

## ELIZABETH PERKINS

### ON STAGE AND PAGE: DRAMA REVIEWS

Louis Nowra, *Inside the Island* and *The Precious Woman*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1981. Jack Davis, *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1982. Clem Gorman, *A Night in the Arms of Raeleen*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1983. Rob George, *Sandy Lee Live at Nui Dat*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1983. Ron Blair, *Marx*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1983. Patrick White, *Signal Driver*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1983. Patrick White, *Netherwood*. Sydney: Currency Press and Lighthouse State Theatre Company of South Australia, 1983. *Australasian Drama Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1982 and Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1983. Leslie Rees, *Hold Fast to Dreams: Fifty Years in Theatre, Radio, T.V. and Books*. Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd., 1982.

Louis Esson and his friends, struggling to initiate performances of Australian plays in Melbourne early in the century and later in the twenties with the Pioneer Players, would be gratified to see the steady stream of performed play texts which over the last ten years hold an honourable place in bookshops, and on the bookshelves of libraries and private buyers. An occasional gloomy reference to a decline in indigenous drama is expected, but no one who looks at the present scene can feel justified in predicting a recession, drought or bankruptcy in the industry of Australian playwriting. While the range and type of plays are considerable, the standard of individual plays is never less than respectable and often impressively good. Whether or not the last few years have produced a great Australian play will only be determined by a longer perspective. No one who has not seen a fair amount of work actually performed on stage can offer an opinion on the matter of excellence, because although greatness may be suspected after reading a text, the real dimensions of a play are never fully comprehended until it has had several different productions. Some plays wait for years before receiving their due recognition. Nevertheless drama, which reflects its time with a particular immediacy, almost always gets a just response within its own generation.

So it is not premature to suggest at least that Patrick White's *Big Toys*, received with great enthusiasm in 1977, has been surpassed by his *Signal Driver* and *Netherwood*, and that the flair and polish of *Big Toys* did not dim the richer, solider texture of any of his four earlier plays. *Big Toys* is not a superficial piece, but it hints at more than it achieves. Although the play's style and texture are adequate objectification of the superficial lives of the power-mongering Mag and Richie Bosanquet, style and polish cannot do justice to the unionist Terry Legge, whose struggles for integrity are seen in opposition to the others' dangerous emptiness and feeble gestures towards honesty. The dialogue seems not quite up to counterpointing the terrifying slightness of the Bosanquets' life with their danger to society and their connection with a potential nuclear devastation. Possibly, without distorting the elegance of the play, White could not do much better for Terry or for his larger theme, which are swallowed by the baroque dialogue and gestures of the play as Terry is swallowed by the furnishings of Mag's late twentieth-century bedchamber. The black wind that blows through the canyons of Sydney's high-rise architecture and sometimes shakes Mag's security, is a good stage device but is too much tamed by the attenuated action and dialogue. The wind does not seem to shake Mag's soul as the wind at the end of *A Cheery Soul* shakes poor Miss Docker.

No one can regret White's elegant painting in *Big Toys*, but other Australian playwrights can do this kind of thing just as well as he does it here. There remain areas, however, where White's achievement is still unique.

*Signal Driver* is a more exciting play and does belong to one of these areas. White returns to the world of *The Ham Funeral*, and the sense of familiarity is only the introduction to his expansion of that world in this later play. Although *Signal Driver* is "set" at a suburban tram-stop, caught between the cosmopolitan city and the circumscribed lives of suburbia, its basic metaphor is that of the theatre, of life as the playhouse of the universe. As the two Beings chant as they end the play, "On His circuit the session is endless."

The male and female Beings are expansions of the two dust-bin scavengers in *The Ham Funeral*, but their role is more clearly defined as commentators on the cosmic implications of the drama of the lives of Theo and Ivy Vokes, whose name

suggests the German "Volk" or "People". The Beings are not simply distanced, remote or dispassionate, and they do more than comment on the action. The flux and the creative complexity of existence are cunningly evoked through their ribald, earthy immersion in contemporary ideas and through the idiom from which they construct a vernacular rhetoric: "Not running, but on the run, /Not waving, but drowning . . ."

