

# Alma De Groen

## “DEVELOPMENT AND DEBATE”:

### the 18th National Playwrights’ Conference

“The rosemary needs some lime content and soil must be well-drained and on the sandy side. Likes full sun, but will grow in half sun....”

I picked up an exercise book to jot down ideas for a speech at the final forum of the 1991 Australian National Playwrights’ Conference and discovered I had packed my gardening notebook.

Since the forum was about opportunities currently existing for playwrights in Australian theatre, the rosemary note seemed apt — it occurred to me that many of us had been growing in half sun for some years, although we might have preferred full sun.

The Australian National Playwrights’ Centre, currently under the artistic direction of Kingston Anderson, is very keen that, as playwrights, we are going to be given full sun from now on: in Kingston’s words, “greater access by playwrights to development and debate.” Scripts are read and dramaturged on a year-round, Australia-wide basis. If you have a play read or workshopped at the annual Conference in Canberra and it emerges from the two weeks unready for professional production in a theatre (which has been the case with the majority of scripts over the years) yet it shows potential, or — perhaps more importantly — you as a playwright show potential, then that two weeks is not the end of the process, as it probably would have been in the past. Means are now available for dramaturges to give the writer on-going help and encouragement. Full sun, in other words: for I’m a strong believer that if you can write a good play then someone somewhere will produce it. It’s writing a good play that is hard, and this is what we have neglected to nurture in the past.

Five plays were workshopped this year, and five more were to be given rehearsed readings. Clem Gorman’s play, *Parts of the Body*, was withdrawn from its reading, which left nine — plus half a dozen short plays by students from NIDA and the VCA which were read on one evening. I missed this night, unfortunately, so I’m unable to comment on

these, except to say that from what I read and heard around the traps they seemed in many cases to be fragments of larger plays rather than genuine one-act plays — which are notoriously hard to write.

Of the nine plays workshopped or read, four were by women, and for me this was one of the most rewarding and hopeful signs of the Conference. I would consider it the year of the women, even though there were slightly fewer women playwrights than men. In Donna Abela, whose play *A Summer Reign* was workshopped, I would say we have a genuinely original voice. The play was nowhere near completion, but in the new “full-sun” context of the Playwrights’ Centre this is not a problem — dramaturgical help and an on-going process are possible and the play need not wither and die as it otherwise might have done. Donna Abela’s writing was exceptional in that it made me want to know what was coming next — every next word in fact — in a way I hadn’t experienced since Peta Murray’s workshop performance of *Wallflowering* a couple of years ago — a play which was much more complete at the time than Donna’s and which has since been very successful all around Australia.

Claire Heywood’s very clever and accomplished *Table For One* was given a reading followed by a fairly heated discussion. Claire copped a serve I’ve sometimes received for writing characters that are perceived as “unsympathetic”. I suspect “unsympathetic” means different things depending on whether you’re a male or a female playwright, and that audiences are uncomfortable with women playwrights who exhibit a sharp edge, as Claire Heywood manifestly does. I relished her utter lack of sentimentality and her attack on woolly “new age” attitudes. Some in the audience seemed to have trouble separating the strategies — and attendant defensiveness and pain — of characters negotiating the perils of modern coupledom from what was perceived (wrongly in my opinion) as shallowness.

*Window Without A View*, by Michael Cummins, was the first of the readings — always a difficult occasion and not easy for the writer. The audience, in discussion afterwards, is still finding its measure and sometimes leans over backwards to be kind and then tilts the other way into extreme frankness. Cummins’s play, which had Reg Evans as 60 year old Roy Flakemore stubbornly resisting developers, was ultimately judged as workmanlike but not saying or tackling anything new.

Terence Crawford’s *Pushin Up Daisies* was much more joyfully received. People were ready for humour by the second night and although the play had some sad and telling insights into families, and the

burdens of motherhood in particular, it was witty and galloped along with confidence and maniacal verve. Definitely a writer to watch, and the play looks like being taken up fairly rapidly for professional production.

Mark Stoyich's *Tokyo* elicited respect for an intelligent and worthwhile piece dealing with Australian/Japanese relationships and attitudes, and a commitment on the part of the actors I overheard who had been rehearsing the reading of it for night three. At three hours it was over-long, but well-received.

