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CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN DRAMA – A PUBLISHER'S VIEW

A publisher's view of drama is bound to differ from a publisher's view of any other form of literature. Drama is a performing art. It is first published in a theatre, before an audience. The person who subsequently issues the text in the form of a book is the publisher of second instance. Without the theatre, the publisher of printed drama would have no function.

That, at all events, is the view of my own publishing house, Currency Press; we invariably decline to publish any play until it has been worked upon and performed in public by a company of actors. We maintain this policy, not on aesthetic principle (though that is certainly relevant) but as a matter of commercial prudence. No matter how definitive the text may seem, prior to production, the author usually makes or accepts some alterations during the rehearsal period, or perhaps after he has seen audience response during the season. The text decided by the author following production represents his most considered and final intention. That is the text which the author will wish to publish, and which the public will expect to buy.

To some, this necessary intervention by actors and director has seemed damaging to drama as a literary form. Literary editors of newspapers, for instance, generally decline to review published plays, unless the author is Patrick White, or perhaps Ray Lawler. Yet the print runs of most plays (two, three or sometimes five thousand copies in the first instance) would substantially exceed those of all but the most successful new novels, let alone poetry collections. The solitary forms of imaginative literature receive the critical and interpretative attention due to literary forms of central importance in the expression of our culture. Plays, it is generally agreed, are also of cultural importance, witness the substantial sums of public money devoted to our theatres; but the level of critical and interpretative attention generally thought proper to them is represented by the entertainment columns in our newspapers, not the literary pages.

It must be conceded that this view of the drama is not unreasonable. A play which has been published in the theatre to great acclaim will not

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necessarily repeat the success as a published book. One of the most successful plays to appear in the Australian theatre of recent years is *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* by Steve J. Spears, a tragi-comedy about a transvestite speech teacher whose secret is discovered by a precocious twelve-year-old. In the hands of Mr Gordon Chater, directed by Mr Richard Wherrett, this one-man play attracted enormous houses right round Australia, then transferred to London, where it enjoyed a substantial season and an outstanding critical reception. Critical approval was equally marked in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. The play was published in a notably handsome, well illustrated book, together with Peter Kenna's short play *Mates*, on a similar theme, and a number of thoughtful articles by and about transvestites. It sold at exactly the same rate as an average Australian play.

Almost equal theatrical success was enjoyed from 1972 onwards by David Williamson's *The Removalists*. After a small Melbourne production it was directed by John Bell at the Nimrod Street Theatre, where it created a sensation. This essay in violence laid bare a particular nerve in Australian society. Though the play is focussed on police activities, the author rightly claimed his concern with a larger social canvas. A commercial production was mounted in Sydney, successful productions followed around Australia, and the play was respectfully received at the Royal Court Theatre in London. The text was published, surrounded by articles and comment on the streak of violence in Australian society. It sold five thousand copies in the first three months and is at present approaching sales of 40,000 — a best seller by any reasonable standards.

In point of unsavoury material, there is nothing to choose between the two plays. Spears' portrayal of deviant sex is matched by Williamson's hideously bloody violence, not to mention some of the foulest language ever heard on the Australian stage. The difference in appeal to the book-buying public is not, I think, to be explained on that score. Indeed, I believe that the 40,000 buyers of *The Removalists* are likely to have bought the play in spite of its unsavoury context rather than because of it, just as I believe that sexual prurience had little to do with the very limited literary appeal of the Spears play. The point, rather, is that *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* is a series of brilliant sketches, almost in the manner of revue sketches, directed wholly to performance. It is, in the terms of the profession, a superbly designed vehicle for a gifted performer — one capable of creating out of thin air the vivid reality of the friends and pupils of the elocution teacher who is the play's sole performer. These people do not, cannot exist on the printed page. They are created only in the theatre.

That is not, of course, to belittle Mr Spears' achievement. Rather it

is to acknowledge that, himself a talented actor, he knows precisely how to provide material for an actor to create in the theatre the comic and moving little world which has so appealed to audiences and critics in three countries. This play, in short, cannot be read; it can only be seen.

