

**Facing Reality: Idealism versus Conservatism in Australian Theatre  
and Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century.**

**PhD Dissertation**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation aims to provide an analysis of mainstream Australian playwriting at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It will argue that mainstream theatre in the 1990s and early 2000s in many ways reflects the concurrent national political developments, in particular the revision of many of the dominant ideals of previous eras, such as those of the sixties. In this dissertation, I will attempt to outline briefly some of the hallmarks of the theatre of the New Wave, and their relation to the broader social movements occurring in Australia at the time. I will trace the beginnings of disillusionment and revising of these ideals in the late seventies and early eighties. The majority of the argument will then discuss the ways in which early nineties theatre engages with and frequently rebuts these earlier ideals, just as nineties politics saw a revision of many of the ideals of the sixties in society as a whole. I will argue that in the latter nineties, mainstream playwrights begin to reverse this conservative shift, reinstating a number of the ideals of the earlier period. I will demonstrate that Australian mainstream theatre at the turn of the century is integrally related to the politics of the society of the time, and that mainstream theatre demonstrates both radical and conservative tendencies through the period under consideration.

## **Certification of Dissertation**

This is to certify that this dissertation is all my own work, and that it has not previously been submitted for any award. To my knowledge, this dissertation does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement or reference is made in the dissertation to that work.

Ben Payne 25/5/5

Signature of Principal Supervisor

Associate Professor Kate Foy PhD.

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## **Introduction**

### **Literature Review**

Studies of Australian drama written over the last thirty or forty years are somewhat symptomatic of the times in which they were written. They range from the optimistic articles of the early seventies, through the more canon-centric and increasingly disillusioned accounts written in the eighties, to the diffuse and overview-rejecting scholarship which dominates the nineties.

The genesis of recent Australian trends, both theatrically and politically, is often traced to the year 1968, a watershed year politically in many countries, and the year which saw the initial stirrings of interest in La Mama in Melbourne, the venue for many of the subsequent theatrical developments, following its inception in 1967. Articles in 1967 from Alexander Porteous and Leslie Rees (“Australian Drama: The Outlook in 1967”) on contemporary theatre, and playwright Alan Seymour’s parting shot at Australian conservatism before relocating to Britain (“The Temperament of Generations 5: To the Gutless Wonders”), reveal little critical awareness of any upsurge at the time, concentrating instead on the lack of successes in the wake of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955), *The One Day of the Year* (1960) and the plays of Patrick White (1961-64). The mood is one of pessimism, particularly compared with the cautious optimism evident in *Meanjin*’s Drama issue in 1964 (although even here, the optimism seems attributable almost entirely to White’s recent work- see Kippax, Brissenden and Heseltine for example).

The revolution in Australian theatre, and the political radicalism which accompanied it, is perhaps most clearly evident in Margaret Williams' series of essays for *Meanjin* in 1972, "Snakes and Ladders: New Australian Drama"; "Mask and Cage: Stereotype in Recent Drama"; and "Australian Drama- A Postscript: Some Comments on Recent Criticism". Williams focuses on the authors who emerged during this period through La Mama and the Nimrod in Sydney, and who became known as the "New Wave". Authors such as Jack Hibberd, David Williamson, John Romeril, Alex Buzo, Bob Ellis and Michael Boddy, and theatres such as La Mama, the Pram Factory, and the Nimrod, would come to be regarded as having redefined the Sydney and Melbourne theatre scenes in the decades to come. Williams draws out a number of common themes: the depiction of inarticulate masculinity, power relations within relationships, and a focus on social relationships. Williams also notes recurring stylistic tendencies, such as the preference for non-naturalistic forms, in particular the use of archetypal characters without the traditionally "psychological" background of "realistic" depictions. These thematic and stylistic convergences were to become recurring touchstones for the more lengthy analyses of the years to come. As I will argue in Chapter One, these elements can be largely linked to the philosophy of the emerging movements of the early seventies, and indeed, the same might be said of Williams' celebratory articles, which combine a sense of an enthusiastic grass-roots movement with a look toward a bright future filled with potential.

Alan Seymour's article "You Can Go Home Again?" (1973) provides a telling contrast to his earlier article. Seymour writes about the feeling of excitement in the air amongst theatre-makers and audiences in the early 1970s, and links this to the "new spirit" in Australian political life under Gough Whitlam, a "progressive

socialist vigour” (“You Can Go Home Again?”) under which the intelligentsia found itself being taken seriously for the first time. It is perhaps no accident, then, that it is “by the mid-1970s,” that is, the period following the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975, that “there was a distinctly post-boom feeling about theatre in Australia” (Fitzpatrick, *After the Doll* 157). Timlin notes in 1975 the Whitlam government’s increased funding of smaller theatres such as La Mama and the Nimrod at the expense of larger companies, a trend which was to reverse under subsequent governments. As early as 1976 Dorothy Hewett describes an emerging nostalgia for the early days of La Mama, the Pram Factory and the Nimrod (“Shirts, Prams and Tomato Sauce: The All-Australian Theatre”), while Katharine Brisbane writes in the same year in her section on “Australian Drama” in *The Literature of Australia* (Ed. Geoffrey Dutton) that by the time of writing many members of the Melbourne group had found themselves drawn into the commercial theatre “in spite of themselves” (279). Tom Markus (1976) took the step of blaming the increase in subsidies following the New Wave’s emergence for what he saw as an increasingly uninteresting theatre scene, although replies (published with the article) from Rodney Fisher, John Mostyn and Alex Buzo disputed this. His remarks are indicative of something of a backlash against the New Wave movement, already becoming thought of as the dominant rather than an alternative theatre force. It is evident in the theatre scene, as in society, that the revolution was to some extent over before it began, and this is reflected in the pessimistic tone of criticism.

Just as Australian society as a whole in the eighties saw the rise of the Boomers<sup>1</sup> but a dilution of their earlier rebellion, so the drama of the 1980s saw a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, “Boomers” is a term used to refer to the generation of Australians, popularly known as the Baby Boomers, the generation of Australians who came of age during the

consolidation of the impact of the New Wave, but without the enthusiasm or broad inclusiveness of the movement in its infancy. This is exemplified in the criticism of the period, with a continuing focus on the New Wave, but a narrowing focus on “canons” of authors rather than the movement as a whole, and an increasingly retrospective tone. These studies include Leslie Rees’s *Australian Drama and the 1970s: A Historical and Critical Survey* (1978), Peter Fitzpatrick’s *After the Doll* (1979), the Peter Holloway edited *Contemporary Australian Drama: Perspectives Since 1955* (1981, later expanded to include a smaller section on the 1980s), Leonard Radic’s *The State of Play: The Revolution in the Australian Theatre Since the 1960s* (1991), and Dennis Carroll’s *Australian Contemporary Drama* (1995). While each of these authors deal with slightly different time frames, all are centred around something of a canon of New Wave authors, particularly Hibberd, Romeril, Williamson, Hewett and Buzo, with a central focus on many of the issues mentioned by Williams, listed above. John McCallum in “Studying Australian Drama” (1988) provides a critical commentary on the similarities and differences in these accounts and “canons”, coming down particularly heavily on Rees as overly subjective. The predominant focus in all but the Holloway collection is on author studies, focusing on career development and themes of plays. The progression of New Wave authors into the mainstream is evident, even if certain critics are reluctant to over-generalise the effects. Perhaps more indicative of the dominance of the New Wave is the relative lack of focus on the 1980s, both in individual chapters (Dennis Carroll, for