Theo and Ivy may be seen as figures of Australia's social history from the first World War, but they are also extensions of the Landlord and Landlady in *The Ham Funeral*. Theo, whose name has obvious connotations, is an extension of the spiritually introspective, austere Will Lusty, and Ivy, clinging to life with innumerable tendrils, is an extension of the sensual, fecund but frustrated Alma Lusty. Like other introspectives or contemplatives in White's writing, Theo works with his hands: "Ivy's crafty, but doesn't understand a craft . . . What it means to feel the grain under your fingers. To Ivy a chair's a chair, a table's a table. The sofa isn't ugly if the springs work. . . " Ivy is the active principle, and will suffer for it; Theo is the contemplative principle and will suffer for himself and for her. *Signal Driver* is a narrative of Australian life through the lives of two recognizable and representative figures, and is a highly theatrical, compassionate image of the strength and joy of the flawed human universe within its temporal and eternal settings.

There are times when *Signal Driver* touches on the kind of whimsy which T. S. Eliot used to bridge the distance between the realistic content of plays like *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*, and the spiritual dimensions of the plays embodied, for stage purposes, in the Chorus of *The Family Reunion* and the Guardians of *The Cocktail Party*. Patrick White's *Netherwood* invokes even stronger echoes of Eliot's *Wishwood*, the house in which *The Family Reunion* takes place. White does not face the same difficulties that made effective productions of Eliot's plays difficult in the thirties and forties, when few directors realized that he asked for no solemn marriage of realism and symbol, but a light-hearted accommodation of the two levels of meaning, an accommodation usually signalled clearly by whimsical, parodic verse rhythms or runic chants. Partly through White's own work in Australia, partly because the contemporary stage generally is not confined to the opposing extremes of naturalism and expressionist symbolism, a play may

now move fluently from one mode to another without disconcerting the audience. The mode of *Netherwood* is more consistently quasi-realistic than that of *Signal Driver*, although the realism, particularly in the final action, must of course be interpreted on several planes and not confined to literal interpretation.

In *Netherwood*, White depicts the struggle between materialism, represented by Miss Jelbart's asylum, the police force and the local farmers, and spiritual values, represented by Alice and Royce Best and their protégés at Netherwood. Into "materialism" may also be read authoritarianism, intolerance, brutality and political expediency; into "spiritual values" may also be read anarchy and incompetence, vision, compassion and imagination. There are, of course, characters who do not fall into this neat division, and Miss Jelbart and the vigorous, bullying invalid Harry Britt, in their different ways, as characters, cross and re-cross the borders of audience sympathy, and consequently the tendencies and values they represent are complex and complicated. Miss Jelbart is again an activist, like Miss Docker in *The Cheery Soul*, crying "Why do I bring out the worst in people when it's my job to help them?" She is to be distinguished from the Policewoman, who represents sheer brutality.

*Netherwood* is resonant with the concerns of White's other work, reminding some audiences, perhaps, of a novel like *Riders in the Chariot*, yet it is also topical and fresh, very much of its immediate environment, and clearly one of White's most complex stage pieces. The final shoot-out, used as a satirical stage device, is also a frightening image of today and of the tomorrow against which thinking people pray daily. The Police Sergeant ends the play, "Comical bastards, us humans. Seems like we sorter *choose* ter shoot it out . . . to find out who's the bigger dill."

The continued debate over the amount of realism or naturalism that should prevail in Australian playwriting is more cohesive than divisive in Australian dramatic theory, or it would be, if the notion of Australian dramatic theory were more than a hopeful concept. Very much to the point are Jack Hibberd's comments, in the interview published in this issue of *LiNQ*, on naturalism and non-naturalism, and the severely limited opportunities in the press and in journals for critical debate about the

interaction of stage practice and dramatic theory. Hibberd's opposition to naturalism as the dominant mode in our drama has been expressed cogently in several articles and interviews, and is founded on considered dramatic and philosophical principles. If the defenders or exponents of naturalism would take issue on the same level, there would be encouragement for deeper analysis of the present practice and direction of Australian stage writing and production.

In the Introduction to *Inside the Island* Louis Nowra warns against directing the play in any way that would shake its reality by treating as metaphors the scenes showing the soldiers' insanity after they have eaten the diseased wheat. Nowra insists that the madness is real and should not be played in "expressionist fashion". The pertinence of the playwright's wish is obvious as far as *Inside the Island* is concerned, since the play is about the insanity of power and the power of insanity as real forces on the destiny of individuals and societies. But this does not blunt the force of Hibberd's objection to the playing of Nowra's *Inner Voices* with emotional naturalism, "a sort of highly hysterical, emotional, quasi-grotesque fashion," and to the production of Nowra's *Visions* as "a sort of South American Grand Guignol." *Inside the Island*, by all reports a theatrically successful play, is also satisfying as a text. Nowra manages to tell the personal stories of a number of individual characters while also using them as representative historical figures. The events, which are highly dramatic, also represent types of Australia's historical experience: the river, with its threat of drowning, the cricket match with its formality breaking into anarchy, and the conflagration from whose ashes little change seems to emerge.

