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TOO REAL OR NOT TO REEL — A DECADE OF DIRECTIONS IN AUSTRALIAN DRAMA 1969 — 1978

Rather than attempt yet another resumé of developments in Australian drama since the Douglas Stewart verse plays of the 1940s, or the burst of energy marked by Ray Lawler's realistic *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1955, I shall concentrate on aspects of Australian stage drama of the last ten years. This is not an exhaustive survey but a commentary using a rather simple division of our stage plays into four categories: domestic plays, historical plays, abstract plays or fables, and entertainments. At the same time I want to draw attention to the debate in which some of our playwrights are presently engaged, as to the relative merits of realistic or naturalistic plays on the one hand, and of anti-naturalistic, impressionistic, surrealist plays on the other. It is often useful and necessary to distinguish between the terms realism and naturalism, but as Alex Buzo is the only one of our playwrights who does so explicitly, I shall here use the terms interchangeably.

The debate between realism and anti-realism is an old one, even in Australia. The playwright, poet and novelist, Ray Mathew, wrote about Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* in 1958:

These Australian plays are safely at home in the "realistic" theatre that began for England in the nineteenth century and is dying now all over the western world. The work of Shaw, Brecht, Williams, Anouilh, Beckett, is the beginning of a renaissance in the western theatre; our playwright Lawler, England's Osborne, America's Inge, belong to a dying convention. The Australian playwrights, then despite their setting and their contemporary properties, are period products — the nineteenth century theatre fashion. They pretend to show humanity in a home with the fourth wall conveniently removed and the actors more or less unaware of the existence of an audience. They use a small number of characters and they go to some trouble to provide reasonable realistic excuses for each character's entrance, exit or delay. Their action passes for real life and their dialogue for observed reality. They have straight plot

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lines and each play has a violent second-act climax and third-act sag that builds up to conclude with either a bang of sorts or a whimper out of sorts.¹

Mathew gives a clear definition of the *methods* and conventions of realism, and this should immediately suggest the different methods and wider conventions open to non-realistic plays. He does not, however, emphasize that the *material* of nineteenth century realism is human psychology.

It should also be noted that the weaknesses that can occur in realistic dramatic method can also occur in plays where the structure and devices are impressionistic and fantastic. A collage of scenes in different styles, strobe lighting, slides, dance routines and acrobatics from the actors will not prevent an act sagging as badly as it can under tea-cup chatter or whiskey-and-soda analysis of human psychology, backed up by technicolour sunsets and storm noises off-stage.

There are, perhaps, certain dramatic intentions for which naturalism or realism is not the best method, and some of our playwrights are complaining that in spite of the present dramatic activity, Australian theatre lacks some important intentions. We have had many and various domestic plays over the last decade, plenty of history plays in varied formats, and a variety of entertainments like Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola* (1969), and *The Hills Family Show* (1977), but we are rather short on the abstract play or fable. These are plays like *Herr Biedermann and the Fire-Raisers* by the German playwright Max Frisch, or plays whose theme is metaphysical, like *The Misunderstanding* by Albert Camus, *Macbett* by Eugene Ionesco or *The Condemned of Altona* by Jean-Paul Sartre. The Camus and Sartre plays are good examples because while they have recognisable plots and require realistic sets and acting, their theme is the existential view of life held by their authors.

Naturalist forms and techniques then do not prevent the dramatic exploration of philosophical worlds. An abstract play does not have to have an abstract format. It is true, however, that we have much psychological drama but very little drama of thought. And by "drama of thought" is not meant problem plays or plays in support of causes.

Perhaps Australians do not take easily to abstract thinking and do not see how it can be presented visually and dramatically on stage. But Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers*, a fairly simple excursion into abstract thinking, has been seen here recently by thousands, and Steve Berkoff's adaptation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, a much tougher metaphysical play which has been seen by hundreds, must have given us some confidence that it can be done and will be accepted by Australian audiences.