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1960s. Use of the term in popular debate is slippery and should not be narrowly set in stone. For instance, some characters are used to represent the “Boomer” generation who technically exist outside of it. For the purposes of this dissertation the term is of more use as a conceptual lodestone than as a definite temporal marker. Readers unfamiliar with the term are referred to Hugh Mackay’s *Generations* as a useful starting point.

example, spends fifteen pages dealing with Williamson's work to 1979, and only eight pages on his plays from 1980 to 1995), and in overall structure; Holloway's section on the 80s is much smaller than that on the 1970s, and still chiefly focuses on the playwrights of the earlier period, while in Carroll's study Michael Gow and Jack Davis are the only authors dealt with who emerged during the 1980s.

As one can imagine, by the early 1990s this focus on New Wave authors could be seen as somewhat exclusionary, particularly as the New Wave had become increasingly recognised as a white, masculine movement. Just as Australian society during the late eighties and early nineties began to confront its oppression of minorities, so too Australian theatre criticism began to open up to "other" cultures. The emergence of the biannual refereed scholarly journal *Australasian Drama Studies* in the early eighties provided an important venue for critical work outside the prohibitive economy of the publication of major studies. It is perhaps no coincidence that its first issue in 1982 featured two articles on the growing women's theatre movement. These were followed by articles by Ros Horin and Claire Dobbin in *Meanjin's* special theatre issue in 1984. Aboriginal and multicultural drama in general was slower to gain critical attention, despite the success of Jack Davis during the 1980s. However, the political underpinnings of the bicentennial in 1988, heavily influenced by the Hawke government's multicultural agenda, helped to throw these "other" cultures into greater focus, and by 1993 Peter Fitzpatrick and Helen Thomson, in their article "Developments in Recent Australian Drama", devote considerable space to Aboriginal and migrant theatre.

*Australasian Drama Studies* has, for over ten years, devoted one of its two yearly issues to a "special focus" on various theatre forms, including two issues on women's theatre (1992 and 1995), one focussing on South-East Asia (1994), one on

Aboriginal theatre (perhaps surprisingly, given the continuing rise in public discussion of Aboriginal issues, not until 2000), and one on Queer Theatre (1997). The influence of postcolonial studies on the field is clear, and it is the primary focus of the major studies of theatre of the nineties. Veronica Kelly notes the increasing unfashionableness of overviews of the field in the introduction to her 1998 collection *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*, commenting that “The dramaturgical erosion of grand historical narratives, noted as a nineties characteristic, has seemingly been accompanied by diffusion of scholarly energies into more richly theorised studies of playwriting and theatrical practices. (“Old Patterns, New Energies” 10). Kelly’s collection is defined primarily by its articles’ focus on the “marginal” forms mentioned above. Among others, Helen Gilbert writes on Aboriginal theatre, Jacqueline Lo, Tony Mitchell and Joanne Tompkins on migrant theatre, Bruce Parr on Queer theatre, Paul Makeham on community theatre, Helen Thomson on women’s theatre and Peta Tait on physical theatre. The recurring focus is on the disputing of notions of “authenticity”, instead positing “hybrid” identity as a transgressive force. The disruption of naturalistic form is also a common element, again linked to a postcolonial distrust of meta-narratives. While most if not all of the articles posit some kind of political action, it frequently occurs through stylistic play and “subjective” interactions, rather than the more overt political aims (successful or otherwise) of the authors of the New Wave. As I will argue in the next section, this scholarly turn reflects the politics of the nineties not merely in its overdue acknowledgement of minority voices, but also, more problematically, in its turning away from broader-picture political analysis in favour of localised subjective rebellion, a reflection, perhaps, of the disillusionment regarding broad change and

collective action which resulted from the collapse of several communist countries at this time.

Peta Tait's study on women's theatre, *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre* (1994) follows similar themes. Tait's argument is that to avoid reinforcing patriarchal values women's theatre must take control of the production of theatre. This necessarily occludes mainstream "feminist" authors from her study. She focuses instead on avant-garde practice, in particular those works which experiment with form, arguing that realism inherently reinforces the status quo. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins' *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996) and Gilbert's *Sightlines* (1998) are similarly form-centric. The focus is on the transgressive potential in, for example, incorporation of ritual in Indigenous theatre. More recent studies include Helena Grehan's *Mapping Cultural Identity in Contemporary Australian Performance* (2001) and Marc Maufort's *Transgressive Itineraries* (2003), as well as the collection edited by Maufort, *Siting the Other* (2001). Again, the focus in these texts is on theatre (predominantly) by marginalised groups, in particular Indigenous and migrant theatre. Again, too, these studies are predominantly tightly focussed analyses of particular works in the light of their perceived transgressive potential. This transgressive potential is frequently seen as intrinsically linked to their challenging of what are perceived as oppressive mainstage realist forms (Grehan's perhaps less so in regard to form, though it retains a focus on marginality and hybridity, and deals with non-mainstream texts in tight focus)<sup>2</sup>. Again, this focus among scholars on form-centric rebellion might be seen as conforming to the growing sense of cynicism toward broad social change and inciting collective action. Rebellion through aesthetics, aimed at altering subjective

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<sup>2</sup> While there *were* publications during this period which did not conform to the postcolonial theoretical model, these predominantly did not deal with theatre in the 1990s, but rather with earlier periods.

interactions with the world, largely replaces any sense of stirring people into action or critiquing broader political landscapes with the aim of effecting change.

Further discussion of some of the potential problems with postcolonial analyses, in particular those informed by postmodernism, are covered in the next section. Worth noting here, however, in terms of existing scholarship, is the absence in the last decade of any analysis of mainstream<sup>3</sup> theatre in Australia, beyond the occasional discussion of a single play. While the attention given to theatre by marginal groups is long overdue, and welcome, it seems problematic to suggest that the recognition of other voices must preclude analyses of mainstream trends. On the contrary, the existence of discussion on both is surely a necessary measure in contextualising each.

The above-mentioned analyses' vision of rebellion as primarily form-centric necessarily excludes most mainstream theatre. However, it is arguable that the mainstream theatre alluded to as a point of opposition in these studies is more akin to early twentieth century realism than it is to contemporary mainstage realism (McAuley), which has seen, in the past few years, the production of works such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, which arguably disrupt the realism of the early modernists to a much greater extent than do, say, the works of Jack Davis or Tes Lyssiotis. While it may be argued that mainstream theatre does tend more often to privilege the realistic form, the binary must be viewed carefully.