The interest of *The Precious Woman* is increased by its kinship to what are arguably two of the best plays to come from contemporary British theatre — John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* and Edward Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. In the person of the woman Su-Ling, Nowra reconstructs the figure of a Chinese Empress who took over the government and warfare of the country from her disabled husband. The treatment of Su-Ling and her maid Dai Yu is both sympathetic and dispassionate. Like the dual portraits of Lillian Dawson and her daughter Susan in *Inside the Island*, the pairing of Su-Ling and Dai Yu allows a more comprehensive study of female

resourcefulness, vulnerability and survival. *The Precious Woman* is a highly individualistic play, in no bad sense derivative, but its treatment of one of Arden's dominant themes, the importance of good government, and of Bond's recurrent theme of the clash of humanitarianism and politics, extends to certain similarities in some speeches and actions.

Rich in idea and language, sensuous and savage in many of its scenes, *The Precious Woman* is also lyric and tender at moments, and is written with splendid economy. Visually, it offers opportunities for unusually stimulating and evocative stage movement and design.

Clem Gorman's Currency double-bill, *A Night in the Arms of Raeleen* and *The Harding Women*, is prefaced by Jack Hibberd's discussion of the plays whose form he sees as "Stretching the Naturalistic Sinews". It is the form only that goes beyond realism or naturalism — terms generally used interchangeably in present Australian dramatic theory — because Gorman's plays, like his earlier *A Manual of Trench Warfare*, are psychologically exact and concerned with the kinds of motives and actions that not only affect the characters' external situation but change, often profoundly, their inner life. In *The Harding Women*, Gorman's insight into the characters' manoeuvres for power resembles Tennessee Williams' gift for this kind of portrait. Yet *The Harding Women* is markedly Australian in its remoteness from the high-tension melodrama that underlies Tennessee Williams' plays. Gorman's concern with psychological realism, his maturity of understanding and well-considered dialogue place his work in a rather special category. The plays in script impress by their almost classical timelessness rather than by absolute contemporaneity. They are in no way dated in technique or matter, and they are not likely to date. *A Night in the Arms of Raeleen* enacts a perhaps improbable reunion between four former bodgies and a widge married to one of them, but its statements are convincing, and it is a dramatically interesting study of the effects of maturity and of the failure to mature. Apart from the play's value as a piece of theatre for the stage, there is the additional interest in seeing another phase of cultural history commemorated in Australian drama.

Ron Blair's *Marx* is one of the series of autobiographical studies seen in recent years which allow fairly realistic character portraits, direction and setting, but which may also be pushed

some way towards non-realistic stylization should the director prefer. *Marx* has the incisive dialogue and intellectual energy characteristic of Blair's work, and clearly delineates its scope and intentions. This study of the young, poverty-stricken Karl Marx, struggling to grant his wife, children and mistress what time he can from his work and vision, probably does more to drive home the achievement of the philosopher than many iconographic epics. The scenes in Uncle's pawnbroker shop are nicely balanced between realism for its narrative interest, and instructive parable. First performed in 1978, the script of *Marx* is a most welcome Currency edition.

If there is such a thing as a genre of Vietnam plays, Rob George's *Sandy Lee Live at Nui Dat* is part of it, and may be compared, for example, with American plays like David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. George's study of the exploitation of the Vietnam war by many different participants and camp followers centres on the career of the Country and Western singer, Sandy Lee, the competitive drug-running of national serviceman Gordon Clarke and professional soldier Ted Howard, and the innocence of Bruce Anderson, a conscientious national serviceman. Juxtaposed are the university students, Peter and Pat; the first, for all his moral fervour, a mere exploiter of causes, the other, a sincere and troubled idealist. In less professional hands than George's the play could have become a heavy, carefully balanced thesis. Ending in violence and the suicide of the completely disoriented Bruce, the last scene is neither a cliché nor a facile way of finishing the play: with good direction and performance it would seem the inevitable outcome of what has gone before, and uncomfortably convincing. Sandy Lee's role and intervals of singing ensure that the play is never completely given over to realism, and lighten the message without allowing the audience to escape easily from the implications of the play.