This Williamson play is no less designed for the theatre, as its success there testifies. But it does not leave so much for the actors to conjure into being from their own mimetic resources. All the characters written into the play are physically present on stage; and each is provided with language, precise and sharply defined, from which to elicit his or her own reality. Whereas Spears calls for pyrotechnics, Williamson's play can be realised by sensitive, competent acting. The performers are supported at every point by Williamson's dialogue telling them how to react, in what tone of voice, whether to turn away or move closer. The language, in short, springs from and reflects what is happening on stage; it has the rhythm and sharpness of individually realised human beings discovering and voicing what they think and feel about each other, and that, already, is literature. But because the language also points beyond itself to dramatic action, the reader finds his imagination constantly extending beyond the words on the page. It is this sense of pressure behind the words that gives dramatic literature its own distinctive excitement. Writing of this kind, must be embraced along with poetry and the novel as essential to our literary culture. Publishing houses such as Samuel French perform the essential service of making available to amateur and professional theatre companies the texts of every significant modern play. They also control performing rights, and indeed the whole Samuel French enterprise is directed to performance. But at the same time such publishing houses as Methuen and Faber and Calder and Boyars (and, in Australia, Currency) are concerned with plays which, primarily, are rewarding to read. We are concerned not only with performance but with the resources of dramatic language — with literature.

This rather long-winded introduction to my subject will have served its purpose if it has suggested in what sense a publisher of drama is looking for literature, and in what sense he is concerned with the theatre. The two are, of course, inextricably related. A good theatrical script need not be notable dramatic literature, but good dramatic literature must be theatrically viable — indeed its distinctive literary strengths, its density of implication, its capacity to enact its own meaning — all are integral to its theatrical quality. Unless it can be realised powerfully in performance, it cannot claim serious consideration as dramatic literature.

It may seem strange that I have chosen to illustrate the nature of dramatic literature by reference to David Williamson. As success has relentlessly followed success in the theatre, the tendency has been to

dismiss him as mere popular entertainment — precisely the kind of playwright, in fact, whose work might be expected to figure only in the list of a script-publishing house such as Samuel French. It is certainly true, I think, that earlier in his career there was a phase when Williamson was too prolific for his own good. The Australian theatre has never known how to develop its talents instead of simply exploiting them. Shortsighted managements and agents will always grab the latest popular actor (or writer) and place him under enormous pressure to accept every offer that comes in. Quality, inevitably, declines. The public begins to tire of yesterday's sensation and looks about for the next new talent. David Williamson had the stamina to survive the flood of commissions for film and theatre which followed the sensational success of *The Removalists* and *Don's Party*. The pressure first began to tell with *Jugglers Three*, full of marvellous but undigested material. With *What If You Died Tomorrow* and, perhaps a more recent play, *A Handful of Friends*, there is an alarming sense of a playwright reduced, spider-like, to spinning drama out of his own entrails. But in that beautifully orchestrated study of power politics in little, *The Department*, Williamson gives us writing densely dramatic, and as immediate and sharply observed as anything in *Don's Party*. It is also effortless and lucid in its development, to the point where the central character, the wheeling-dealing departmental administrator, Robbie, no longer offers simply the delight of total recognition, but rather takes on the larger-than-life dimension of an embodiment of power; somewhat as Jonson's major characters acquire the intensity of poetic emblem. This is not, of course, to claim Jonsonian stature for David Williamson; it is merely to draw attention to an unremarked development in his writing which is, I believe, carrying him well beyond the surface observation of manners which is so often taken as the limit of his achievement. As the critical assessments continue to be made of his growing body of work, I believe it will be found that David Williamson's contribution to our dramatic literature is increasing steadily in importance. In the tradition of Ray Lawler, he is developing realism with the intense focus of poetry.

His most recent work, *Travelling North*, will, I think, surprise many. Never before has he written so simply, with such economy of materials. Externally this appears in minimal stage settings and the impressionistic brevity of his scenes. But these in turn reflect an internal simplicity, a stripping down of human life to final, essential values, which is the play's theme.