Similarly, works discussed in this dissertation such as those by Williamson and Sewell, presented by mainstream companies, frequently disrupt the realistic form. But with these examples in mind, it is problematic to suggest that disruptions

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<sup>3</sup> See definition of this term in "Limits of the Study"



to form are *intrinsically* radical. I would cite Williamson's 1995 play *Dead White Males*, with its disruption of reality and temporality, as an example to the contrary: the play uses non-realist methods to stage a conservative political argument. A counter-argument may posit that this play's form means that it shakes assumptions, regardless of its text's politics. If so, this point remains contentious rather than (to my knowledge) "proven", in terms of any concrete evidence regarding audience perceptions, and so while arguments for form-centric rebellion as primary may be fruitful, even necessary, an exclusionary focus on this area would seem premature.

Furthermore, even if it *could* be proven that disruptions to form were the most potent form of disrupting social norms, and even if disruption to form *was* confined to the margins and absent from mainstream theatre, it would still be arguable that the absence of any analysis of text-based mainstream works is counterproductive. For surely, even if form is the central site of resistance, and even if mainstream theatre can be generalised as excluding such reform, the homogenisation of mainstream theatre as univocal would still be an eschewing of potentially revealing points of difference among the (to form-centred approaches, less radical) whole. To put it another way: I have argued against the notion that aesthetically-disruptive and aesthetically non-disruptive theatres exist in an unproblematic binary. But even if they do, the examination of textual tendencies (by which I refer to predominantly narrative and dialogue-based elements, those elements which do not aesthetically disrupt; again, a binary which is not necessarily tenable in over-simplistic terms) *within* each of these poles may still yield productive results.

This dissertation, then, takes as its starting point the question: If we suppose that mainstream (predominantly realist) theatre *can* be both radical and conservative,

what does an analysis of nineties drama suggest the tendency to be? To those who see form-centred rebellion as only one type of radicalism, hopefully this analysis will go some small way toward filling the gap in recent critical discourse regarding mainstream trends. To those who view realist, text-based drama as unable to challenge the status quo, I hope it will nevertheless provide an illuminating discussion on some of the debates within that whole.

### **Theory and Methodological Process**

Postcolonial criticism has been the dominant lens in Australian theatrical critique over the last decade, to an extent which is, if not entirely exclusive, certainly overwhelming. While not wishing to undo the valuable analyses these studies have often provided, some discussion of the potential weaknesses or absences of postcolonial theory in general may help in illuminating the need for studies from outside this field as a complementary addition.

Some scholars have critiqued postcolonialism as a movement imposed upon its subjects by academia. While this is perhaps true to some extent of much scholarship, it bears consideration particularly with regard to postcolonialism due to the latter's postmodern influence. Aijaz Ahmad writes of the argument that:

“postcoloniality” is postmodernism’s wedge to colonise literatures outside Europe and its North American offshoots—which I take the liberty to understand as saying that what used to be known as “Third World literature” gets rechristened as “postcolonial literature” when the governing theoretical framework shifts from Third World

nationalism to postmodernism. (“The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality” 276)

The danger in such a situation is that the postmodernist agenda of scholars does not always coincide with the desires of the authors they take under the postcolonial wing. While it is not necessary that scholars’ use of an author’s work coincide with that author’s aims, it does become problematic in those instances where the postmodernist agenda superimposes its ideology on its subjects to such an extent that other forms of political dissent are effectively erased, as Daniel Nugent argues occurred in recent times in Mexico. In such instances, postcolonialism must itself be aware of the danger of rewriting insurgence in terms which exclude other voices.

Christopher Norris, in his book, *The Truth About Postmodernism*, offers a critique of the postmodern theoretical turn in relation to achieving change. Norris relates recent postmodernism to the historical context of the fall of the Soviet Union and the so-called “End of Ideology” propounded by authors such as Francis Fukuyama. He notes the turn against “old-style (Marxist and Enlightenment) notions like truth, ideology or critique” (2), and draws a parallel between the theoretical turn among scholars and the revision of the ideals of traditionally left-leaning parties, claiming that postmodernists and poststructuralists were, at the time:

busily engaged in reducing all truth-claims to a species of rhetorical imposition, assimilating history into the realm of narrative (or fictive) contrivance, and rubbishing ‘enlightenment’ values and beliefs in whatever residual form. [Concepts such as ideology and false consciousness had] now been overtaken by the passage to a postmodern (‘New Times’) outlook that acknowledged the collapse of any hopes once vested in Marxism or any other such delusory ‘meta-

narrative' creeds [. . .] This realignment of theoretical positions on the left went along with a widespread tactical retreat from socialist principles among Labour Party politicians, policy-makers, and (more or less) well-disposed media and academic pundits. (3)

In other words, postmodernism accompanied a broader political turn away from former ideals. The link between the two is far from arbitrary, as Norris goes on to argue. For postmodernism, in its turn to the discursive, operates against any kind of political dissent:

one cannot begin to grasp the lived realities of class and gender oppression without using terms (like “gender” and “class”) which render that experience intelligible [. . .] if everything is ultimately constructed in discourse—truth, reality, subject-positions, class allegiances and so forth—then ex hypothesi we could only be deluded in thinking that any particular discourse (for instance, that of feminism) had a better claim to injustice or truth than the other currently on offer. (25)

Dissent is therefore left with no grounds from which to launch rebellion other than the discursive (and even then, no grounds on which to base any claim to being more valuable, or “right”, than any other discourse). Postmodernism thus works to undermine political change.

In terms of recent Australian postcolonial theatre criticism, rebellion is more likely to be anchored in form than textual discourse. However the rebellion posited remains equally based on the deconstruction of “reality” through subjective experience, rather than the positing of alternative modes of social organisation or resistance. That this aspect of postmodernism is problematic with regard to

postcolonialism, in particular with regard to the postcolonial subject involved with seeking real-world change, is acknowledged by Ato Quayson:

postcolonial theory and criticism have increasingly become riven by a contradiction: the social referents in the postcolonial world call for urgent and clear solutions, but because speaking positions in a postmodernist world are thought to be immanently contaminated by being part of a compromised world, postcolonial critics often resort to a sophisticated form of rhetoric whose main aim seems to be to rivet attention permanently on the warps and loops of discourse. (8)

In this case, there is the danger that postcolonial criticism will serve primarily to redirect more radical forms of rebellion into textual dissent (Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* 1), nullifying (consciously or not) more overt political messages and repackaging them in forms more acceptable to the status quo. E. San Juan Jr takes this line of argument further, claiming that postcolonial theory

has become an apologia for neoconservative free marketers and other reactionary social programs. Its logic of deconstructive critique led to its subsumption in a neoliberal epistemology that displaced concepts of class and nation, replacing them with questions of identity. Not the identity of the insurgent subaltern, but rather the identity of diasporic and border-crossing intellectuals removed from popular struggles and, in practice, allied with the transnational bourgeoisie of finance capital.