The two well-designed plays by Western Australian poet Jack Davis, *Kullark* and *The Dreamers*, will, one hopes, be seen as part of a distinguished vanguard of plays by aboriginal dramatists, among which Robert Merrick's *The Cakeman* has already taken honourable place. *Kullark* tends towards the epic and pageant in scope. It moves back and forth from the contemporary kitchen of a family of aborigines and the depiction of the interaction between the first settlers in Western Australia and the Nyoongarah people: an interaction which led to con-

siderably more than decimation of the indigenous people between 1829 and 1901. Flash-back scenes deal sympathetically with the attempts by the settlers, Alice and Will, to live peaceably and co-operatively with the aborigines, and deftly indicate the varying attitudes of both blacks and whites. In the contemporary scenes, a similar complexity of factors is enacted, relying on a realistic depiction of aboriginal and white characters. A sensitive dramatic skill and great competence in dialogue construction ensure that no equally competent production could allow the play to solidify into the stiffness of a sociological treatise. As in *The Dreamers*, scenes enacting aboriginal legend and evoking the spirit of aboriginal ancestry lift the play beyond the level of realism, and inform the work with a religious, rather than a sociological significance.

*The Dreamers* shows the last days of the indomitable Worru, a role taken by the playwright in the original production in 1981. Worru's fears, and his last illness, drunkenness and death, are tragically counterpointed by scenes involving the visitation of the spirit of an ancestral Dancer and music. Worru dies in the home of his family who are in various stages of psychological assimilation to white Australian life-styles, a position which the playwright presents, to a fair degree, as positive if inevitable. The last poem, recited by Worru's niece, Dolly, a warmly-drawn portrait of the mother of the family, is in the English four-lined ballad metre. This envoi sounds oddly with the verses in freer rhythms which Davis uses elsewhere for the recitations by Worru. There is a paradox in the fact that the regular rhymed tetrameter stanza, which appears at first the simplest and most basic of verse forms, and therefore apparently appropriate for an elegy such as Dolly speaks, is in fact a highly artificial and manipulated form compared with freer rhythms and unrhymed verse. *The Dreamers* is a stage drama in a dimension so much greater than any polemical study, that the final verses could easily sustain the heightening which the freer form would permit and against which the ballad, for all its use in folk poetry, often militates. The visionary realism of both *Kullark* and *The Dreamers* is integrated with the realism of the plays' basic form, just as the racial tragedy that Davis brings home to the audience is balanced by his scrupulous fairness in estimating the position of contemporary aborigines.

Leslie Rees' biography, *Hold Fast to Dreams*, is more than the usual study of a life and times. Rees' contribution to the

cultural development of Australia embraces his free-lance work as a young graduate from the University of Western Australia immersing himself in the theatres and literary life of London and interviewing writers like George Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Casey, Jacob Epstein and Henry Handel Richardson, his years as Federal Drama editor for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and his superb collection of fact and fictional writing, including the now classical Digit Dick stories for children.

The full extent of the achievement of a man like this can not be estimated, even when all due credit is given to his inauguration of the Playwrights' Advisory Board in 1938, his promotion and maintenance of standards in play selection, which placed some early Australian radio drama among the best written in the world, his encouragement of individual playwrights and instinct for perceiving excellence, as in his backing of Douglas Stewart's first verse play, *Fire on the Snow*, in 1941, and his pioneer work in Australian theatre criticism. What cannot be estimated are those things which are accomplished by groups and colleagues only because the character and personality of people like Rees make possible a co-operative, imaginative vision and energetic execution of creative ideas.

Intimations of this kind of personal achievement reach the reader of an autobiography in spite of the writer, not because of his or her modesty or self-congratulation. Perhaps it is no more than a matter of reading between the lines, but usually, as in the case of *Hold Fast to Dreams*, it is something that emanates from the writer's attitude to life and other people. The title of Rees' book may sound a little self-consciously whimsical, but a reading of the book makes clear the aptness of the concept of grasping firmly as much as possible of one's imaginative vision. Those who work in the arts and cultural areas of society often fall into one of two categories, each invaluable but necessarily complementary: the free-ranging imaginative creators and the disciplined, creative executors. Rees seems to combine both traits, in the same way as he has promulgated the work and prospects of others while pursuing his own programme of writing.

To students of Australian drama, Rees' formidable two-volume critical history of Australian stage and radio drama, from the first settlement until the mid-seventies, will remain a basic reference and source of critical analysis for many generations. *Hold Fast to Dreams* does not spend many words on this

area of Rees' work, but it must be read by serious students as a personal supplement to the more academic study.