Abstract thinking on a wider scale is only developed when people

are faced with overwhelming situations where the usual modes of practical, technical, economic, patriotic and religious thinking prove useless. Unlike Europe, Australia has never had to face such a situation. The other ranges of ideas have always been more or less adequate to meet our problems: we have never had a civil war, an enemy invasion and occupation, we have never collectively, from the richest to the poorest, suffered a total national disaster. At present our philosophies are all borrowed. Perhaps the closest we come to an indigenous metaphysics is in the philosophic confrontation of our isolation, vast spaces, sparse population and culture. This has been expressed in some of our poetry and novels, but the nearest thing to a dramatic treatment of it in the last ten years has been Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination*. It has been touched on too, in earlier plays like Thomas Keneally's *Halloran's Little Boat*, Bill Reed's *Burke's Company* and Rodney Milgate's *A Refined Look at Existence*.

We do not need a national disaster to provide the stimulus for more general thinking about human life, and those playwrights like Hibberd and Louis Nowra who in recent months have called for less naturalistic and psychologically based plays are indicating a valuable line of development for our drama. As Nowra said recently, a naturalistic play comforts its audience and confirms what they already know about life. He added:

Art should not confirm or duplicate; it must rephrase and recast. Plays should pull the carpet from under the audience's feet and make them see the world differently so that they can perceive things anew or question their own reality.²

As a matter of fact art never does simply duplicate life, no matter how realistic it is, but Nowra is asking for plays that show aspects of human existence beyond those available to psychological interpretation. His own very good play *Inner Voices* (1977) attempts to do this.

The impatience felt at the appearance of too many psychological and sociological plays is sometimes complicated by the demand for different methods and techniques in staging and performance. Realism, as described by Mathew, is basically the method of Shakespeare. It was developed further about a hundred years ago to give expression to our more organised understanding of human psychology, and it is perhaps especially suitable for plays dealing with the emotional and social relationships between people. As much European drama shows, it can also be used to dramatize wider view of existence. Less realistic methods like fantasy, impressionism, surrealism, stylized dialogue, and more physical or less physical action on stage, will not by themselves extend the context of drama.

Some playwrights complain that Australian audiences are wedded to realistic methods. It may be necessary here to develop our own

appropriately Australian non-realistic styles to impress on us from the beginning of the evening that the play is not about the psychology of Stevo, Maggie and Big Roo, but about their metaphysical existence: that not their place in society but their place in the universe is the subject of the play.

Some of our playwrights are also concerned that if they do write about Stevo's place in the universe, instead of writing about his place in the Catholic Church or the Collingwood football team, they will be accused of being high-brow or non-Australian. That there can be first rate low-brow plays about metaphysical existence is demonstrated by the scripts of Spike Milligan, John Antrobus and Joe Orton, and these playwrights have carefully embedded their metaphysical situations in English society. Perhaps we could adapt from Japanese or other Asian drama, and even from aboriginal corroboree forms, some modes of representation that will be both popular and abstract. To date, the music-hall conventions and rituals have been used most often to present abstract or mythic themes, and useful as they were at first, there may be some audience resistance to too much of them.

Turning back to 1969 we find the realism and non-realism debate implicit in four plays of that year. John Romeril's *Chicago, Chicago* and *I Don't Know Who to Feel Sorry For* and Alex Buzo's *The Front Room Boys*, none of which is completely realistic in technique or concentrates on human psychology, make a strong contrast with Hal Porter's *Eden House*, first performed at St Martin's theatre in Melbourne, in March 1969.

Eden House is a good example of a three-act psychological play, and its genre is indicated in the script itself, as the behaviour of characters is likened to roles played by Cary Grant, Marlene Dietrich, Gertrude Lawrence, Bette Davis, Judith Anderson, Margaret Rutherford, Orson Welles and Boris Karloff. The names of playwrights are sprinkled throughout the script, and they also suggest its genre: Strindberg, Shaw, Chekhov, J.M. Barrie, O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham and Edward Albee. The central figure is fifty-year-old Maxine Charlesworth, described as "an intelligent, articulate, intense, striking, and vital extrovert" ex-actress. By marrying a wealthy alcoholic, afflicted with pederasty which he makes no attempt to conceal, she keeps him out of the clutches of the law and after his death inherits Eden House, a beautiful late-Victorian mansion, set in a five-acre garden, in a once-fashionable Melbourne bayside suburb. Maxine's son Abel is drowned in the bay at the age of twelve, and she is devoted to Eden House for its beauty and for the values and way of life it represents, and because she believes the garden is still inhabited by Abel and his playmates.