Postcolonial criticism is very much a product of its time, an era where belief in overhauling the social system has become increasingly seen as “unrealistic”. In terms of analyses of Australian theatre, I have no wish here to erase or invalidate the often valuable contributions of postcolonial criticism to the body of knowledge. However,

I would argue that the dominance, to such a large extent, of such criticism in the field should perhaps be balanced by analysis from alternative perspectives, so that we might avoid the danger that, as Arif Dirlik writes, “the celebration of ambivalence as a condition of tolerance also makes for a helplessness against bigotry and duplicity”. It becomes necessary, then, in terms of Australian theatre criticism, to look at the forms of dissent which may have been diverted through the focus on postcolonial postmodernism. This study hopes to achieve some small measure of progress toward this aim by examining in nineties drama notions such as class and ideology, as well as that political rebellion which, while still constituted in discursive terms (as theatrical texts), engages more directly with the political situation outside the discursive frame.

It also aims to provide an overview; again, something disdained by much postmodern and postcolonial theory. This has been linked, again, to the declining belief in the potential for, and desirability of, social change (Fox-Genovese 48). The focus on individual subjective interactions with society, rather than social groups, or “classes”, somewhat precludes a historical analysis, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes:

Proverbially, history has been understood as the collective memory of a people or society, and, in our own time, that understanding has led to the conviction we are all entitled to our own memories, which themselves are entitled to as much respect as any others. But the emphasis upon the personalisation of memory virtually erases the proper understanding of history, which implicitly requires the recognition of multiple—and frequently conflicting—individual memories. The recovery of a personal past results in autobiography or

genealogy, each of which has its intrinsic value. History, in contrast, focuses upon the interaction of individuals and groups, and this multiple focus generates its abiding political significance. (49-50)

In this dissertation, I take as a point of departure the belief that, while historical overviews are always going to be flawed, and will never represent an unproblematic, objective “reality”, there is nevertheless something to be gained by presenting broader-picture analyses to complement and to contextualise more tightly focused accounts. I aim not to present “*the* history”, but rather “*a* history” of drama in the nineties. It is my hope that, despite its biases and inevitable omissions, it may nevertheless provide a perspective which a less broad study might overlook or ignore.

### **Limits of the Study**

Obviously, despite any grand ambitions, any overview of a particular period will always be incomplete. While I have attempted to be comprehensive in my reading and, therefore, to present as accurate a picture as possible, it is necessary, in a dissertation such as this, to select certain texts for deeper analysis, lest the argument flounder through superficial engagement. As such I have had to base my decisions regarding texts for inclusion on certain criteria. I have confined myself to drama in the mainstream, by which I mean plays produced by the four state theatre companies, other annually and triennially-funded companies and, occasionally, commercial organisations. . In the interests of tracing comparisons, I have focussed first and foremost on the more “successful” playwrights; that is, those writers whose work has

spanned a decade or more and has met with considerable local and, often, overseas success. In this category I include David Williamson, Stephen Sewell, Louis Nowra, Michael Gow, Hannie Rayson and Joanna Murray-Smith as prime examples. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, the length of these playwrights' careers and their financial success would perhaps indicate that they are more consistently representative of mainstream drama fare than the work of playwrights who may have had one play produced to limited critical and audience acclaim. Secondly, the length, again, of these playwrights' mainstream careers enables a level of comparison between differing stages of their work, which would be missed with a different selection. As with any selection, though, this entailed a compromise. A separate analysis of the "less successful" authors to appear in mainstream drama would, no doubt, prove interesting and valuable itself.

It will also be noticed that I have included little discussion on Indigenous or migrant authors. The reason for this is one of necessity. An analysis such as this relies on some degree of focus, and it became evident quite early in my reading that, while there is room for comparison and parallel between these authors and the playwriting of white women and men, there are also significant contextual differences which, if I were to give them the analysis they require, would lead to lengthy excursions away from my central themes. In other words, rather than lumping these authors into a box with non-Indigenous playwrights and attempting to gloss over the differing debates, it is my belief that these playwrights are deserving of an analysis of their own. As mentioned earlier, there are numerous discussions of the work of migrant and Indigenous writers available, and while most of these are not broad historical studies, any reader seeking a more complete picture of Australian drama is advised to seek these out. Despite my reservations about the



postcolonial movement, expressed above, these studies contain a great deal of worthwhile material, and it is of some reassurance that, in terms of academic analysis, their omission from this study does not render them likely to be entirely “left out”<sup>4</sup>.

While attempting to offer an overview-of-sorts, then, this dissertation makes no pretence at offering the “whole picture”. It argues the prominence of a particular tendency in mainstream theatre which emerges from the writing of the past decades, but makes no attempt to cover *every* theme or trend which might emerge from reading these works. Space alone renders such an analysis untenable. In the interests of coherence and brevity there is little comment here on those writers, such as Nick Enright, whose work, seems to contribute little for *or* against the analysis at hand, seems to contribute little. While I have not omitted any work on the grounds of its contradiction to the argument, I make no pretence at covering all bases. The overview presented here is one of a general trend, rather than of a cohesive whole. All of which is basically to say: this study represents a starting point rather than an ending point. It is my hope that it will provide a springboard, rather than prescribing boundaries, for any future mainstream theatre analysis.

It is necessary to remark on my use of the terms “radical” and “conservative” within this dissertation. These terms, like all discourse, are contingent and rely heavily on context. In terms of my argument I utilise these terms in a framework based on the political discourse of the nineties. It should be borne in mind that the discourses of “radical” and “conservative” arguments in the plays under discussion do not

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, since the time of writing, Maryrose Casey has published a book entitled *Creating Frames*, which provides a very strong historical study of Indigenous theatre from the seventies to today, which readers looking for more information on this area of Australian theatre are advised to seek out.

necessarily conform to any easily-defined binary. However, in the interests of presenting an argument which traverses a number of texts over a significant period, it is useful to present some sort of schemata. For the purposes of this discussion, “radical” is applied primarily to texts which adhere to the notion of social change in the interests of greater equity. Notions such as affirmative action, compassion, the perception of human beings as (at least to some extent) socially constructed and changeable, a belief in the social (as opposed to individual) oppression of minorities and women, and a faith in individual reason and kindness, are all elements to which the term “radical” is applied. In contrast, “conservative” is taken to allude to a belief in the primacy if not inevitability of economic rationalist capitalism, the privileging of competition over equity, to a focus on individuals as self-made and (frequently) responsible for their own success or failure, the questioning of social justice, a scepticism toward increased rights for women and minorities (often elucidated as attacks on “political correctness”), a distrust of individual reason and compassion, and a cynical view of “human nature”. I recognise here that these definitions may not necessarily concur with the reader’s. They are presented not as a cast-iron definitions of either term, but as definitions of the terms as they will be used herein. I recognise, too, that individual texts rarely present one side of this equation as a homogenous argument, and have tried to make mention of the existence of both sides of this distinction in some texts, to varying degrees. However, I will argue that in each of the periods under consideration, and in each of the texts under consideration, one side or the other is dominant.

It is also necessary to point out that while I refer to various authors’ work “reflecting” the politics of the time, this is not intended to be taken overly literally, as a one-way flow. Rather, just as a person’s reflection can both reinforce one’s

appearance *and* help to sculpt it, at times inaccurately (in the sense that someone might imagine his or her hair parted on the opposite side, due to the mirror's influence, or the way a convex or concave mirror may distort one's own self-view), so theatrical texts can both reflect *and* sculpt a society's image of itself, in a constant two-way interchange which is capable of both reinforcing and challenging social norms. In other words, this dissertation is interested in the manner in which texts tend toward reinforcing or challenging political ideologies, rather than in establishing any strict definition of their place in any cause and effect structure.

