REJECTION

"I don't know how to handle rejection," said a Young Person once. My first thought was "Then you shouldn't be in this business." In the theatre and allied trades rejection is just part of the game. If you go for an audition and are turned down it doesn't mean you are no good. It just means you did not fit in with one particular director's ideas. I sent a copy of *The Marginal Farm* to a director at the Ensemble Theatre. He rejected it, sent it back without explanation. So I waited a little while and then sent it to another director at the same theatre. She loved it, the rest of the staff loved it, and pretty soon it was slotted in as the theatre's twenty-fifty anniversary production. It turned out to be their most successful production in years and made a profit. When my agent suggested the same play to a theatre in Brisbane they didn't even want to read it. Now should I have been depressed then elated then depressed again at all this? No. If you allow your morale to fluctuate all over the place according to whether you have been accepted or rejected then you will end up going crazy. Besides, my books sell well in Brisbane.

STATUS

If you meet with some success in the arts, make some money, and get your name on the front page, then you may start to worry about becoming conceited. There are two ways of combatting this. You can ring the ABC or the Australia council. No one on the staff there, particularly the telephonist, will have heard of you.

FILM PRODUCERS

Film producers acquire a "property", usually a book or an article or a scandal and then look for a writer to turn the property into a screenplay. It takes six months to write a screenplay, on average, and if the producer doesn't like what the writer has done, he will commission another writer and so after twelve months he may have his desired screenplay. Some producers think twelve or eighteen months is a bit long to wait for a screenplay to be ready, and so they shorten the process. I leave you to guess how.

THE NOD
Every so often something gets The Nod. The American Film Theatre got The Nod following a critics’ preview at a “classy” motel in Double Bay with round the clock chicken and champagne. The reviews were ecstatic. The result, at the State cinema, was awesome to see. During The Iceman Cometh about 75% of the audience walked out. Others writhed and whinged about the interminable, incompetent non-cinema on view. Some tried to sleep, draping themselves over two or three vacated seats or dossing down on the rugged carpet. A whole generation of theatre-goers and film-goers was lost in one hit. If nothing else, the American Film Theatre paved the way for Star Wars. In the early seventies most business and professional people went to the cinema and theatre regularly. By the eighties they had deserted both art forms except for annual visits to the latest Spielberg or Webber effort. The State was as packed in 1984 for Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom as it had been in 1975 for the Iceman Cometh. But this time no one left.

Something else that got the Nod was a telemovie called I Can’t Get Started. Television and even cinema reviewers right across the board were united about this one; it had the goods and was stylish, witty and funny into the bargain. I thought this was a little odd. Firstly, few of our critics have a sense of humour, and the only style they know is naturalism. Secondly, most of the cast—John Waters, Wendy Hughes, Heather Mitchell, Barry Quin, Andrew McFarlane, Ben Gabriel—had not previously been lionised for efforts in the field of comedy. Thirdly, the director was given a co-writing credit. This is usually a sign that all is not well—either the script was so bad it needed a directorial re-write, or a busybody director has turned a good script into an ego indulgence. Sure enough, the film was an unfunny bore, so much so that one of the critics reneged. And style? The ending was a real clincher. Heather Mitchell waits behind a door in the dark waiting for John Waters to come home. When he does she walks up behind him holding a cassette player from which the strains of I Can’t Get Started can be heard. The idea of this pretty girl waiting there in the dark cueing up a cassette, tensing the forefinger on the “play” button at every footfall, perhaps sneaking a listen to the weather forecast every now and then, perhaps wondering if this is punishment for having stolen the film, perhaps reflecting on the fate of those before her who have got The Nod... For the record, the middle class males in the story were played by John Waters, an Englishman trying to sound Australian (and failing) and Donald MacDonald, an Australian trying to sound English (and succeeding).

PROSE
After establishing a reputation as a writer of dialogue, the Young Person may feel that personal identity is being lost as the various actors and directors pull the dialogue every which way. If dialogue is the problem, then maybe prose is the answer, the Young Person may reason. The convert to prose will have to avoid Flaws in Style, however, as they can be something of a setback in the quest for identity. Sally McMillan, according to the Weekend Australian, “caught up with” the singer Leonard Cohen in New York:

He is a Peter Pan, this man. His slim-reed body encased in black and suave good looks belies his fifty years. You know he has done some wild living in his time but like a modern-day Dorian Wilde (sic) it must have all gone into the writing.

For the Young Person not conversant with turn-of-the-century literary culture, it is advisable not to refer to turn-of-the-century literary culture. Peter Pan, by J.M. Barrie, was a play about a boy who never grew up; Dorian Gray was the central character in a novel by Oscar Wilde whose portrait grew older while he retained his youth; Leonard Cohen is either a schizophrenic or a high flyer who should never look at his own work.