The action centres on Maxine's resistance to her stepson's attempts

to persuade her to sell the site to the Peterson-Armstrong company who want to erect a supermarket complex. Apart from opening and closing with a brief dream sequence in which we hear the voices of Abel and his friends in the sunlit garden, the play is wholly realistic in every detail. Lighting is used to suggest and emphasize the dramatic lines and it would cost a fortune in insurance to set the stage adequately. Eden House is an important character in the play and the properties could not be skimped or poorly designed. It is a good, solid, actors' play, with eight juicy parts, the dialogue is sound, rich stage stuff. Maxine ends the first act with this confrontation of her sister-in-law.

You were glad to have (your brother) married again because it solved your problems, because I took over your fear and burdens. Don't pretend *now* that you've forgotten what that man was. I'm not talking about what went on under this roof, but about what could have gone on outside, the years of protecting him from himself and scandal and the law, the watching and trailing and covering-up that had to be done when he was at his worst . . . Those constitutionals along the Esplanade, those prowlings through the public gardens and the amusement park — an old man skidding about after school-girls, trying to lure little children into the bushes with sweets. And not even surreptitiously, almost openly, like someone without a proper mind, and outraged because one always appeared — oh, accidentally — in time. Decadent. Dangerous. Soul-destroying for the one who had to trail and track and arrive in time. I acted my way through the whole perilous business. I protected, I didn't give up and run away, I didn't divorce; I paid and paid and paid. I paid so much that I even earned his gratitude! (*She has become quieter and quieter*) I know how prostitutes feel.

Helen: (for once, violent) You're a bad woman, a bad woman — immoral.

Maxine: As you say, as you say. Then these are my immoral earnings, and I'm not going to lose them. I didn't marry that silly vile old man — I married Eden House.

Curtain

Beside *Eden House*, the plays of Romeril and Buzo show the distance that separated the Australian Performing Group and the Off-Off-Broadway developments of the Carlton La Mama theatre from the establishment theatre represented by St Martin's Lane. *The Front Room Boys* by Buzo is set in twelve scenes corresponding to twelve calendar months, emphasizing the repetitious mechanical cycles of industrial employment. Buzo said the play was an attempt "to capture the rhythms and tensions

of modern big-city living" and "to explore the tribal rituals and ceremonies of today's equivalent of primitive society." He added that the play attempted "to prove what Sir Herbert Read has called the problem of our age — 'Why people without personal convictions of any kind allow themselves to suffer for indefinite or undefined causes, drifting like shoals of fish into invisible nets. The problem is mass suffering, mute and absurd!'"⁴

That it is not only Australian audiences who concentrate on seeing the particular, instead of the universal idea behind a play, is evident from the comment of a reviewer in the English paper *The Guardian*, reviewing a London performance of *The Front Room Boys* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1971. The play, Buzo said, was meant to dramatize the meta-physical state of man suffering in mass, silent and apparently futile: a statement about the philosophic absurdity of human existence made by the English philosopher Sir Herbert Read. But *The Guardian* reviewer called it "a pretty bleak picture of the antipodean preoccupation with status and self-advancement."⁵ The reviewer obviously was happy not to identify the situation in the play with the English or with the universal states of man.

Buzo's plays in general have been misunderstood as specific psychological studies of Australian men and women, rather than seen as partly that, but also as attempts to show his own attitude towards the wider state of human existence. Not to recognise this and express it in production and action has resulted often in inadequate presentation of other of his plays written in the last ten years: *Tom* (1972), *Coralie Lansdowne Says No* (1974), *Martello Towers* (1976), and *Makassar Reef* (1977).

These last four plays are in format domestic plays, dealing apparently with relationships among professional class Australians. But each also departs at certain points from strict naturalism, and this is done specifically, it seems to me, so that the playwright can indicate the play's existence in another dimension. The dialogue is often so witty that we overlook the fact that it is more than clever psychological communication. Apart from obvious effective symbolism, like the tree around which Coralie Lansdowne's borrowed house is trendily built, there are more-than-real, that is surrealist devices, integrated into the plays as indicators that we should not take the action too literally. *The Roy Murphy Show*, first produced in 1971, has a sufficiently impossible format to let even the slowest of us see that Roy Murphy's collapse is not only psychological but also part of his fate as man in an absurd universe.

