

FOOTY IN BERLIN — DAVID WILLIAMSON'S *THE CLUB* —
FIRST GERMAN PERFORMANCE

David Williamson, the Melbourne playwright, has written a play about Australian football. It has been staged at the Schlosspark theatre in Berlin. I have been asked how this is possible, how our mystical game and sacred argot could possibly be grasped by foreigners?

The answer is really very simple. Firstly, Williamson's play is not about Australia, nor even about Australian football. As German commentators have remarked, it is international, a play about capitalism and football, about manipulation behind the scenes, about the free-market trade in players. Football and capitalism are almost everywhere.

Secondly, our beloved Ocker vulgarisms, our Strine, this verbal union-card and huddling-agent of what is self-consciously lonely, inferior, and resentful in the national corpus, simply serves in Williamson's drama as a semiotic device; it signals a character's relative place in the scheme of things. As such, it can be replaced with no trouble at all. All nations have their foul-mouthed, cynical manipulators. The type of speech is important in locating character, but, for dramatic purposes, as in Williamson's play, the particular national version is incidental. Football and its attendant scandals are as international as a porno film; and the dubbing is merely auxiliary to the action. It should hardly need adding too, that the older nations particularly, have resources of language every bit as colourful as those of Australia. Certainly, in the Schlosspark version, the language was adequate for a highly effective performance.

Furthermore, *The Club* is what the Germans call a "kolportage" drama; which is not to say that it is "Kitsch", quite. But it does imply a big distance from "high" drama, and it also implies that its subject matter and range of interests have much in common with those of the boulevard press; which is not to say that the play need not be well constructed and very good of its kind. Indeed, a combination of good construction and trivial or popular matter, as in the innumerable examples of the *pièce-bien-faite* have long proved successful in Australia and elsewhere.

The Schlosspark performance was staged by Ernst Seiltgen, normally the director of the Ingolstadt city theatre in Bavaria, as guest-director. The performance was of seemingly effortless virtuosity. Each of the six roles enacted is a ghastly delight. One is taken in initially by the presentation of characters who in the course of events are revealed as utterly fraudulent. Sympathies roused in the beginning are demolished, and the football world

behind the scenes is shown to be a cynical and pitiless struggle for power, in which the vast crowds of spectators are reduced to a "pack of mugs" who still believe in the idealistic mouthings of club-room cynics. The senior man of the club, played by Carl Raddatz, oozes fruity sermons on the club's traditions, on team-spirit and fair-play. He comes to be shown almost incidentally as an oily, nauseous con-merchant. A touch of clownishness, of would-be human levity, only adds to his impression of unctuous evil.

The club is going through a difficult period. A series of defeats necessitates overhaul. Great sums of money are at stake. Heads must roll. Behind a facade of lying waffle about sporting ideals, the three arch-conspirators, the trainer, the manager, the president, meet in the club-room. Like in any market-dependent business operation, dud performers have to be dumped and new investments made. Certain limelight-loving idiots who kick themselves and the ball around have got to be kicked out and replaced. But first on the list are the trainer and president themselves. The knives are out. Repeated pious self-reference to one's sterling contributions to the club help not at all. No one is listening, only the audience.

It is the manager who emerges as the victor, donning his jacket after the fray, in a gentlemanly, even elegant way. His is the main part, played by Rainer Pigulla; a very cool, seemingly tried and true lover of the sport, an experienced man whose restrained words of concern engender confidence in his devotion to the club. A quite erroneous impression, as it turns out. His restraint, even icy, is his asset; along with a sure knowledge of his fellow man. He cons his partners and the public. The president of the club, played by Peter Neusser, is a pumped-up bag of wind who still manages to give the impression of being inflated, although the wind now has been taken out of him. The trainer is played by Friedrich Siemers, as a strong man and weakling, all in one. He seems never to have grasped that the waffle could have any real basis at all. The captain of the team, like a highly-priced gold-mine that secretly has no reserves, is a trembling wreck behind his still buoyant public image.

The one almost engaging character is the star-player purchased by the club at huge cost. His heart is not really in the business; played by Michael Tregor, he affects not to like all that mucky running around on the field out there.

Each of these repellent types stays in the mind. Nevertheless, one leaves the theatre, very pleased with a play and direction which has put them so compellingly into action.