Frank, in his vigorous 70s, and Frances, some 20 years younger, have found each other with all the delight of young lovers. He will take her away, at last, from her demanding and exploitative daughters and their

families in Melbourne, to an idyllic retirement on the sub-tropical northern coast. All her life she has been restless, unsatisfied, seeking in concert halls and art galleries a serenity lacking in her life. He, a stirring spirit and free-thinking Socialist who left the Communist Party after the Hungarian invasion, is determined to give her the freedom to discover life anew, while he draws the threads of his own life together and ponders its meaning.

But the retreat into serenity proves no easier now than at any time of life. No sooner are they settled than the painful and demeaning ailments of old age begin to reveal the flaws in Frank's robust constitution. As her daughters had grimly predicted, Frances has forsaken the role of grandmother and convenient baby-sitter only to become a geriatric nurse. They clamour for her return to Melbourne and a proper sense of duty. As for Frank, he has lapsed into moody silence and an obsession with medication. The desperate Frances, pulling at the oars of their fishing boat under the irritable direction of her heart patient ("looking," as she says, "like a morose Captain Ahab") reflects that if only he would talk to her, her position would be more bearable. After a particularly savage outburst she is forced to retreat down south. Their life together seems closed. Yet it is not. Frances, in love for the first time in her life, is no longer the drifting, inward-looking woman of old. She is determined not to repeat the failure of responsibility with which she charges herself towards her children. Precisely because she knows she is free to leave Frank, she knows she must return when he telephones her with a gruff apology. On his part Frank had, up to now, thought that conduct grounded in discipline, Socialist principle and a spirit of adventure, was adequate to all life's human demands, including those of the people he loved. "I've loved mankind in general," he tells Frances awkwardly, "but I've been less than generous to some of those I've been involved with in particular."

In what proves to be the last days of his life, he promises a fresh start, beginning with the marriage ceremony he has hitherto denied her. And he is as good as his word. There is new gentleness between them in the play's last moments, as he dies. Sharing a magnum of champagne on Frank's instructions with their two closest friends, Frances is asked her future plans. She says she believes she will travel north.

Williamson has written this play with great daring. It could so easily have been a sentimental and simplistic statement about love and life. It is saved, first of all, by the toughness of the characterisation. Frances candidly remarks that she is not eager to return to the only life Frank can offer. Her daughters, with their desperate marital problems, are not monsters but neglected children hopelessly seeking security.

Secondly, Williamson never ceases to be the wry comic realist; and

finally, the personal dramatic action is firmly grounded in a social and political context. These are the Vietnam years and Williamson is reminding us that the backbone of the radical movement was not the student activists but the veteran left who had lived through the '30s and the Stalinist years of disillusion to bring their radical ideals, toughened by experience, into a new era. Whitlam is about to win government as the play closes. The message Frank hands down is that political principle is all very well but behind political principle what matters is human engagement.

Such thematic counterpoint, focussed so intensely in a larger-than-life figure, already points to poetic metaphor. But deeper and more powerful than this is the metaphor of travel. To travel north, away from the life-denying world of received values, is to adventure into new experience, to discard an old self-image, to be evoked into new life. It is to accept the death of the self, without which there can be no new life. Living your death, that is travelling north.

Currency is looking forward greatly to publishing *Travelling North*. The reputation we can help build today will be building ours tomorrow. But a publisher's view of recent drama — and that is the brief I must stick to — cannot and should not be concerned only with dramatic literature of high quality.

It was not literature but audience response to a burgeoning theatre that persuaded my wife, Katharine Brisbane, then national theatre critic for the *Australian*, and myself to launch a press for the sole purpose of widening the audience for those urgent and motley communicators, the new playwrights. In our first promotional brochure, issued in 1971, we outlined a publisher's view of recent Australian drama:

Ten years ago it was almost impossible to obtain a professional production for an Australian play; our cultural sights were set on London and New York and the Australian playwright had to succeed there before we gave him our attention. Today there is an audience that no longer demands or cares that playwrights succeed overseas and Australian plays are a regular feature of the theatre in almost every capital city. Try-out houses have sprung up, devoted to their resident writers and for the first time Australia has an expanding group of young, developing playwrights, exploring the society we are creating, asking who we are and where we are going.