John Romeril is staunchly anti-capitalist and is so sincere in his belief as to persist in seeing playwriting as a collective group activity. He

admits this is very difficult:

Consensus creativity, to call it that, can be a nightmare. The point is that when it works it's better than anything else. Much much better, largely because theatre is in the end a collectivised medium, the work of many people, not one.⁶

I don't know how many of Romeril's published playscripts have been written by democratic collaboration. Apart from *Chicago, Chicago*, a political satire of twenty scenes, apparently influenced in form by the work of the American dramatist Jean-Claude Van Itallie, Romeril's published plays of the last ten years include *I Don't Know Who to Feel Sorry For* (1969), *Bastardy* (1972), *The Floating World* (1974), and a musical, *Mickey's Moomba* (1978). *Bastardy* is realistic in form and is essentially a domestic play of social concern about poverty and racism, although the "domestic" setting is a warehouse full of stolen merchandise inhabited by a white female prostitute. She incites her male companion to beat up the part-aboriginal man who comes to Melbourne to identify himself as her son. It is a strong, straight, realistic play.

I Don't Know Who to Feel Sorry For, set in the young working-class of Melbourne, is also a domestic play, but it departs at times from realistic technique and convention and, although Romeril's socialist concern might deny this, the title does in fact reinforce our bafflement in attempting to identify the source of the social malaise that lies at the heart of the play. A sincere socialist, like a sincere Christian, cannot admit an absurdist view of man's existence: both must see the roots of misery and destruction to lie in man, and it must be in man's power to eradicate them. But to my mind, *I Don't Know Who to Feel Sorry For*, in itself an entertaining stage play, actually goes beyond social criticism to imply that the causes of human distress lie outside man's control.

The Floating World (1974), a very good play indeed, concerns the attempt by an ordinary Australian who survived a Japanese prison-camp to cope with the emotional and intellectual problem of accompanying his wife on a Women's Weekly Cherry Blossom cruise to Japan. The loose structure of the play sets Les Harding's crisis in the context of Japanese business men flying in with VIP treatment to buy up tracts of Australian land, flash-backs to the death of his mates in the prison-camp, and the sordid, mindless, madhouse entertainments on board ship. The play is not a crude sociological, political or ideological attack, but a Brechtian presentation of a plain, middle-aged man, ill-equipped by education, endowment or environment to rationalize or philosophize his way through this dilemma. He is carried from the ship insane. Properly presented, with the dynamic sharpness and aloofness that Brecht requires, with irony constantly undercutting the pathos and the bawdy, an audience

could hardly fail to see that *The Floating World* represents precisely that. The problem faced by Les Harding is a present historical dilemma for Australians, but its implications transcend the present moment.

The year 1971 saw two completely different plays by David Williamson who has continued since then to provide the Australian stage with a steady flow of more than competent domestic plays. *The Removalists* (1971) is the only well-known Williamson play set outside the Australian professional middle-class, and Williamson insists that it is less a social play about police brutality than a psychological examination of a conjunction of the limitations in three ordinary Australians that results in one of them being battered to death.⁷

In spite of complaints about the simple linear development and lack of structure and the repetitive effect of the colloquialisms, *Don's Party* (1971), *What If You Died Tomorrow* (1973), *The Department* (1974), *A Handful of Friends* (1976) and *The Club* (1977) are demonstrably good stage drama. They are well founded in recognisable situations, interesting in themselves as studies in human relationships, and are treated with sufficient awareness of their general implications to provide reflection. Williamson's naturalistic plays may disappoint those looking for more abstract Australian drama and indications that we sometimes give thought to our metaphysical status, but Williamson has explained and justified his work adequately enough:

Naturalism will always be with us because it works and people want it and respond to it. They want to have tales told to them which are particular to their own time and place, their own ways. They want to recognise people they know.

I'm going to keep on doing it my way. The role of story-teller is crucial to me, and I feel I'm fortunate to be a story-teller. I have the concept of the artist developing in view over his lifetime in a community. It's an important role to play, and I'm going to keep working.⁸

That Williamson's plays do transcend Australian types and social mores is demonstrated by the Berlin production early this year of *The Club*, which Noel Macainsh reports the German audience enjoyed as an exposé of power struggle and manipulation possible in any human enterprise. Macainsh says:

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.⁹

Williamson's latest play, not yet produced, is called *Travelling North*, but as the northern rivers district of New South Wales apparently

denotes the north to a Melburnian like Williamson, it appears that North Queensland will have to wait a little longer before it is immortalized in a play by a leading Australian dramatist.