CORPORATE RAIDERS

I have met very few corporate raiders in the theatre, in fact none. I don't even know what a corporate raider looks like.

DISAFFECTED AUDIENCES

The Young Person who wins some fans with youthful efforts must not become too disillusioned if some of this audience later becomes disaffected. Life is hard for most people and some either can't take it or become coarsened by it or, most likely of all, both. The Young Person must be prepared for some previous admirers of his literary work to spend their middle age snorting cocaine at a brothel. Their tastes in entertainment run to images of degradation. The Young Person must not become too dismayed to see B.A.s queuing to hire video nasties. After all, someone's got to do it.

SCROONING

Most people who give interviews to the press find the finished article to be somewhat different from what they expected. Occasionally a process known as scrooning takes place. Clive James was scrooned by the Sydney Morning Herald. He gave an interview to a lady journalist, whom he told he had never been done over by a lady journalist. She did him over. Sex therapist Bettina Arndt received a classic scrooning from the (Townsville) Advertiser. During the course of an article which made much of her views on vibrators, the following appeared: “Ms Arndt said the print media always highlighted points
she did not want highlighted." If a Young Person giving an interview does not wish to be scrooned, then better not comment on the process or result of the interview. Just hope for the best.

HANDLING CELEBRITIES

I met Australia's ultimate television personality, Don Lane the day after he'd appeared on an all-star special. I saw the show and thought Lane was all right, but that Paul Hogan was unusually laboured. Lane talked about the show, and especially about how distraught Hogan was on returning to the dressing room. "He though he'd died," said Lane, "But I thought he was great, didn't you?" I agreed. I was a yes-man because Penguin wanted me to go on Lane's show and plug a book. Lane paused. "Hogan was so depressed," he said. "He thought he'd died. But I though he was sensational. Didn't you?" I agreed, very warmly. "I thought he was great," I said. There was a pause. I didn't get to go on the Don Lane Show.

MANNERS

Good manners prevail at most levels of theatre; it's the best way to get things done. I would counsel good manners for any Young Person, not just for its own sake but for the practical reason that a reputation for being "difficult" is hard to shake. And yet... and yet... Once upon a time the artistic director of a theatre company took a group of playwrights to Sandro's for dinner. All the playwrights were well behaved except for one. This exception shouted and banged the table. His bellowed philosophies of life could still be heard from the loo. When he went to the loo the artistic director spoke disparagingly about the playwright's crassness. Even Sandro, who has seen them come and go, had to ask for less volume from this table, please. Can I squeeze any suspense from this story? No, I can't. The artistic director chose the noisy one's play and had it produced in his theatre. Why? Well for one thing, some middle class people love to be shocked.

RESEARCH

The Marginal Farm was set in a CSR Field Officer's house in Fiji. When I was in Fiji I took photos of several such houses, which were all light yellow with a green trim. "Were they like that in the fifties and sixties?" I asked everyone. Yes, they hadn't changed, I was told. Old Fiji hands back in Sydney confirmed this colour scheme, so that was what I told the designer. Two weeks from opening, with the set already built, we invited Don Dunstan, who had lived in Fiji, to come and talk to the company. Don Dunstan thought the CSR people were just awful, and as for the houses they lived in, well! "I can still see, in my mind's eye, those purple and brown monstrosities," said the former South Australian premier.

GRAPHICS
Often it seems the aim of the graphics department is to make the title of your play as obscure as possible. This is especially so if the play has an oriental setting. They will have a wonderful time bending the Roman alphabet even more out of shape than usual and end up with some lettering that seems Chinese but is in fact illegible. The best thing to do is to talk to them, treat them as autonomous human beings, and ask if you can see a “rough” before they print the poster or ad.

TINNIE EAR (part 1)

Some playwrights are supposed to have a “good ear” for dialogue, particularly for colloquialisms, whereas others, those who can’t slice the junket, are said to have a “tin ear”. Most of the adjudicators in these cases, critics and managements who assess a writer’s work, are like Andrei Gromyko—they only see real people through the window of a limousine. Nevertheless, if your play doesn’t “sound right” then you are gone. It’s no use complaining that your dialogue has been drawn from life; it has to “sound right”, and opinions on this can vary wildly. The Young Person who would become a playwright learns early on that it’s an old dog for a hard road.