Why this sudden efflorescence? Our interests and values can no longer be identified with those of the great and powerful friends who made yesterday's world so comfortable and undemanding. We are a nation and a culture in search of an individual role in a colder, harder, more isolated world, and a new Australian awareness is in the making in our theatres.

It is because we believe in the importance of what our new drama

(and in retrospect our older drama) has to say to us today, that we have set up Currency Playtexts – to enable a wider audience to discover them, both through the bookshelf and the theatre.

If fine dramatic literature is the most lasting and important product of the theatre, it is none the less a by-product. The first and essential business of the theatre is communication; and while the infant Currency Press set out with high hopes of discovering dramatic works of literary quality, the main task it saw for itself was the creation of a wider audience for works initially performed before eager but small and uncommercial little theatre audiences. Today Currency's list comprises some 50 titles in print. Their authors range from Patrick White to names as yet unknown outside theatre workshops. Some of these works will continue to be reprinted as long as Australians care about their theatre and their literature. Some may not go into reprint after an experimental print run. But each has appeared on our list because it had something to say to an immediate audience about the life and the world we know. Each was helping to sharpen our sense of what it means to be an Australian here and now.

The sudden renewal of the Australian theatre which launched Currency Press in 1971 was, of course, one aspect of that larger, national movement which finally turned away from the Menzies era and brought to power a new, reformist government in Canberra the following year. Both in its political and literary aspects the new movement was directed towards a fresh national self-awareness. To some overseas, and to those older Australians nervous of change, the new movement seemed dangerously reminiscent of the jingoistic, xenophobic strain of Australian nationalism inherited from the '90s. Russel Braddon came hot-foot from London to beg us the moment his plane landed to return to a more sane estimate of ourselves. But of course the new national movement had none of the vicious qualities of the old nationalism. Rather, it was a liberating, if somewhat rueful recognition that it was, after all, perfectly all right to be Australian. More relevant, perhaps, to the new consciousness were the long *Meanjin* years of quietly cultivating a national and international sense of our literature. Yet, looking back now, I believe, as far as the theatre is concerned at any rate, the off-the-cuff analysis we offered in that first Currency brochure was substantially correct. The era of great and powerful friends was over. No longer could we sensibly feel that our polity, our economy or our culture were British to our bootstraps. A simplistic and relentlessly pursued Australian foreign policy, to involve United States military power deeply and permanently in our region, was ingloriously crumbling in Vietnam, and with it was evaporating that naive and whole-hearted allegiance, political and emotional, which we had transferred not long before from the British to the American raj.

If a water-shed event need be named to mark the dawning realisation that we were on our own and there was no alternative to simply being ourselves, I would nominate the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Unlike the solitary literary forms, drama responds immediately and sensitively to shifts in social awareness through the box-office and its essential rapport with the crowd. Consciously or unconsciously, the crowd had begun to ask what it meant simply to be ourselves, and throughout the country the playwrights were rising up to tell them.

The first thing it meant, obviously enough, was self-acceptance. "Whatever will the British think of us?" the press and public had asked as *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* took off for London in 1956. The play seemed to perpetuate precisely the sleazy, rough-neck image which cultivated Australians (that is, the theatre-going, British-oriented middle class) found so embarrassing. This was not a sentiment evident in the mild press interest which accompanied British or American productions of Williamson or Buzo. Overseas production has ceased to be the real aim of the Australian dramatist because the Australian theatre's metropolitan centres are at last to be found in Australia itself. There, audiences may be shocked or delighted by the mirror held up to them by our playwrights, but they hardly spare a thought for reaction overseas.