This brings me to pass over a few years to mention Ray Lawler's two plays, *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times* which were produced in 1976 to form a trilogy with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Whenever my students and I discuss the exit of Barney and Roo from the Melbourne house and Olive, as the ill-fated seventeenth summer ends, we have wondered what really would happen: does the action suggest that Olive will surrender her romantic dream of eagles flying down out of the sun, idealistic or immature as it may be, and marry Roo? Will the Barney and Roo mateship survive their moment of truth and sustain their advancing years better than marriage? We've meditated a play set in Townsville, with Olive and Roo spending a scoop in the Pools to stay at the Strand Travelodge, where Barney is head barman, and living happily with two former girl-friends running a poultry farm at the Black River.

It was disappointing, in fact, when Lawler decided to write about the years preceding the seventeenth summer. The situation in *The Doll* was so well handled that all its past history was implicit there, and Lawler's treatment of the roots of the affair yielded no surprises and added very little depth, although some of the social background of the period from 1937 to 1955 was intrinsically interesting.

Kid Stakes and *Other Times* introduce Nancy, whose defection to the life of conservative marriage counterpoints the romantic wanderjahre of Olive, Roo and Barney before the seventeenth summer begins. The appearance of Nancy in the earlier years reinforces this perspective. The trilogy enacts the steady drain on the resources and morale in Emma Leech's Carlton house that leads to the bankruptcy of *The Doll* ending. The new plays spell out the significance of lines in *The Doll* like Emma's speech to Roo in Act Three:

This is what I call interestin'. The lot of yez squabbling at last 'stead of all that playin' around went on other times. Only thing I'm sorry for is Nancy aint here. She knew which way the wind was blowin', that one.

Roo: (slowly) Nancy got married.

Emma: Nancy got out while the going was good, that's what Nancy did.¹⁰

It cannot be said that Lawler's Doll trilogy is unnecessary, any more than Arnold Wesker's trilogy about his English Jewish family was unnecessary, but what people like Jack Hibberd are saying, I think, is that it has appeared too late to be seen as something dramatically exciting.

Ray Lawler gave an excellent defence of the trilogy in an interview in 1976, and he forestalled objections like mine:

You may say there is very little information one couldn't discover through just a detailed analysis of *The Doll* but to me a play is more concerned with character than mere information. It's what happens to people that interests me, and in a way the trilogy will present a picture of an Australia that has gone — and that also concerns me.¹¹

The Doll Trilogy may be valuable as an historical study of Australian character in the mid-twentieth century, and it contains three well-crafted plays, which is in itself an achievement. Yet Lawler's own surprise at the climate of contemporary Australian theatre perhaps indicates that realistic plays of character are not now entirely adequate to our needs. In the same interview he said:

I'm reading a lot of Australian plays by many young playwrights. I find the established men like Buzo and Williamson are interesting but as far as I'm concerned they need no help from me. I'm finding there is a great bitterness which I feel is a pity. I don't think it was in the Australian character before. In all the Australian wisecracks there was always a relish and appreciation of life, but now there's a bitterness and resentment. It's something to do with modern times I suppose — although I don't see why it should be because in 1937, for example, when I've set *Kid Stakes*, we'd just come out of a depression . . . and people had to work much harder, life was tougher but generally people were much happier than they are now.

The bitterness that Lawler observes in the plays of younger writers can partly be explained by our present economic and intellectual climate: this generation is better educated and economically more secure and the old basic goals have been achieved. Bitterness is the admission that the usual practical, technical, economic, patriotic and religious ways of thinking do not account for all the problems of man's conscious life. The time is ripe for the development of an Australian drama of thought.