The peak of Australian colloquialisms is said to be “let’s crack a tinnie”, meaning “let’s have a can (of beer)”. I have never heard the expression “tinnie” in real life, except when the user was being self-consciously satirical. I asked several friends of mine, one of whom is a Queenslander, if they had ever heard the term. Like me, they were not strangers to the bar, but not one had heard “tinnie” except in unfunny amateur satire. Yet “let’s crack a tinnie” is supposed to be quintessential Australian slang. Apparently, it “sounds right”. I would have thought “Let’s have a few Cairns” would be more the go, but there you are.

Consider the reality or otherwise of the following dialogue. Freddie is from Melbourne, Brian is from Sydney.

FREDDIE: I understand, Brian, that you only recently discovered you had aboriginal blood, that you kept it secret before, but now you’re on the Aboriginal Arts Board.

BRIAN: I understand, Fred, that you fuck brown dogs.

Is that too much of a contrast? The ideological thrust countered by one in the eye? Well, it comes from real life, at an elegant dinner party given by a millionairess (as I remember it of course). “HE WON’T CHANGE A WORD”

That’s what they said about me in my early days as a playwright.
Those were the days when writers were expected to be some kind of “house-hack”. The press kept saying how fashionable it was for writers to “join the team” and not see every word they wrote as “sacrosanct”. Well I didn’t agree with this. I worked hard on my plays and I did not want to change something carefully thought out for some whim that came up in rehearsal. Of course, there were exceptions. In every play of mine there is something in the final text that came up in rehearsal. But the style evolved from the stylisation of careful observation and the chances that someone else had observed the same thing and stylised it in the same way were most unlikely. In The Roy Murphy Show, for instance, the dialogue sounds, or so people have told me, just like that in a real sports programme, as if I’d taped one and reproduced it. Well it isn’t. If you compare a transcript of a real television programme with the play you will immediately see the difference. What I did was to write down some key phrases taken from actual programmes and then orchestrate them, stylise them, into theatrical dialogue. The cliches used are carefully chosen to be both appropriate to the character and to have good sound and assonance in the context. The actor who changes dialogue like this on a whim usually comes unstuck. The names are chosen carefully, too. Who else, for instance, would you meet in the Turkish bath but Johnny Raper? Occasionally, when students and amateurs ask me if they can update the names of the sports stars in the play I agree, but in my heart I know they’re wrong. On the other hand, the biggest laugh in Big River—or one of them—comes when Evan is trying to remember the last thing Adela said to him when they broke things off years ago. Adela is not keen to pursue this subject. “Evan, not now,” she says. “That was it,” he comes back at her and the audience laughs. “Evan, not now” is the set-up line and it is Sandy Gore’s invention. I don’t like the way it looks on the page. It looks amateurish, especially with the name at the beginning of the line, and it’s not as realistic a parting shot as my original (“Go to hell”), it’s funnier, sexier, and it works. Besides, I’d do anything to please Sandy Gore.

One other incident which contributed to my apparent reputation for intransigence concerned The Case of the Counterfeit Commentator. In this vignette I was asked to change the sex of a character to fit in with the management’s contractual obligation to an actress. I made it clear to the management, in the nicest possible way, that while I was prepared to make cuts, there were cuts and cuts.

TINNIE EAR (Part 2)

Arriving at the Grafton Tennis Club early one June morning in 1985, I overheard the following dialogue:
“Ge go out last night?”
“Air. Went down the Ex-Services Club.”
“Have a good time?”
“Oh, yeah. It was a top night.”

If I had read that dialogue before leaving the city I would have said it must have been uttered by two men over thirty. Why? Firstly, “going down” somewhere is exclusively male, unlike “going down to” or, indeed, “going down on”. Males over thirty in the big cities “go down the pub” or “go down the beach”. Women tend to be more sensitive to the appearance of a preposition. Secondly, describing something as “top” is, in my experience, exclusively male and becoming slightly old-fashioned and therefore more likely to be used by an older man especially in describing a sporting event (“It was a top game”).

In a country town like Grafton, however, I discovered that these theories were inadequate. The dialogue in question was uttered by two girls in their twenties. Were they gas pumpers or old before their time? Not really. They seemed feminine enough and both had top legs. Was the dialogue a half-heard hangover from what their men might have said? Not the way they said it. They said it to the manner born without any qualms about tin ears.

HOME THOUGHTS

Is there a credibility problem with arts reports from overseas? What is it about arts journalists in France? Should the Young Person develop a sceptical outlook on these matters? This is matter for the individual conscience. “Caning at Cannes makes Bliss prize bomb,” wrote youthful Telegraph columnist Dorian Wild (sic), “The movie version of Bliss is bombing so badly at this year’s Cannes film orgy the tremors are being felt on the Richter scale.” Unfortunately for this young paragon the critics back home gave Bliss The Nod. It turned out to be a long way from a bomb.