The early plays of David Williamson, for instance, were fundamentally a rip-roaring celebration of this long-delayed self-acceptance. In *Don's Party*, a middle-class audience found itself relieved of the responsibilities of British middle-class culture and recognised with delight the working class roots of their own tastes and aspirations. It was, in the best sense of the word, a provincial play, and although its enormous Australian success induced a London entrepreneur to mount a season at the Royal Court Theatre, it was inevitably and grossly misunderstood by the London critics, to whom the obvious middle class status of Don's guests was unbelievably incompatible with their language and behaviour. *Don's Party* remains, nevertheless, a landmark in the Australian theatre.

A more poetic essay in self-acceptance was Jack Hibberd's one-hander, *A Stretch of the Imagination*. An English reviewer of the published text found it incomprehensible, exactly as the English theatre critics boggled at *Don's Party*. How could anyone believe in Hibberd's hatter of One Tree Hill who drops Latin tags, reads Proust and Plato and pisses into a kero tin? And yet the strength and relish of the play lie precisely in its gathering up of Australian mythologies, from elegant Melbourne cafe society to pub rorts in Sunraysia and a round or two with Les Darcy on Mount Kosciusko. The play is, however, more requiem than celebration. "This small pink tribe of mistletoe men" is the image Monk O'Neill offers of white Australia as he makes a last, loving survey of the

land he has exploited and failed to conquer. In gratitude and penance he bequeaths it to the Aborigines as he makes ready to roll into the grave he has prepared.

Not the least part of the affectionate regard in which Melbourne Pram Factory audiences held this remarkable play sprang, I believe, from its gracious and even positive acceptance of failure. Failure, it is often remarked, has been a deeply ingrained theme in our culture since the unwilling arrival of our first settlers, and it has haunted us ever since. The conviction of success does not come easily to Australians. Appropriately, the heroism of Gallipoli, in which for so long we sought a definition of our nationhood, was a failure. Today heroism has lost credibility around the world, but in Hibberd's old battler we can find failure becoming a natural, inevitable, even friendly presence. Behind the grotesque vigour with which he picks over the relics of that doomed enterprise, his life, he shows failure transformed by calm if stoic self-acceptance. Comparison with that earlier and great study in failure, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* shows the distance travelled in a generation. The Australia of *The Doll* still believed in the possibility of tragedy, was still in touch with Gallipoli. Between Lawler and Hibberd stand the absurdist years and the towering figure of Samuel Beckett. Hibberd mentions Beckett in the preface to the published text of his play, but only to deny firmly his influence; and indeed it is true that *A Stretch of the Imagination*, despite its notable sense of the absurd, the failed and the moribund, is set apart from the European absurdist by a paradoxical sense of optimism — a sense that a phase of civilisation is coming to an end in a life-affirming acceptance of the natural powers. As Monk O'Neill crawls away to die the play breathes the relief of liberation from imposed, and stubbornly — even heroically — maintained foreign values. And if failure continues to be celebrated in theatres across the country it is because we shall never become what we truly are unless we cease striving to be what we are not. That, in the seventies, is the meaning of failure and that is why it is so often felt as finally a positive value.

I must in candour confess that this thematic commentary on some of the plays Currency has published is largely wisdom after the event. A publisher contracts new work, at least in the first place, by instinct rather than critical assessment. In Mr Peter Cummins' virtuoso performance of *A Stretch of the Imagination* we saw a loving cartoon of our national character, warts and all, being laid cheerfully to rest. But above all we saw a responsive audience, and that is always what first alerts us that something is going on. A publisher's view of drama is a communicator's view. Critical and interpretative judgment are, of course, essential publishing skills; but first of all the publisher must be convinced, not only

that someone has something to say, but also that someone wants to hear it. I have reluctantly turned down works of very acceptable quality — usually written by veterans some time ago — because I knew their time was not now. I have sometimes found room on our list for immature or uneven works which I expect to be quite quickly superseded but which strike a particular nerve here and now; which, imperfectly, hold up a mirror and help an audience to see itself a little more clearly. Despite its proven staying power I would put *The Removalists* in this category. Its strength lies in its gut-understanding of insecurity and authority in male Australian society; but it is a flawed work, especially in its portrayal of women. Williamson has since written far more even, more mature plays. Yet none, I think, has been more important than *The Removalists* in our developing self-recognition and self-assessment.