Similarly, it is important to note that although I have chosen to follow the work of a number of authors over a period, the aim is to track the movement of ideas within their work, rather than to establish any notion of authorial intent. It is quite possible that an author may recycle conservative ideology, for instance, without intending to. For the purposes of my argument, it is irrelevant whether Williamson, for example, desired to promote conservatism when he wrote *Dead White Males*. The purpose of this dissertation is not to ascribe any motive to Williamson or any other writer, but rather to analyse the manner in which texts engage (whether by intent or not) with contemporary political tendencies. Equally, the analysis of individual plays is not intended to provide a complete or final interpretation (if that were even possible) of the texts in question. In some cases the politics discussed may be evident only in a minor section or subplot. The purpose of the textual analyses which follow is not to attempt to categorise texts (as "radical" or "conservative"), but to draw out elements of political content from within the plays in order to examine their engagement with Australian politics in the nineties as a whole. In short, the aim is to establish an argument for broad tendencies, rather than to inscribe playwrights or texts with any definite ideological stamp (although there are times when this is

close-to unavoidable). Within the context of this thesis, tags such as “a conservative play” should be taken as referring to the plays’ textual tendencies within the framework I have mapped, rather than as an attempt to limit or close off interpretation.

On a similar note, I have written here about Australian “drama” rather than “theatre”, for the most part, in order to differentiate a textual focus from an analysis of works in performance. Again, this was a question of practicality; the timeframe of a study such as this, combined with the frequency of production of the plays discussed, rendered it impossible to witness productions of all of the relevant dramatic texts. Even if it were possible, each performance would only indicate *one* interpretation of the text in question. In the interests of taking as broad a view as possible, therefore, I have confined myself predominantly to the discussion of the plays in their written form. It should be taken as accepted that, again, these readings do not offer any “final” interpretation of meaning, and that performance elements are capable of both reinforcing and contradicting the tendencies noted here.

Audiences provide another variable in interpretation of theatrical performances, and again, this dissertation makes no attempt to deal with the complex manner in which audiences interpolate meaning. It is entirely possible that a play which presents, for instance, economic rationalism as inevitable will be interpreted by an audience member as a call-to-arms rather than a recommendation of passivity. Likewise, a play with a more “radical” message will not necessarily be interpreted in that light by all audience members. While I have attempted to make some gesture toward recognising variance of interpretation, in the form of analysis of reviews, it is not my purpose here to deal with the complexities of audience responses. Again, the rationale for this is primarily one of space and focus. Attempting to acquire and

analyse data regarding audience responses to these plays would be another study in itself. In terms of the discussion of this dissertation, it is necessary merely to recognise, again, that the interpretations contained herein represent readings of the texts, and that both performance elements and audience interpretation are capable of altering these interpretations. In other words, the analyses presented here represent a launching pad for further analysis, rather than any kind of “final word”.

### **Section breakdown.**

**Section One** sets out to map a context for my analysis of nineties drama. A central precept of my argument is that the drama of the nineties, like the social and political tendencies of the period, is to a large extent dominated by the revision of the core ideologies of the sixties era, in particular those of the New Wave. This section is divided into two chapters, one on the period from 1968 to 1975 and the second on the period from 1976 to 1988. This periodising is not intended to be static, or strict in its delineations. As with any periodising, these times cannot and should not be conceived as homogenous or discrete. Nevertheless, it is arguable that certain ideas and beliefs are more prominent at a certain historical point than at others, and the temporal delineation I have chosen is intended to reflect the emergence and decline of a number of key ideas.

The intention in these chapters is not to provide a comprehensive survey of the times discussed. As mentioned earlier, the drama of this era has been written about in great depth elsewhere. Rather, this section is intended to deliver a rough outline of the central tenets driving the New Wave authors and the authors of the period which followed. Again, it is not my purpose to ascribe any simplistic homogeneity to a broad body of authors. However, an analysis of the period in the light of the historical context of a changing society does reveal a concurrence of political tendencies and playwriting tendencies, and it is my aim in this section to establish certain dominant themes as the yardstick for the following analysis of nineties drama. The purpose of this is less to create an accurate picture of the period (although I have not deliberately done otherwise), than to establish those themes and tendencies which the drama of the nineties would define itself, to a large extent, against.

Similarly, it must be recognised that, particularly in Chapter One but also to a degree in Chapter Two, I have focussed less strictly on “mainstream drama” than I have in the chapters which follow, and which form the core of my argument. Again, the rationale for this move is that the first section serves primarily as a contextual reference from which my analysis of nineties drama will derive. While the New Wave, at least in its early years, in no way represented the “mainstream” of Australian theatre, many of the New Wave authors were to move, in future years, into the mainstream. Similarly, while the early work of Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra was sometimes presented by mainstream companies, it would be difficult to argue that they dominated eighties mainstream drama. However, by the nineties each of these authors was considered among Australia’s most successful theatrical writers. In this sense, it is perhaps a more useful comparative referent to examine their earlier

writing than it is to compare their latter, more successful, writings with the work of other authors who may have had more immediate success, but who by the nineties are to a large extent absent.

This relates directly to my second, more important, point of justification. The central focus of this dissertation is not on the relationship between nineties mainstream drama and the mainstream drama of an earlier era. Rather, my argument is that the drama of the nineties engaged in debate with a specific set of ideas, or discourses. The plays of the early nineties present a revision of many of the themes and beliefs evident in the drama of the New Wave, just as the politics of the nineties represents in many ways a direct attack on the ideals and beliefs which rose to a certain degree of prominence in the concurrent political period. Section One, then, serves primarily to establish the emergence of these themes in the early period and the beginnings of their decline in the second period. In other words, the subsequent analysis of nineties drama relies on the contextualisation of this earlier period not as a context for the development of mainstream theatre as an industry, but rather to contextualise the drama of the nineties as a site for the interplay of discourse and ideas.

**Chapter One** sketches a vision of the drama of Australia from the late sixties to mid seventies, and attempts to contextualise it through reference to the political situation of the time. In both society at large, and in the theatre in particular, there occurred a reaction against conformity and social regulation, which were portrayed as stagnant and limiting. There were attempts to question acceptance of both Australia's perceived genuflection to the US, and its own place within its geographic region. Attitudes toward other races, both at home and abroad, were critiqued as stereotypes

without basis in fact. Similarly, “tradition” was no longer enough justification for entrenched attitude toward women or towards class. In the drama of the period, as in the emerging social movements in society as a whole, there was a focus, evident in the writing of authors such as Hibberd, Williamson, Romeril, Hewett, Buzo, De Groen and others, on society as alterable, as unstable and as arbitrary, rather than as “natural” and static. These works are frequently underpinned by a socialist or neo-socialist aesthetic, a belief that society can and should be changed for the better, and a belief that society can and should be underpinned not by greed but by ideals such as social justice and compassion.