Naturalistic or realistic plays are not in themselves dramatically limited. The major plays of Peter Kenna, written in the last ten years, deal with problems in human relationships in social and Christian environments, and in spite of what seems like rather academic complaints about structure, *A Hard God* (1973) has that superb stage-worthiness that justifies realism at its best. There is not a soggy line in the whole play, and several lines touch depths of human bewilderment that all the absurdist plays of Europe could not better. Martin's comic despair in the face of his concept of God: "We just have to stumble on blindly with his mercy raining down on us like thunderbolts;" and Aggie's realization of absurd

cruelty when the doctor sat her down on a sofa in the hospital corridor to tell her that Dan has cancer: "I didn't wait to find out any more. Telling me a thing like that in a hospital corridor on an ordinary sofa. I just got up and walked away from him."¹² The two plays that follow *A Hard God* to make Kenna's *Cassidy Album* are *A Furtive Love* and *An Eager Hope*, tracing the career of Aggie's son, Joe. They were produced in 1978 but have not yet appeared in print.

Whatever may be the inadequacies of naturalism as a mode of Australian stage drama, the playwrights who use it in basically domestic plays are now accomplished craftsmen with something in their minds to exercise their craftsmanship on. In this tradition are Paul Sherman's *Melba* (1974), which brings alive both the character of Melba and the social period of her career, Barry Oakley's *Bedfellows* (1975), Anne Brooksbank and Bob Ellis's *Down Under* (1975), and the earlier prison plays of Jim McNeil, like *How Does Your Garden Grow* (1974), Alma de Groen's *Going Home* (1976), and perhaps the most authoritative of all this group, though not necessarily theatrically the best, Patrick White's *Big Toys* (1977), which is also not the best of his present dramatic writing. Among the considerable number of domestic plays are some which introduce non-realistic devices in basically realistic stage-work, as, for example, the effect of the wind that tears at Mag's and Ritchie's lofty harbour-side apartment in *Big Toys*. It is a real wind, but its impact intentionally goes beyond its natural effect to suggest the dark void of space outside the plateglass windows. The dominant image of the play, sociologically or metaphysically interpreted, is kept before the audience throughout by the huge letters spelling out BIG TOYS profiled on the screens covering the plate-glass windows.

Most of our writers who use basically straight plots and techniques obviously do so with full awareness of other possibilities and with a sense of responsibility. Peter Kenna, who led the way in depicting the love affair between Joe and Jack in *A Hard God*, succeeded in this difficult presentation because he had his creative finger on the pulse of Australian theatrical sophistication and proceeded with tact as well as determination. Kenna said recently:

I believe the very pace of plays and the making of climaxes in them should be a reflection of the audience's pace, should be pitched to the degree of emotion it allows itself to reveal in real life and that the artists involved in creating and interpreting our drama should pursue their studies of human nature on our streets and in our houses and not simply follow the fashionable conventions of what is regarded as reality elsewhere.¹³

Australian drama needs Fabian progressives like Kenna as much as it

needs more radical innovators like Dorothy Hewett and Reg Livermore, to name only two writers who are using vaudeville and Broadway formats. After an early realistic play *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, written in 1965, Dorothy Hewett's avowed purpose was to encourage flamboyant theatricality in stage drama. I link her with Livermore because her plays of this decade like *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), *Roses and Bon-Bons for Dolly* (1972), *The Tatty Hollow Story* (1974), and *Pandora's Cross* (1978), I see as essentially historical plays recreating the mood and spirit of aspects of Australian show business and private life. They are stage entertainments presenting a social and theatre history of three or four Australian decades, focussed on the efforts of the female psyche towards expression and liberation. This is done on a mythic as well as a personal scale, and the two seem closely linked, even in the West Australian rock opera *Catspaw* (1974) which brings on stage Australian women like Mary Gilmore, Nellie Melba, Daisy Bates, and the Yorkshire aviatrix, Amy Johnson.¹⁴ While the exaggeration of the female figures does give them mythic proportions, it undercuts their effectiveness as representatives of the feminine social plight. To make them sufficiently self-centred to represent dominant females, Hewett has made them so obtuse to anything but their own concerns that they appear as monsters rather than as epitomes of the female life-force. It is the attempt to present sympathetically unpleasantly self-centred figures, rather than extravagance of design and vagueness of direction, that make the plays just miss their artistic mark.

There is nothing inartistic in representing women as monsters, but it asks too much of flamboyant art to make the same monsters sympathetic.

