

## DAVID MYERS

### LOUIS NOWRA'S *PALU*: IN THE MOULD OF THE CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDY.

Louis Nowra, *Palu* Picador/Pan. \$10.95.

'Ripperty Kye A-hoo!' sings the diminutive, black female narrator, Palu, in a melancholy and mocking refrain that punctuates her death-cell confessions. 'Ripperty Kye A-hoo' she shouts exultantly and defiantly, remembering both Henry Lawson's satire on Australian suburban marriages and the unconventional, literary English that she learnt as a young girl on a New Guinean coffee plantation from a lonely old Australian farmer.

*Palu* is Louis Nowra's second novel. Since his award-winning novel *The Misery of Beauty* he has published numerous plays such as *Inside the Island*, *The Precious Woman*, and the *Golden Age* which was recently performed at the Nimrod theatre in Sydney. His telemovie *Displaced Persons* also won an award after its performance on ABC TV and his latest telemovie *The Lizard King* will be screened later this year.

*Palu* is an ambitious and unusual novel. Nowra has adopted the first person narrative viewpoint of a superstitious black girl from the New Guinean Highlands. He has recorded her confrontation with white imperialist civilization, her exile in Australia, her triumphant return to witness New Guinea's political independence and the presidency of her husband, Emotu, and finally her imprisonment by her husband as an alleged witch. She writes now secretly in her death cell in the jungle awaiting execution and enduring humiliation, rape, interrogation, and murder by slow poisoning.

Louis Nowra has put his anthropological research on the exotic customs of New Guinea to good use in this novel and it is amazing that on the whole he has achieved a convincing evocation of Palu's life. After all, there can't be many white novelists who have attempted to write a novel from the first person viewpoint of a soulful black woman from the third world.

Palu is diminutive in physical stature, but a titan in spirit. She is a latterday Antigone, an uncompromising heroine in the mould of classical tragedy. She mourns the moral corruption of her husband President Emotu. Emotu's dream of technological progress for his homeland (a mythical simulacrum of New Guinea) becomes a nightmare of chaos, rusting machinery and murderous tribal factionalism. Emotu himself is transformed from a puritanical fighter for democracy, progress and

justice to an evil bat demon who holds power by slaughtering his opponents in parliament. He has become a tyrant crazed by his failure to overcome his nation's barbaric primitivity. He sinks tragically into a mire of paranoia, power-lust and self-pity. Finally as the arc of his life's ambition is exhausted, he falls back, ironically, into an idolatrous worship of Christian angels. He has replaced the irrational and allegedly primitive superstitions of his own people with the equally primitive superstitions of white Europeans. He withdraws in crazed terror to his Angel Room, a room stuffed full of wooden, stone, plastic and styro-foam angels purchased in catholic devotionalary shops in Australian cities. There he tortures himself with razor blades in a pitiful plea to the unknown gods to restore his lost dream of successful government.

Palu's plight is even more tragic than that of her husband Emotu. She began as a bright adventurous girl who offended the male chauvinism of her Highland tribal elders by sacrilegiously entering the all-male room of the spirits. She is subsequently fortunate enough to be transformed into a civilized woman by love for an ageing coffee plantation owner who educates her with Dickens and Henry Lawson. She marries the future president of this mythical New Guinea who is inspired by Engels and Marx to create a new future for his ignorant, misused people. But as in Greek tragedy, the hybris of hero and heroine, their reaching like proud Prometheus for the fire of the stars that man might become independent of the old gods, brings about their tragic downfall. Palu has learnt compassion for the poor from her reading of Dickens and Henry Lawson; this alienates her from her husband's murderous tyranny. Even worse, she cannot give birth to an heir. As a result, she is accused of being a witch and cast into a remote jungle prison to rot and to die. But like her Greek classical counterpart, Antigone, who is cast by the tyrant Cleon into a cave to rot and die, a miracle of the human spirit occurs. As her flesh decays and the promise of her youthful idealism is destroyed in tragic waste, her courageous spirit rises in defiance. She never gives in. To the moment of her agonizing death, she records the truth. The truth about love and betrayal, about the human need for religion as well as for rational civilization, about the corruption of political power and about the tragic loss of a great dream, the dream of a utopian, participatory democracy. But strangely enough, as with Sophocles' Antigone, we are not downcast by Palu's defeat. We exult tragically in celebration of her fighting spirit as she affirms to the last the ideals that have been the guiding light of western civilization since Athens in the fifth century B.C. Her soul rises to be reunited in bliss with her beloved birds of paradise and she proclaims at death a Dionysian vision of the triumph of art and truth amidst the failure of all else:

'Now Emo oh my beloved my enemy my vision has conquered yours  
the emperor of darkness is dead and poor Larenkeni knows that even if

he cuts me up into a thousand pieces I will not die you have given me immortality Nambweapa'w I am going to join Mister Bacon by the side of the river and there we will live for eternity and I am so happy so happy I cannot stop from crying out for joy my cry is filling the whole of the prison and I am yelling out Ripperty Kye A-hoo! sing exultantly Ripperty Kye A-hoo! Ripperty Kye A-hoo!

Louis Nowra's novel *Palu* is as inspiring as these last words of the heroine. The aesthetes will doubtless find flaws in it; some of the scenes seem only to have been hastily blocked out rather than fully dramatised. Some of the satire on the Australian suburbs and some of the sexual psychology seem unconvincing. But this is of little consequence when one is confronted with the power of the whole work. *Palu* is a novel that needs to be read by everyone who has ever pondered on the tragic clash between the ungodly materialism of white man's civilization and the primitive religiosity and poverty of the third world.