**Chapter Two** deals with the beginnings of a shift away from these ideas. The period from 1975 to 1988 saw the revising, if not reversing, of many of the reforms of the preceding period. In both politics and in the theatre, there was a growing sense of pessimism, as hopes for any radical reform were replaced by more “realistic” goals. There was a decreased focus on social constructs and more of a focus on individuals. Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra, the dominant authors to emerge during the period, aptly demonstrate the shift in their focus on systems’ self-perpetuating tendencies, and in their sense of a loss of ideals in the face of complexities. There was also, in a number of plays, a revising of the notion of generational overthrow and the radical ideals often attached to it. In these plays, the radicals’ predecessors are portrayed as fighting back, reclaiming the ground previously thought lost. In the drama of women and minorities, too, there was a loss of reforming zeal as the pace of reform slowed, and more of a focus on working within the system, as opposed to changing it.

Together, these two chapters form a snapshot of the preceding period which is essential in contextualising the drama of the 1990s. The drama of the nineties



would take the beginnings of disillusionment a step further, and would enact a full-blown reversal of the beliefs underpinning the drama of the New Wave.

In **Section Two** I discuss the drama of the period from 1989 to 1995, and attempt to establish the ways in which the plays discussed interact with the political tendencies of the drama of the preceding periods. Once again, the temporal boundaries are fluid rather than set in stone (indeed I have moved beyond them on occasion), and are intended to indicate a rough periodising of the dominance of certain ideas, rather than any over-programmatic homogeneity or simplistic perceptions of shifts. It is most likely unnecessary to stress that historical and ideological change occurs gradually, rather than at New Year's Eve on a certain year, and that emergent ideas do not, even then, follow a steady linear gradient. Nevertheless, again it is possible to see in many of the plays of this time a number of tendencies which bear comparison to the concurrent political shifts. In this sense, periodising is a useful tool, providing the reader keeps the limits of such a schematic in mind.

This section argues, over a number of plays, that the drama of the period is dominated by a revision of previous attitudes, predominantly an opposition to the notions of compassion, social justice and social change evident in the playwriting of the sixties. It traces these themes through a number of plays and relates these arguments to the changing political climate, in particular the growing conservatism.

**Chapter Three** sets the political context for the chapters which follow. It attempts to sketch some of the major political and social tendencies of the early nineties, in particular with regard to the rise of conservative thought. It details the so-called "fall

of communism” in the late eighties and the use of these events, despite the contextual complications, by conservative commentators to posit a pseudo-scientific binary between capitalism as “realistic” and “natural” and successful, and socialism as “ideological”, “imposed” and “proven” to fail. It will be argued that, in the absence of any strong local communist movement, the right seized upon “political correctness” as a location-point for its arguments about leftist totalitarianism. Attempts to recognise and legislate for minorities’ rights were exaggerated and generalised in order to invalidate them and to posit them as a threat, and to facilitate the myth of the dominance of the left. These political and cultural shifts would underpin much of the mainstream drama by the dominant playwrights of the early part of the decade.

**Chapter Four** looks at the influence of economic rationalism in the writing of some early nineties plays. *Money and Friends* (1992) presents a world where greed reigns supreme, and acts of kindness only occur when they coincide with monetary values and therefore “realistic”. Katherine Thomson’s *Barmaids* (1991) and *Diving for Pearls* (1992) present economic rationalism as similarly ascendant. They offer no hope. *Diving for Pearls* in particular depicts the imbibing of the ethos of greed, even by those left by the wayside. Similarly, in Tony McNamara’s *The John Wayne Principle* (1997), Robbie attempts to fight the system but ends up being drawn into it. Again, there is no real alternative. To some extent, the plays in this chapter reflect a similar ideology to those in Chapter Two, in their depiction of internalisation of ideology and the inability of characters to achieve any social change. However, they are clearly a development in the sense that the rhetoric of economic rationalism is more pervasive and that any alternative is even more distant than in the rebellions of the earlier plays.

**Chapter Five** looks at the changing of attitudes toward compassion and social justice. Louis Nowra's *Cosi* (1992) pits the "universal" notion of love against the "ideology" imposed by the play's insensitive, unreliable Marxists, and operates as a validation of the private, apolitical concerns of opera over the apparently hypocritical and superficial desire to change the world. Michael Gow's *Sweet Phoebe* (1992) forces its central characters beyond the personal, into engagement with the world, but this is portrayed as a bad thing; the characters' lives are destroyed and there is no sense of any potential to help others or create a better world. All that results is unhappiness. The end result would seem to be that self-centred interiority and accumulation is the more fulfilling way of life. David Williamson's *Sanctuary* (1994) sets the desire to achieve social good against self-centred interiority. As the play progresses, the former is torn down via the characterisation of young rebel John, and revealed to be a charade. Social responsibility or compassion come across in this play as false and imposed, and, furthermore, as demonstrated by John's violence, dangerous. Joanna Murray-Smith's *Redemption* (1997) equally deconstructs altruism and portrays it as a mask for baser desires, and also portrays self-centred interiority as more genuine than attempting to change the world. In their rejection of compassion and structural change and their endorsement of "natural" competitiveness and complicity with reversing oppressor/victim dichotomies these plays conform very much to the conservative ideology of the early nineties.

**Chapter Six** deals with some of the portrayals of feminism evident in early nineties drama, and argues a similar revision of earlier ideals. Peta Murray's successful *Wallflowering* (1989) offers a blatant anti-feminist argument, defending the central characters' "traditional" relationship against the critically-portrayed

feminists who seek to cruelly destroy it. Hannie Rayson's *Falling from Grace* (1994), while less loaded, also portrays feminism critically, and affirms contrary values such as need for males and business over female solidarity. Joanna Murray-Smith's *Love Child* (1993) depicts a confrontation between a feminist woman and the daughter she gave away, and comes down firmly on the side of the latter, with the mother's feminist concerns shown to be a mere protective pretence to mask her feelings of loss due to her acquiescence to feminist ideology rather than childbirth. The plays covered in this chapter all conform to the argument that feminism, at least in terms of social justice as opposed to individual gain, is "ideological" and blinkered, and that it seeks to attack the "natural" desire for a traditional relationship and/or nuclear family. Feminists are portrayed as deluded and unkind. These plays fundamentally attack many of the core beliefs of the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies and replace them with the conservative ideology propounded by the revisions of the early nineties.

**Chapter Seven** discusses the generational conflict in these plays in comparison to earlier works. In these plays the older, pre-boomer generation is presented as ailing or dying, and the boomers in control. Elizabeth Coleman's *It's My Party (and I'll Die if I Want to)* (1993) portrays the older more conservative generation as less threatening, more an amusement than a dominant force, and the younger generation's problems as at least partly of their own making. David Williamson's *Dead White Males* (1995) depicts the Boomer generation as ascendant, and oppressing the older and younger generations through its subservience to "political correctness", including feminism and multiculturalism, at the expense of more "genuine" or "honest" values. *The Garden of Granddaughters* (1993), by Stephen Sewell, likewise portrays the ideological concerns of the Boomers as

superficial and defends the older generation with its belief in more universal concerns such as “love”. Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Honour* (1995) situates this revision in a feminist context, portraying the feminism of the sixties as superficial and unkind, and defending the values of older women, in particular those of traditional family and inward-looking relationships over engagement with society and career. The plays in this chapter rewrite the generational tableau of earlier discourse, positively portraying the conservative older generation in opposition to a critically portrayed boomer generation dominated by false ideology which is unrealistic and imposed.