One excellent Brisbane production of *The Chapel Perilous* in 1972 succeeded in showing Sally Banner as an Everywoman figure because the actress underplayed the role with subtlety and intelligence. Parts extravagantly written probably need balancing by subtle, rather than theatrical playing, if the stage is to achieve all the effects that the playwright seems to want. The early *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home* succeeds with dominant realism in showing the forces that foster and drain the energy of Australian women. Perhaps the American critic Harriet Kriegel was right in fearing that impressionistic plays "mythicized women out of proportion". She added: "It may be that only a 'realistic' drama can treat women as people."¹⁵ In *The Beautiful Mrs Portland* (1976) Dorothy Hewett did return to the realism of Hal Porter's *Eden House* to dramatize the life-story of a Melbourne woman living in the early years of this century.

Alma de Groen's short piece, *The Joss Adam's Show* (1970) is realistic but fluid in presentation and makes an effective fable of women

reacting to overwhelming emotional pressure. Jennifer Compton's *Crossfire* (1975) shows simultaneously two Australian women, one in 1910 and one in 1975, working in domestic and social situations for an improved social and personal understanding of women. If the play remains at documentary level it is not because the method is realistic but because the best resources of realism are not used. As Eunice Hanger said, the best of naturalism justifies its method.¹⁶ The best allows the kind of dialogue that is inevitable because it actually *enacts* what it says, and gives those moments on stage when a human being actually *is*, before merging again in the convention of illusion:

OLIVE: I won't let you — I'll kill you first!

ROO: (lashing at her, hurting himself at the same time). Kill me, then. But there's no more flyin' down out of the sun — no more eagles . . . [Going down on one knee beside her and striking the floor with his hand] This is the dust we're in and we're gunna walk through it like everyone else for the rest of our lives!¹⁷

Pieces carefully designed to be documented theses like Jennifer Compton's *Crossfire* do not often draw on these resources of realism, although Bernard Shaw succeeds in doing so in his Bluebook plays like *Widowers' Houses* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*. *Crossfire* is to me a history play, as is Jill Shearer's *Catherine* (1976), staged as the rehearsal of a play about Catherine Crowley, transported on the convict ship "Neptune" in 1789.

Reg Livermore's *Ned Kelly* (1977), subtitled *The Electric Music Show*, might be called an entertainment pure and simple, and it was in technique very entertaining. But it also intended to make some serious representation of aspects of Ned Kelly's career — the copious programme notes and supplementary leaflet emphasized this. At this level it was disappointing because Livermore's technically volatile theatre piece only repeated what Douglas Stewart's sober verse play had said thirty-five years before. The slightly socialist interpretation of Kelly's career and the denunciation of corrupt authority were simply gestured at, and came over no more forcefully than the arguments on these points carefully embedded in Stewart's play. They were there, but the show didn't do anything with them dramatically. I enjoyed Livermore's *Ned Kelly*, but it was a history play with electrical stage work, not an electric presentation of an Australian myth.

Australian playwrights have developed the technique of the dramatic monologue which peoples the stage with characters presented through the personality of one figure. There is a difference in intention between

Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* (1971) on one hand, and Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers* (1975), Steve J. Spears' *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* (1976) and Barry Oakley's *Scanlan* (1977). These latter plays are character studies within social and domestic settings where personal relationships and social pressures gradually destroy individual hope and confidence. Spears' play is a funny but moving two-act drama about a transvestite speech correctionist, and Oakley's *Scanlan* is a short satire on academics, first performed at a Melbourne conference of academics. Both end with their former fluent speakers reduced to painful stammering and babbling. Audiences respond particularly warmly to the immediacy and intimacy of the single actor, and this has led Louis Nowra to criticize them as inhibiting the expansion of Australian drama:

Implied with my style is also an interest in the scope of plays. Instead of a living room, I want space and freedom to move. The current crop of monologues, no matter how good or bad they may be, have proved to be immensely popular. I realise such plays are a boon for theatres who are very fond of their cheapness to produce, but I wonder if they're healthy for our theatre in the long run? For I see theatre... as atrophying unless it can offer something more than naturalism and plays of small scope.¹⁸

Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* deliberately prevents audience identification and intimacy by its more abstract presentation of the eighty-year-old Monk O'Neill, who soliloquizes wittily and scatologically in the stylized vernacular Hibberd developed for a number of his plays. *A Stretch of the Imagination* is not a character study of a semi-repentant old Ocker living out his days in the backblocks. Like Patrick White's novel *Voss*, it takes a man out to the desert to show his mortality. The stylized vernacular that an interviewer suggested could be called "ocker baroque,"¹⁹ and which Hibberd calls his "solipsistic baroque," is one device to frustrate the audience's natural instinct to identify with characters as real people and so miss their symbolic or more than representational significance. Melba, in Hibberd's *A Toast to Melba* (1976) and Les Darcy in *The Les Darcy Show* (1974) use the same vernacular as Monk O'Neill, which has evolved since it was used with the figures of the three young men in his first published play *White with Wire Wheels* (1967).

Jack Hibberd, supported by Louis Nowra, speaks for those playwrights who believe that the present theatrical climate in Australia "takes the ordinary much too literally and seriously,"²⁰ Nowra warns academics that what he says about his intentions as a writer should not be taken too literally or seriously either, but his quite strongly worded assertions do indicate his concern to prevent audience identification with and easy acceptance of his plays. He seems to reject late nineteenth

century realism and return to early nineteenth century romanticism when he writes – perhaps tongue-in-cheek:

Any debt I do owe (and any literary banker would be well advised at this point to keep a watch on my tongue, just in case it pops into my cheek) is to the simple but wonderful advice of Novalis: Make the familiar appear strange and the marvellous appear commonplace.²¹

It seems a little hard on an audience to expect ironic detachment if you are partly, no matter how tongue-in-cheek, pursuing the purposes of Novalis, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Audiences who try to respond as Nowra would wish to the “dark humour and irony (used) to undercut gratuitous emotion” in Nowra’s *Inner Voices*,²² will also respond to the touch of nineteenth century Man in the Iron Mask romanticism of the play. There must be something there to undercut, and we cannot prescribe the exact level emotion may reach in each member of the audience. That in itself suggests a subject for a play. The present situation calls for a cartoon showing the audience emerging from two doors in the Nimrod, one stream dripping warm tears and wet kleenex and the other hands-in-pocket with cynical smiles of ironic comprehension on their collective faces.

And so the debate goes on, from Ray Mathew’s complaint against the dying convention of realism in 1958 to Dorothy Hewett’s accepting the challenge of realism in 1976:

Discussing with Richard Wherrett of Nimrod my last play, *The Golden Oldies*, he asked me why I didn’t try a realistic play for a change. It was a form I had shied away from since my first play *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, not because I ever had the temerity to sneer at realism. I know how difficult it is to do well but I have felt that the exclusive brethren of Australian realists made it very difficult for other and different playwrights to breathe the same theatrical air. I knew what a challenge a realist play would be for me, no tricks, no razzamatazz to excite the audience and send them out reeling, only the bare bones of a plot, a Toorak house and garden in 1915, eight characters, a touch of melodrama and a tragic ending.²³

And round again to Jack Hibberd asserting in 1977 that “The great disease of Australian dramaturgy is pedestrian naturalism.”²⁴ It is a complicated debate because naturalism in its purest form hardly exists in present Australian drama and what seems to be under attack is the realism of Williamson, Kenna and Lawler. Pure fantasy and pure allegory are also rare. Hibberd and Buzo use language surrealistically – Buzo more subtly than Hibberd – and Hibberd uses other devices to persuade the audience

to look beyond the literal represented meaning in his plays. Buzo distinguishes between realism and naturalism, and sees his plays as realistic but not naturalistic:

Also, when I first started I was very influenced by the theatre of the absurd. *Rooted* is a particular example of that. In later plays the images are more integrated into the background. You don't get the same unreal juxtaposition. *Coralie Lansdowne* is chockerblock with images, but the characters respond realistically. . . . My plays are realistic, I enjoy naturalism in others, but see no point in it for myself.²⁵

Australians can now leave the theatre on Monday, comforted and confirmed in their view of reality by Williamson and Kenna, and reel out on Thursday, shaken and dis-oriented by the black humour of Nowra, and Romeril and Hibberd's Brechtian treatment of *Marvellous Melbourne*. It is important however, that audiences take some note of this debate, for it will deepen understanding and enjoyment of whatever is seen on stage if the widest expectation is held of its possibilities.

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