I dramaturged two of the workshopped plays, Lois Achimovich's *Meekatharra* and Rod Saunders' *A Moral Man*. These were at opposite poles of what one can encounter as a dramaturge at the Conference. Lois's play was virtually a complete entity, very delicately wrought, beautifully written, and best not interfered with unduly. Lois herself was clear about what she needed from us and the only rewriting required was to marry two versions of the text: the one we had was a second draft which still contained overtones of the first draft where one of the characters, a part-aboriginal station worker who is friend and father-figure to a young white girl in Perth in the 1950's, is introduced as a new character. In the second draft the other characters have known him for some years but the exposition sometimes made it sound otherwise — a hint of the earlier draft. The author had no trouble making the necessary adjustments until we were down to quibbling over a single word in the final scene.

Rod Saunders' play, on the other hand, was completely rewritten during the ten days and it sometimes felt as if we were workshopping the playwright as much as his play. It became evident to Rod that the play, written six years earlier, no longer fitted his needs in terms of what he wanted to say. A lawyer himself, he had much to say through *A Moral Man* about the legal profession, its lifestyle and what it takes to stay honest within such a world. The play got smaller in length over the ten days, but immensely larger in its breadth of attack and its current relevance. It was a brave process of self examination that Rod put himself through and he earned the respect of his actors, director and dramaturge. Watch out for a powerful contemporary work from him in the future because he has something to say and the talent and passion with which to express it.

Eric Earley in his play *Jane* also had something to say — about prostitution in Queensland — and he said it at length. Far too great a length. What started out as telling observation and engagement in the

plight of Jane, the young prostitute soon turned to audience impatience as the hours dragged on. We're told it was the author's decision not to cut, and in this he was entirely within his rights — however it was apparent that he had missed an opportunity to take advantage of the expertise he had at hand — director, dramaturge and actors — to make his play more succinct and workable.

(It occurs to me that one rarely encounters plays by female dramatists at the Conference that are over-long. They may be tedious for other reasons, but seldom because of length!)

The marathon reading of *Jane* was followed, after a short break and very late in the day, by the last workshoped play, Susie Bromfield's *All The Way* — a one hander performed by Sue Ingleton as chief cook and bottle-washer in an old folks' home. It was lacerating, funny, and moving, and from what had been a down-swing, took us up to the heights again. I had been feeling desperately jaded by this point, thinking I'd had enough of theatre for the foreseeable future, but Susie's play gave me heart and hope again.

On the whole, as I said earlier, it was the women's plays that gave me hope — for they were not predictable: there was no wearying sense of "having seen it all before". Even Lois Achimovich's *Meekatharra*, which used the form of the traditional well-made play, was not predictable within the form, and had an unexpectedness and individuality which almost overcame the limitations of the genre. I said during one of the forums, as I have elsewhere, that I think the well-made play has limitations for women playwrights. We may use it once or twice, but then it becomes a strait-jacket. Wayne Harrison, Director of the Sydney Theatre Company, revealed during the final forum that he hopes to initiate workshops for established writers that will put them in touch with the great works of the past and thus aid them in their development — in other words to examine the classics and how they work. Going back to my own preoccupation with form as it applies to women's playwrighting I asked what models would be available for women — other than the traditional male ones — and was given Aphra Behn and Clare Booth Luce in reply.

Wayne Harrison's idea is admirable and timely, but it needs to be balanced by an acknowledgment that, for women, studying the "masters" is only half the answer (if that) and we need tools and insights that aren't so readily discernible or available. We're engaged in a theatrical adventure that is different from that of the male playwrights whose explorations, from a female point of view, often result in a dead-end.

My delight in hearing the words of women carried over into the Writing for Radio workshops with the playing of parts of Alana Valentine's *The Story Of Anger Lee Bredenza* to illustrate radio writing techniques, and the sheer bliss of hearing Victoria Roberts perform her biography of Truman Capote. It did the things the Conference aims to do — it was educational and inspirational — and it left me with an interest in radio as a medium and a resolve to explore it further. I gather this was a resolve shared by the majority of those fortunate enough to have attended the radio workshops conducted by Alana Valentine and Timothy Daly.

I also came away with a clearer understanding of movement-based theatre, due to the presence of the Sydney-based Entr'acte Theatre Company who conducted workshops throughout the ten days. The workshops were not part of my schedule but the forums were for everyone and the "Writing for Performance" forum and presentation conducted by Entr'acte was especially illuminating.

Splinters Theatre Company were also illuminating: they lit fires in the courtyard outside the Arts Centre at ANU and treated us to a spectacle of giant puppets that was medieval and surreal and seemed to take us back to the burning of heretics. We warmed ourselves in the Canberra autumn night and then went away to reflect on ideas that, if not heretical, might, we hoped, be at least a little bit thought-provoking — if not world-shattering.