It will be pointed out, with some justice, that the distinction between the publication of immature work with something to say and journalistic running after the ephemeral and sensational may not always be very clear. Max Harris's *bête noir*, the ocker, is a case in point. Like Hibberd's Monk O'Neill, the ocker flouts the irrelevant decencies of our inherited middle class culture. His larrikin manners and dress are a declaration of independence. But may not this amount, as Harris alleges, to nothing more than a glorification of all that is brutal and anti-intellectual in our heritage? Certain commercial publicists have clearly chosen to make it so, but their sins are not to be laid at the door of David Williamson or Alex Buzo. We are called upon to recognise the failure of their youthful ideals and the sad material rewards of the present. Media beat-ups and Mr Harris notwithstanding, the brutal ocker is not a hero of the Australian theatre. On the contrary, if he appears there (as perhaps he does in Buzo's *Rooted* or Williamson's *The Removalists*), it is to be firmly and sensitively "placed" as an unrealised human creature. His failure is far removed from the liberating failure of Hibberd's old larrikin.

At this point we should glance at another example in the theatre of Australian sloughing off its past. Australian Catholicism, especially Catholic education, has given rise to some of the most impressive of our new drama, notably in the work of Peter Kenna and in Ron Blair's extraordinary one-act success, *The Christian Brothers*. Blair's rueful recollection of an unimaginative and authoritarian era of education has proved immediately recognisable to Catholics and non-Catholics of his generation. But the distinctive moral pressures and guilt engendered by such a system in a religious context give the play a special impact for Catholics. From the moment that the Christian Brother enters intoning Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* one knows that nothing creative can happen in this class room, where rigorous cramming backed up by the strap is the sole pedagogic

method. Nor is anything better to be hoped of the religious instruction relentlessly offered on the same terms. The school-room jokes with which the play is packed have a lot to do with its popularity but its power springs from Blair's sensitive revelation of a faithful, sad and limited human being behind the strap-wielding martinet. He and his audience part on terms of mutual forgiveness. A damaging past has been understood and exorcised in a spirit of liberation not unlike that of Monk O'Neill's parting.

The fruits of religion inculcated by fear are also the subject of Peter Kenna's trilogy *The Cassidy Album*, of which the first play, *A Hard God*, must rank as one of the most powerful plays written in this country. Throughout the three plays we trace the career of the developing creative writer, Joe Cassidy, as he struggles to liberate himself from the oppressive past and realise his potential as a playwright. At the end of the trilogy, I am not sure that this god who "rains down his mercies like thunderbolts" has been exorcised. It appears to be an endless battle for the creative spirit in Australia; but that is a theme to which we must return later.

If, as we have seen, the new Australian drama, especially in its earlier phase, has been so often concerned with liberation, with burying the past, where is it leading? What new vision is superseding the old? We are not, I think, by nature a visionary people. Neither our colonial origins nor the foundation of the Commonwealth signalled that western civilisation was trying again. The new vision will have a hard birth, and many, like Mr Harris, will see only the destruction of the old. However, surveying recent developments in the theatre and the way our publication list seems to be developing, I find certain signs which may point the way ahead.

First, behind the present crisis, I find a strengthening sense of continuity in our theatre. It was to counter the monotonous catch-cry accompanying every new critical success, "At last the Australian theatre has been born," that I decided to demonstrate the existence of a flourishing earlier Australian drama by launching the National Theatre Series, covering the century 1840—1940. These plays had for the most part not been previously published; there had been no recent revivals to bring them to the public notice; we did not expect them to sell at all well. However, while sales were at first very small, they have now grown to equal, by and large, many of our more recent titles. There is reason to hope that the haphazard, on-again-off-again development of the theatre in this country may at last be coming to an end; that new developments will grow from a sense of permanence and strength, from an understanding of past achievement, instead of from our customary timidity.

