'd given her all kinds of horrific treatment trying to cure her T.B. The general theory is that she went there to die, but there are letters which make it clear that she went there hoping that she would leave eventually and go south and buy a farm and live in a warm climate — that she would survive. So it's really about the last three months of her life, but treated in a way so that it becomes a metaphor for women's existence in the world, as it is today.

EP: I look forward very much to seeing it. But to come back to *Vocations* for a minute, one of the strongest moments I've had recently in theatre occurs in *Vocations* when the insecure scientist Ross asks, "Why do women hate themselves?" Ross's own insecurity is obviously so much less than the almost generic insecurity of the two women. How much do you hope the audience will learn about women, not from Vicki and Joy, but from Ross and Godfrey?

ADG: That's something that I hadn't analyzed before. But I think that the audience could probably learn a lot in the sense that they have to make up their own minds about the difference between the women as presented by the play and what they're seeing on stage, and by Godfrey's and Ross's perception and evaluation of them as beings whose wings should be clipped. Both of the men are psychic vampires in the way that Mary Daly talks of them, feeding off the women's energy.

EP: There seems to be some connection between Vicki's speech as Cassandra and Christa Wolf's use of Cassandra as a female archetype in her book of that name. Did you have anything of that in mind?

ADG: I've since read a passage in *Feminist Aesthetics* where Wolf says that once the image of Cassandra has a hold on you it changes your life and never lets you go. It's as if Cassandra really is an archetypal figure and once she enters your consciousness she does stay with you. So perhaps she was a kind of guidance figure in some way.

- EP: Is the seagull metaphor of central importance in *Vocations*?
- ADG: Yes. Not only for the obvious reason that at the beginning of the play Vicki is talking about flying and that she'd always had the feeling she could fly. She's talking about her work in terms of transcendence. But also I saw a production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* recently and it reminded me of how much of that play I've drawn from thematically. The content of the play that Constantine is presenting at the opening is very reminiscent of the first chapter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. It is extraordinarily close. Later on, the doctor, Dorn, talks about the World Soul when someone asks him what city he'd liked best when he was abroad, and he said Genoa, because when you go out into the life on the street there and enter into the spirit of the crowd, you really feel there could be such a thing as a World Soul. It sounds like Baudelaire! In *Vocations* Ross is talking about the Gaia hypothesis and the World Soul. There is also the Krakotoa passage in *Vocations* where Ross talks about life regenerating after the holocaust. And that is very like Constantine's play in which he says no living creature has been born for thousands of years and the moon lights her lamp in vain. The bodies of living creatures have been turned to dust and their souls have been fused into a single whole, and that is the World Spirit that Nina is representing on stage in the play. I would like to see a production of *The Seagull* that focused on all those things that are so relevant today, but nobody seems to emphasize that in a production.
- EP: Do you hope that audiences will get something like that from *The Rivers of China* — something more than intellectual or emotional experience?
- ADG: Well, spiritual too, perhaps. But I'd hope some people might get a real existential understanding of what it is like for women not to have a history.
- EP: You've said that you don't feel a play is really worth writing unless it is forcing you to do something that you almost feel you can't do. Isn't that a very exhausting demand on yourself?
- ADG: Yes, it is, but not nearly as exhausting as doing something I know I can do. I feel tired at the very thought of that. There's no excitement in it. No discovery. That's what theatre is for me, the more so as I get older — a mysterious journey.

*\*This interview with Elizabeth Perkins took place at James Cook University in Townsville on 12 July 1986. Alma de Groen visited North Queensland to conduct, with Judith Rodriguez, a Writers' Workshop sponsored by the National Book Council, and to attend the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.*