More importantly still, perhaps, *Hold Fast to Dreams* contributes to the present recording, through the varying accounts of many different writers, of Australia's cultural growth in the middle decades of this century. Historians of culture and sociology will find this book, apparently a warm and intimate record, of value in pursuing their own disinterested surveys. This fact bears witness to Rees' ability to discern the course and even pattern of his own activities, and to discriminate between those things which were important to him and those which had greater social significance. The book is refreshingly free of the kind of gossip which is enlivening in a trivial sense but which often causes pain or embarrassment disproportionate to its aesthetic or human interest.

Other readers have been struck by the frank and yet balanced account of Rees' childhood and his relationship with his difficult father. In the same way some woman reviewers have been wryly amused by his accounts of his relationships with women, setting aside his life-time love affair with his talented and lovely wife, Coralie. Oscar Wilde once warned men against women who tell you their age — such women will tell you anything. But what can a woman make of a man who charmingly writes: "The reason I have more women friends than men is that, apart from their natural charm, women are more concerned for me, while men are usually more concerned for themselves."

One of the most provocative aspects of Rees' book, however, is its sense of vision, not only a vision of what needed to be done in the past, but what could be done in the future. When *Hold Fast to Dreams* is read, even by someone who has little interest in the cultural value of drama and theatre, it must appear to justify every moment of time and every penny or cent that has been given to the encouragement of this area of Australia's cultural and social growth.

With the demise of *Theatre Australia* we lost the monthly round-up of reviews of all major stage productions in Australia, which alone did something to fill the gap in on-going discussion of the developments, strengths and weaknesses of Australian theatre, and which were augmented by articles, interviews and playscripts printed in the journal. *Encore Australia* stepped in as

a replacement, but is chiefly a trade and professional show-case and does not claim to perform the role of *Theatre Australia*. Recent issues of *Encore Australia* have enlarged the review section, and this is welcome, proving reason enough to renew one's subscription.

The English Department of the University of Queensland has not replaced *Theatre Australia* with the inauguration of *Australasian Drama Studies*, because the twice yearly journal lacks the immediacy and recency in review, but in other respects it has gone much further towards providing a forum for drama discussion. *Australasian Drama Studies* is a scholarly journal, but not oppressively academic, if academic must be used as a term of abuse. Edited by Richard Fotheringham, Veronica Kelly and Jeremy Ridgman, with a panel of advisory editors led by Alrene Sykes (Australia) and Terry Sturm (New Zealand), *Australasian Drama Studies* is the first journal of drama to represent Australia and New Zealand adequately at home and abroad. Yet, as its editors point out, it is not parochial.

The first issues include four studies to further the flourishing industry in nineteenth-century drama research: Eric Irvin's "William Archer: The Prophet of Ibsen at the feet of false gods", Dorothy Green's "William Forster and the drama of ideas", Paul Richardson's Garnet Walch's *Australia Felix*: a reconstruction", and Berent Lindfors' "The Hottentot Venus' and other African attractions in nineteenth-century England". The range of articles is wide, including also in the first volume pieces on Women and Theatre, Australian television, a casebook of Richard Wherrett's production of *Macbeth*, and two well-balanced articles by Richard Fotheringham and Jeremy Ridgman. Fotheringham's "Sport and Nationalism on Australian stage and screen: From *Australia Felix* to *Gallipoli*", involves the thorough research and the comprehensive view of art and society that give all his work an unusual depth and relevance. Ridgman's survey of "Images from the Empire in post-war British drama" has a similar foundation in social and political fact, and a clear discussion of the significance, in this context, of plays by Osborne, Bennett, Storey, Stoppard, Harrison, Wood, Bond, Arden, McGrath, Friel, Brenton and Edgar. The article is necessary reading towards understanding the wider context of similar plays by Australian dramatists like Nowra, Sewell and Blair.

The second issue of *Australasian Drama Studies* concentrates on popular theatre, and includes spirited articles like Michael Booth's, who writes towards a definition of popular theatre, Tom Burvill's comprehensive "The politics of the popular" and Robyn Archer's challenging view in "The politics of the musical". An interview with Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell and Neil Armfield, and the script of P. R. Stephensen's play written for the Workers' Theatre Movement, which is discussed by Craig Munro, are bonuses to this issue. The birth of a journal like *Australasian Drama Studies* has been long awaited, and everyone will wish it a long and successful life.