**Section Three** focuses on the period from the mid nineties to the present day. Again, taking a sample of mainstream works, it will examine the ways in which the authors of these plays reverse the conservatism of the early nineties, and rediscover some of the ideals and values which had been rejected during this period. It focuses on the work of Williamson, Rayson, Murray-Smith and Sewell, and discusses the revisions in these texts of the authors’ early nineties work, as well as the work of a younger author in Ben Ellis. The aim of this section is to establish the critique of conservative notions, such as the acceptance of economic rationalism, or the turn toward insular, apolitical, “traditional” relationships, and the concurrent re-establishment of notions of compassion, social justice, social engagement, equality and change as positive themes.

**Chapter Eight** looks at the work of David Williamson since the mid-nineties, and argues that in the latter part of the decade, Williamson reverses some of the conservative precepts of his early nineties work, and critiques the economic rationalist mindset. While *Heretic* (1996) recycles some of the arguments of *Dead White Males* regarding ideological correctness, it offers a more balanced portrayal and ultimately argues that the sixties' rebellions were necessary and that recognition of biological imperatives must be accompanied by an awareness of human ability to create change. In *After the Ball* (1997) Williamson returns to the generational tableau, but in this play the temporal shifts enable him to portray the Boomers' parents at the height of their power as a conservative force. It also critiques the turn away from idealism toward self-centred interiority and greed. This is continued in *Corporate Vibes* (1999), which operates as a critique of economic rationalism, undermining the belief in it as "realistic" and inevitable and reasserting the belief that "quality of life" is as important as economic efficiency. *Face to Face* (1999) transfers the critique of narrow economic frames to the broader ramifications in terms of crime, and ultimately argues the need for analysing crimes in their social context, and argues that economic good cannot exist without social good. *The Great Man* (2000) again deals with generational conflict and the legacy of the sixties. Again, the ideals of economic rationalism are critiqued. The play presents a rediscovery of ideals which avoids nostalgia for the sixties or the boomer generation, but is not afraid to appropriate many of their ideals in order to work for a more hopeful and compassionate future. These plays recover previously discredited sixties ideas such as compassion, social context, a critique of economic rationalism and a positive image of humanity and the capacity to forge a better future. In this sense,

Williamson's work from this period represents a move toward more radical ideals and a rejection of naturalised conservative ideology.

**Chapter Nine** deals with the work of Hannie Rayson, and again traces the revision of the conservatism of many early nineties works. *Scenes from a Separation* (written with Andrew Bovell, 1995) critiques the "realistic" attitudes of Mathew, and reveal the ways in which his insularity and cynicism toward humanity end up sabotaging his personal relationships. In contrast, Nina offers hope in the desire for change and the ability to move beyond "traditional" notions of relationships. *Competitive Tenderness* (1996) deconstructs the myths of privatisation. Economic rationalist ideology is pushed into the realm of high farce, and anti-leftist attitudes are caricatured. There is also, in this play, a tangible sense of resistance both as necessary and likely. The play's climax argues that economic rationalism is not only problematic, but that it ultimately leads to its own downfall. *Life After George* (2000), like Williamson's *The Great Man*, critiques the betrayal by Boomers of their ideals, but argues the need to recover some of that generation's hope and desire for resistance amid the economic rationalist nineties. *Inheritance* (2003) critiques prejudices, both rural and city, in particular those of the opponents of "political correctness". It points out the divisive rhetoric which prevents the oppressed from recognising their similarities to other oppressed groups, and ultimately emphasises the need to look outward beyond the self toward social justice and solidarity. Rayson's work of the late nineties and early twenty-first century, like Williamson's, represents a significant move away from the conservative attributes of early nineties drama.

**Chapter Ten** deals with the recent work of Stephen Sewell and Joanna Murray-Smith. Murray-Smith's *Nightfall* (1999) deals with a family conflict, and

nuclear family is deconstructed, notions of “normal” are critiqued and the perpetuation of daughter Cora’s upset as fashionably ideological rather than “real” is overturned. Edward’s crime is contextualised in the light of his social status and ideology, and the play ultimately argues for the need for positive change in order to move forward. *Rapture* (2002) sees a similarly insular, anti-idealist, conservative, money-centric relationship threatened by friends’ newly-acquired spirituality. The play argues that the former are a façade and promotes the need to find meaning in life by attempting to change the world for the better.

Stephen Sewell’s *The Sick Room* (1999) operates in a similar manner. It establishes a conservative family, which sees competitiveness as “natural”, believes in economic rationalism, is cynical about compassion and social justice, believes in “pragmatism” over idealism, and insularity over social engagement. As with Murray-Smith’s plays, this is undermined as a façade and social engagement is touted as the best way to achieve good on both a personal and broader level. *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* (2003) again portrays conservatism as dominant, to the extent that characters are physically blind to its violence. Through the character of young idealist Margurite, Talbot is forced to realise that it is lack of idealism, rather than idealism, which is the illusion. Talbot ultimately, despite his appalling treatment, comes to believe in human reason and potential as real and valuable. Again, despite the dominance of conservatism, it is clearly resistance, compassion and the desire for change which are portrayed as the most valuable commodities. In each of the plays in this chapter, it is adherence to conservative ideology which emerges as the illusion, and the need to recover and ignite lost ideals such as compassion, social engagement, social justice and social change which is posited as the solution.



**Chapter Eleven** deals with young author Ben Ellis, as an example of a younger writer tackling similar themes. In *Post Felicity* (2002) Ellis satirises the breadth of acceptance of economic rationalist discourse, with Felicity's parents unable to interpret her suicide in terms outside the economic frame, and silencing her voice to replace it with their own conservative clichés. The parents in *Falling Petals* (2003) are former boomers who have succumbed to capitalist designs, not merely betraying their own ideals, but also robbing their children of any sense of the possibility of existence outside the economic rationalist frame. Like *Post Felicity*, it is a dark satire of the lack of questioning of conservative discourse, and of the subsequent oppression and indoctrination of youth. *These People* (2003) is similar in its satire of accepted norms, in particular those of conservatism, but its focus moves onto the issue of asylum seekers. It undermines the blame-the-victim rhetoric and wilful blindness of Australians to the plight of others, and functions as a critique of the breadth of acceptance and unquestioning attitude to conservative ideology, and suggests that the dismissal of compassion is based on a blinkered adherence to this façade.

