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MARIGOLDS OR MANGROVES:
SETTINGS FOR NORTH QUEENSLAND DRAMA

My first drama visit to North Queensland was in 1966. I came as a member of the Young Elizabethan Players presenting abridged versions of *Twelfth Night* and *Julius Caesar*, mostly to school audiences in old picture theatres and church halls. There were few Civic Centre theatres then. We had rehearsed in Sydney, then spent six months touring most of Queensland.

Over Christmas 1966 I came back again, getting as far as Cooktown. Outside Cooktown I was astonished to discover mudskippers, which helped me some years later in writing the scene where Joseph Banks discovered the very same creatures. That was for my 1970 radio series on Captain Cook. Also that Christmas of '66 I plodded among the mangroves and waited (in vain, fortunately) to see a crocodile at a creek entrance. I didn't know that nine years later the feeling would start to crystallise at Thursday Island into a one-act play, *The Mangrove Man*.

What is the essence of the Tropics, which attracts some people, and is repulsive to others? When I wrote the first scene of my play *Melba* I had to try to express the loathing which the young Nellie Armstrong felt for the riverside cane farms where she lived as a young wife at Marian, outside Mackay. But when I visited Paris where she studied to be an opera star, I felt a great nostalgia for the lush warmth of the Tropics, and I wondered if she had felt it too? She never returned to Mackay.

Before I first went to Thursday Island I read Somerset Maugham's story of French Joe, which is set there. Did he know why he had left the steamer at that strange jetty? He didn't stay long, but when I was there someone showed me a Wongai (wild plum) tree and said, "Somerset Maugham sat under that." Later I went out to York Island and heard the story of the real Yankee Ned, who I suppose is the original of French Joe.

Ages ago, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders captured the essence of the North in their rich oral literature of dance, song and legendary story. The collectors and translators have enabled the rest of us to have enrichment through this literature. I remember how stunned I was when I first read Margaret Lawrie's collection of the *Tales of the Torres Strait*, and then its fuller volume, both published by the University of Queensland Press, and illustrated by Islander artists. Later I was fortunate to hear some of these stories orally from the Islanders themselves.

For many years our non-indigenous artists and writers gave us only very fragmentary and tentative images of life in Northern Australia. Now, in the paintings of Ray Crooke and the prose of Xavier Herbert, we have rich, total responses that blaze through without the filters of hesitation or apology. We wait for equivalent expressions in poetry and drama.

Our leading poets, such as Judith Wright, have of course been much more than regional poets. But, in the sense that response to a certain environmental core is at the heart of the creation of all poetry, none of our leading poets so far have found that environmental core in the North. Likewise with our leading dramatists. When will the pattern change?

All I can say is that I see certain obstacles which will need to be removed (by erosion or dynamite) before the equivalents of our Lawlers and our Williamsons will emerge north of the Tropic.

These obstacles concern not only the determination and experience of dramatists, but also the expectations of audiences and the dispositions of directors and actors.

There is still an expectation in our audiences' minds that the fit and proper framework for live drama is a three-wall box setting, preferably of a decorative upper-middle-class style, wherein witty, sophisticated persons will indulge in deft conversation and slick behaviour. Now, while there is no denying that many good plays have their genesis in such settings, there is cause for regret that the success of such plays has exerted such a stranglehold on audiences' expectations. This is not the place to summarise the gory history of the various vehicles of frenzied defiance of stage convention. In my opinion, the rebellious forms of "kitchen sink," cruelty, absurdity, etc., have got bogged down in their own excesses and have failed to free theatre from its old cosy conformity.

It's not much use declaring "Naturalism is dead" (as I have heard proclaimed at Playlab meetings) when Naturalistic drama is still the most successful form on both amateur and professional stages. I don't think there is anything inherently wrong with Naturalism in the theatre. The objection is partly to Naturalism's claim to rule by divine right and, more importantly, to the selection of one limited shade of Naturalism as the dominant one in the dramatic spectrum. After all, this constricting three-quarter box of rosy-tinted rooms, which audiences expect to see whenever a curtain opens, is hardly a fitting framework for a race of people who love to be outdoors, who prefer action to conversation and who, if they do talk at home, prefer to yarn at ease on the steps of the verandah.

The established rituals for getting a play performed do not work in favour of a play which is action-oriented and whose setting is rough or casual. The selection readers, however dedicated and sincere they almost

certainly will be, will be biased in favour of those plays where people behave *as people in plays usually do*. They will see great possibilities in scenes in drawings rooms or lounges or hotel rooms, where people can drink whiskey and soda. Scenes in panel-vans or at street-corners or against a background of ant-nests may be regarded as problematical or impractical or just plain crazy or — even worse — as suitable only for “film or TV.” Why? Is it that scenic artists are incapable of representing panel-vans or ant-nests? Or is it that we have forgotten that a modern audience is quite *capable of imagining* such things as long as the author has done his job and the actors do theirs with conviction?

Then, if you get your play accepted, it will probably be for a *rehearsed reading*. I’m not suggesting that such readings can’t be very helpful. They certainly have proved so to me, and I’m very grateful to actors and directors who have worked so hard at doing ingenious things with scripts in their hands. But the writer must be aware of the danger of finally coming up with a script that reads well but doesn’t play well. I’m thinking too that a play coming from North Queensland (and evocative of that environment) is likely to be one where the action and setting will be more pungent than one coming from the suburbs or the ivory towers of Sydney.

If you do get your play to the BIG workshop in Canberra (where I have been only as an observer) it will, most probably, be placed in the hands of urban, sophisticated, however sensitive, actors and directors whose own restricted life-styles will bend them to see anything casual as dramatically sagging, and anything rough as an Ocker affectation. Sometimes too, no matter how sincere they are in trying to serve the playwright and the play, they are influenced by their own professional need to present a smart product to the other actors, directors and observers who see the outcome of the workshopping. I dream of the day when a basaltic Northern playwright, possessed of the determination of a Xavier Herbert, arrives at the “Playwrights’ Conference” in Canberra.

There, in my view, are some of the obstacles. I am sure that erosion is already starting to reduce them and, in company with many, I am hopeful that the day of the dynamite isn’t too far away.