A further sign pointing the way, perhaps, to renewal, is a strongly marked dialectic in our recent drama pitting the creative individual against an oppressive society. Figures of authority — religious, political,

administrative, ranging from Blair's harsh pedagogue to the fearful Simmo of Buzo's *Rooted*, or, most nakedly, the characters in Dorothy Hewett's *Chapel Perilous* described simply as "authority figures," or finally, I suppose, Kenna's hard god himself — all testify to a profound Australian conviction that people are not to be trusted. Again and again our dramatists have been hammering home to Australian audiences the message that we are over-governed; that our society is preoccupied with authority, all too often exercised irresponsibly; that true and creative human relationships cannot be based on the exercise of authority; that a society grounded in hierarchic domination is hostile to the creative spirit. If, in all this, one sees again the rejection of a dead hand, one also sees behind it the will to affirm human creativity. Despite everything, Joe Cassidy is determined to go on writing.

The pervasive sense of oppression reflected in so much of our recent drama is referred back to Alexander Buzo, in that imperfect but important and neglected play, *Macquarie*, to our convict beginnings. Australia was founded by crims and screws — by those who exist to be administered, and those who exist to administer. Today it is populated by those who exist to be told whether they can march in the streets, and those who exist to tell them. Nothing much has changed. The system is embodied in Buzo's grotesque portrait of Samuel Marsden, flogging parson and self-seeking entrepreneur, in whom ecclesiastical, economic and political powers meet. It may be that, as Professor Manning Clark has charged, the portrait is historically inaccurate; but the model of divinely ordained administrative right, working in the interests of commerce and caring nothing for the un-free population at large, is persuasively familiar. Equally and sadly familiar is the figure of Macquarie, the would-be reforming administrator, who is not only brought to heel by the entrenched interests represented by Marsden, but whose increasingly arrogant response is finally the public manner of the machine liberal who no longer hopes or believes anything: "I was just trying to get on with the bloody job." Audience sympathy throughout is overwhelmingly on the side of the humane, reformist governor, while Marsden appears not to have a single redeeming feature, apart perhaps from a certain sardonic humour. Yet behind this apparently black-and-white confrontation is the necessary transformation of a convict settlement to a prosperous, free enterprise colony. Macquarie has a vision of New South Wales as a humanely run prison — one where human beings are treated with respect, and where the aim is rehabilitation, but none the less a prison. Marsden believes in freedom, primarily freedom to build his own commercial empire, to extort work, to exploit. It is the freedom of the jungle; but none the less, a kind of freedom. Perhaps even a kind of growing point? For Buzo it is at

best a grudging concession while his real interest lies in the failure of the liberal vision.

For a broader development of the theme of the creative empire builder we may turn to Williamson's *The Department*, with its portrait of Robbie, the organisation man. This time the view is sympathetic, though heavily qualified with irony. At the end of a lengthy staff meeting (which occupies the whole play) the staff members have been played off against each other or flattered or threatened into the decisions Robbie needs to advance or consolidate the position of the department in the organisation, and he is left alone at last, surveying with quiet satisfaction his little empire. It may not be much of a vision, but at least we have seen an exercise of energy, dexterity and judgment to make in this sterile administrator's world, something in which a man can take a modest pride.

For a true celebration of the administrative machine one must go to Alex Buzo. In *the Front Room Boys*, an early work, he is studying office routines with the fascinated eye of an artist and articulating the language of office memos with full-throated ease. But it is in the character of the hapless Bentley in *Rooted* that his mastery of the office mentality and lingo achieves its finest effect. Under pressure, Bentley has only the dehumanised language of the civil functionary to communicate with his world, even with his wife. Everybody seems to find him practically invisible. One by one his possessions, his home unit, his wife are taken from him by the gang of acquaintances whose charmed circle he can never manage to enter. Not that the members of that circle have any monopoly on human warmth. On the contrary, they are wholly preoccupied by possessions, jobs, status, as they circulate about the mysterious figure of the all-powerful Simmo, the charismatic, never-seen leader of the group and the play's centre of social and economic power. This icily witty account of young Australian materialism with, and so often in Buzo's work, a haunting undercurrent of deprivation, remains one of his major achievements. When for a moment the play halts its chatter for Bentley to attempt to describe the lyrical peace of a solitary walk among the sunny rock-pools of the beach, the unaccustomed language has the resonance of a *cri de coeur*. Deep below the surface something survives which might have developed into a creative human being.

