

ALEXANDER BUZO

THE THEATRE AS FICTION

Book publishing over the last ten years has been dominated by non-fiction "authors" — Alvin Toffler, Marshall McLuhan, Germaine Greer, R.D. Laing, Woodstein, Timothy Leary and the unspeakable Susan Brownmiller ("before a rape situation develops there is a pre-rape situation").

This has two main consequences for the fiction writer. Firstly, the quality of language has declined because people who can't write are being promoted as writers. Consider the following passage from the appalling Timothy Leary:

The emotional human being is an evolutionary drug addict continuously and recklessly shooting himself up with adrenalin and other dark ferments. The way to turn off the emotions is to turn off the senses, turn on to your body, turn on to your cellular reincarnation circus, turn on to the electric glow within and engage only in turn-on ego games.

Quite apart from the unbridled pseudery of Leary's conceptions, the way language is twisted to follow his conceits results in gibberish. The vulgarity which can create "cellular reincarnation circus" should be reserved for private conversation among initiates.

If language loses its potency through debasement by these exponents, who will understand or appreciate what a real writer is doing? Yet newspaper hacks who can barely spell "Gilbey's" are falling in judgement on the work of fiction writers — "Needs more depth in the relationships", "an affirmation of life", "genuinely witty and erotic", "funny and touching", "superficial analysis" are the creations of third rate minds. Not one of these shapeless banalities can be applied to a work of fiction. What does "an affirmation of life" mean? How can life be affirmed? It can be lived or terminated but to 'affirm' life is a monstrous absurdity. Do we take it, then, that the Maker has done a good job? Or merely that the author has pinched himself and is not dreaming?

The defenders of non-fiction will bleat that what the writer is saying is more important and "relevant" than a natty prose style. But what *are* they saying? What is a cellular reincarnation circus? Is it an affirmation or a negation of life? One person who definitely won't know is the author.

A more serious consequence of the drift of values from non-fiction into the writing and assessing of fiction is the sociological bias of much of this activity. Playwrights and novelists are praised for having a good ear for verbatim dialogue or realistically portraying a social strata or "tackling" big issues, preferably with a stiff arm. While any writer who writes truly will be able to accommodate all of these virtues, they remain incidental to the main impetus of art, which usually flows from an image.

It's a surprise to most people to learn that plays are fictional, that most plays have more in common with the much-maligned novel than they do with television documentaries, and that their function is not to give information but to interpret states of mind. Most plays start and take early shape in the playwright's brain as a result of an image, a bizarre event, or an intense feeling that has suddenly stumbled on a outlet. Very few are written as the result of a conscious decision to report on the doings of a socio-economic sub-strata, although that is often incorporated once the work is in progress.

The twentieth century mind, as educationist W.R. Niblett has pointed out, is happier with facts and theories than with feelings and personal commitment. Accordingly, none of the playwright's real motives are discussed, as statistical truth is preferred to poetic truth.

One of the most aesthetically satisfying and popular works of art, to this mentality, has been the film *ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN*. This is essentially an amoral documentary devoid of imagery and inner life. It deals with two newspaper hacks who pursue the Watergate story without any serious questioning of the morals of either the hacks or the Attorney-General whose actions set the investigation going. The artistic effort concentrates on reproducing the Washington Post offices in a film studio 3,000 miles away. It achieves the highest praise on offer — it is accurate. The same criteria are applied to works of fiction without so much as a double shuffle and the result is ludicrous. I regard the imagination as an important part of any human being, yet the qualities which appeal to the imagination are those first to be condemned or ignored in art.

To give an example from personal experience, my play *CORALIE LANSDOWNE SAYS NO* was given a favourable review in the Daily Telegraph (Sydney) under the headline "Buzo Hits Palm Beach Set". The play was praised as being an in-depth think-piece probe on the inhabitants of an affluent suburb. In fact it is nothing of the sort. It attempts to describe the central character's inner life through dialogue and imagery (e.g. the tree growing through the roof).

Why should I bother to correct the scribblings of the uncouth toadying dills employed by the capitalist press? Because the disease has spread further than the small, distasteful world of journalism. Even the Brontes aren't safe from the sociologists — they're now seen as nineteenth century campaigners for abortion on demand. No one in the audience knows what an image is. School children quote statistics in the foyer. The first question is "Who are the characters based on?" When the playwright replies "It's fiction. The play is fictional.", the expressions range from incomprehension to disgust at such a frivolous pastime.

But when I look at the effluent produced by the opponents of literary humanists in the name of relevance (I'm old enough to remember when *HAIR*, *AMERICA HURRAH*, *THE TRIAL OF THE CATONSVILLE NINE*, and *DIONYSUS IN 69* constituted the millenium) I can say with history as evidence that it has failed in its objectives and is irrelevant.

The literary, fictional plays of the 1950s and 1960s are still done, however, and display an incorrigible tendency to attract and touch people with their wit, characters and imagery. Although no one knows what an image is, they find themselves "turned on" by Scott Fitzgerald in some mystical way. Perhaps they should be left in ignorance of the process, but then someone has to say publicly that the imagination should not be neglected otherwise we'll end up like the relevant brigade — and a bigger gaggle of neurotic depersonalised pseuds I have yet to meet. To me this proves that it is necessary to explore the imagination to stay human.