Our theatre's major witness to the struggling creative spirit in a hostile society is Dorothy Hewett. In *The Chapel Perilous* young Sally Banner, determined to "walk naked through the world," open to every experience life has to offer, soon finds that she generates hostility wherever she goes. The challenge is too much for those who protect themselves behind a decent reticence and expect others to do likewise. Figures of authority — the headmistress of her old school and the chaplain, mother

and father figures, all who claim spiritual or temporal allegiance — preside over her progress to a scandalous but famous old age in which, ironically, she herself becomes an emblem of spiritual authority. The way of the poet is made hard at every turn; at every turn she encounters personal failure. Yet out of that failure are born the passionate songs and poems that light up the play. Sally Banner, constantly sloughing off the old in search of a new and truer self, following no final vision yet making each step of the way an act of creation — is she perhaps our best indication of the way ahead? Is it illusory, even self-defeating to look for goals in our developing drama, while that developing drama itself is testimony that we are growing in understanding of ourselves and of our world? And what goal could or should there be beyond that?

In conclusion, however, I will hazard one further observation — that we appear to have passed through a necessary period of inward looking in which we had to learn to recognise and accept ourselves. There are now signs, I think, that we are beginning to look outwards, to take our place in a wider world. At the beginning of the current revival in our theatre (our *Look Back in Anger*, as it were) stands Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed*, a one-act encounter between a middle-aged Australian of the old breed and a young Pakistani student. It was a momentous meeting. For the first time we were seeing a Pakistani, not through the eyes of Shaftesbury Avenue or Broadway, but as Sydney has been seeing him, going his self-effacing way, ever since the inauguration of the Colombo Plan. Our theatre was reflecting a sense of the region in which we live and in which our future lies. The brutal violence in which the play ends states with uncomfortable precision the reality behind the diplomatic fiction of our international relations, and the desperate need of Norm and Ahmed to understand each other a great deal better.

With the rise in economic importance of the ASEAN nations and the established fact of our economic dependence on Japan as our major trading partner, it would seem obvious that the enormous cultural gap dividing us must be bridged. Mutual understanding has already become not a cultural luxury but a political necessity. As a publisher whose income is heavily dependent on the educational market, I am constantly looking for and expecting to find new plays introducing South-East Asia in our theatre. For that reason alone, quite apart from the pleasure it gave me to publish a major work by John Romeril, I knew Currency had to publish *The Floating World*. In this nightmare recall of Japanese prison camps against the background of today's prosperous Japan, bastion of Asian capitalism, Romeril parallels commercial with military invasion and bids us consider our position. Some have found his play xenophobic, others may find it ideologically offensive; but its importance as the first serious

attempt in our theatre to place Australia in its geo-political context must be obvious to anyone with a thought for the future. Currency treated the play as a major publication. We surrounded the text with historical documentation on the Yellow Peril, an essay on the contradictions in Australian nationalism by Alan Ashbolt, extensive excerpts from the Official History of Australia in the Second World War, and substantial background notes, as well as our usual account of the play in the theatre. It is a good book but it has sold slowly. It is, I think, still a little ahead of its time but I have no doubt that its time will come.

In a series of newspaper articles on Australian cities, published some years ago, the distinguished English journalist John Morris pointed out the cultural implications of Australia's geography. He went on to envisage an entrepot culture, interpreting South-East Asia and the West to each other. He could imagine, he said, no more honourable destiny for this country. I can imagine no more exciting or honourable future for our theatre.