Overall, then, this dissertation argues that the drama of mainstream authors during the nineties was integrally related to the changing political context. While the writing of the early nineties in many ways reflects the politics of the decade in its rejection of many of the attitudes of the sixties and a turn toward economic rationalism, the drama of the second part of the decade tends to work against this shift, critiquing the rise of economic rationalist ideology and attempting to re-establish some of the abandoned attitudes as valuable and necessary. Mainstream drama is therefore neither apolitical nor inherently conservative or radical, at least in

terms of content. Rather it is a part of the broader national renegotiation of identity which occurs around it all the time.

## **SECTION ONE**

### **1968-1988**

This section of the dissertation aims to establish a context for the analysis to follow. No theatre occurs in a temporal vacuum. Just as the politics of the nineties and early twenty-first century in this country cannot be separated from the politics of the sixties and seventies, to which it reacted, so the drama of the latter part of the century must be contextualised in terms of the drama which preceded it.

Chapter One attempts to establish the links between the drama of the late sixties and early seventies, in particular the emerging group of authors and practitioners who became known as the New Wave, and the socio-political context of the time. It argues that New Wave playwriting, like the rebellion of the seventies, was based on the desire to question existing structures, to see society as changeable and greater equity as both a desirable and achievable goal. Chapter Two parallels the drama and society of the decade to follow, and argues that in both drama and society the late seventies and eighties saw a disillusionment with the radical ambitions of the previous period, and a renewed focus on working within pre-existing structures rather than reforming them.

The mainstream drama of the nineties and beyond has frequently dealt with the legacy of the sixties and seventies, often overtly, but also covertly, in terms of its engagement with the themes and tendencies covered in these two chapters. The purpose of this section is not to provide a comprehensive view of this earlier period, but rather to draw out those themes of mainstream and non-mainstream drama against which 1990s mainstream drama would react. In this regard the following chapters, while not dealing with drama at the turn of the millennium, provide an

indispensable aid in understanding and situating the shifting politics of that period's society and drama.

## **Chapter One**

### **1968-1975**

This chapter focuses on providing a context for the conservative rebellion of the nineties by sketching an overview of the tendencies which would come to symbolise the sixties, and which later eras would rebel against. Primarily, this is dominated by the tendency to question existing structures. Tradition and conformity came into question, and many authors satirise the dangers of conforming unthinkingly to social norms. There was also an increasing questioning of social regulation and the bodies which perpetuate ideology, such as religion and education. Radicals rebelled against Australia's subservience to British and US interests, and this is evident in the New Wave authors' nationalist agenda, which eschewed traditional alliances. With regard to women and to other races, too, traditional attitudes were questioned and structural change seen as a goal. Capitalism as a system was also critiqued. Overall, the focus was on broad structural change as a goal.

### **Political Context**

In arguing that the drama and society of the nineties represent a revising of the attitudes of the sixties, it is necessary to first establish those aspects of society, those attitudes and changes, to which "the sixties" will, for the purposes of this argument, be taken to refer. In Australia the Boomer generation in particular, and society as a whole, saw in the period from 1968 to 1975 (while acknowledging the porousness

and instability of such an exact temporal delineation) the revision of a number of conservative attitudes into more “radical” attitudes which would shape the years to come. On a basic level, many of these changes can be traced back to an increasing propensity to see society, its traditions and its structures, not as stable and inevitable, or even necessarily as desirable, but, rather, as unstable, socially created and therefore changeable. This basic attitudinal shift allowed for the questioning of Australia’s relationship to both Great Britain and the US, and subsequently to all other countries and races. It also led to a questioning of race relations at home, along with the recognition of the oppression, and the desire for the emancipation of disadvantaged groups such as women and homosexuals. This desire for the alteration of the status quo was linked to the broader acceptance of socialist, or at least neo-socialist ideals, as changing the social system became seen as both possible and desirable. The vacancy left by the declining faith in the system was filled by a new faith in the intelligence and morality of one’s fellow man, and a concurrent focus on reason and compassion as the governing lights by which society was to navigate.

“The sixties” as a concept bears no specific relation to the actual 1960s, at least not in their entirety. As with any chronology-based interpretation of history, the term “the sixties” can be attached to varied sets of dates and social happenings. David Williamson has one of his characters comment that “Our sixties didn’t happen till the seventies” (*The Great Man* 33), while Donald Horne, in his book *A Time of Hope*, selects the time period from 1966 to 1972 as the “time of critical change” to which references to the sixties are commonly taken to refer. In any case, for the purposes of this discussion any exact delineation is unnecessary. The sixties serve contemporary society predominantly as a conceptual centrifuge for a number of associated ideological representations.

A series of articles appeared in *Meanjin* in 1968 entitled “The Temperament of Generations”. These articles are instructive, not so much for any description of social change or rebellion, which, if these articles are to be believed, was still largely absent, but because they reveal the backdrop against which the coming change would occur. Contrary to what one might expect at the dawn of the boomers’ revolutionary days, these articles describe the youth of Australia as conservative and apathetic. Alex Carey notes that recent polls indicate Australian youths of the sixties to be more conservative than their elders regarding Vietnam, abortion, and prostitution, among other subjects, while Thelma Forshaw describes a younger generation driven above all by the need to conform (Forshaw 218). Some commentators attribute this apathy to Australian culture. Donald Horne notes in *A Time of Hope* that a resistance to change was a cornerstone of the Menzies philosophy (2), while Douglas Kirsner comments that Australian “Society is paternalistic. The people are passive recipients of goods and governments. Apathy is regarded as good, a sign of stability” (Kirsner 366). L. J. Clancy laid the blame on the material rewards of the post-war boom: “Perhaps less in Australia than in any country has the tension between the two generations been felt; material affluence glosses over a number of evils” (Clancy 211). All of this was, of course, about to change.

This background of conservatism is important for two reasons. Firstly, it would seem to indicate that the rebellion of the Boomers was not due to a mindset intrinsic to that generation, but rather an attitude which emerged gradually, snowballing to a climax at a similar or concurrent moment to like-minded movements worldwide. That is, the Boomers’ radicalism must be seen as part of the historical context. Secondly, the conservatism of the fifties and early sixties is

important to grasp in that it was this collection of attitudes: conservatism, apathy, and conformity, against which the rebellion of the sixties would define itself.

Against this context of perceived apathy and stasis, change itself, and the desire for change, became integral to the agenda of those who rebelled. Kirsner notes a similar trend worldwide, reporting that “Youth everywhere—from Tokyo to Paris—are rebelling, and even where the aims of the rebellions are not precisely enunciated, a feeling of abhorrence for what is happening in society can be sensed” (366). Donald Horne describes the period as “a time of challenge to some of the dominant values and bodies of knowledge in Australia” (4), while Petro Georgiou and Josef Szwarc, discussing the agenda of the New Left, write that the movement “continually subjects society to critical examination, and calls for its reform or ‘restructuring’” (373). Clearly there was an abandonment, in such attitudes, of the notion that some things are best left unquestioned, or best left as they are. All elements of society were suddenly open to critique. Integral to this questioning and challenging of bodies and structures was the rethinking of the monolithic regulator “tradition”, resulting in a frequent “determination to break with the past” (Osmond 198). Forms of social regulation came to be seen as stifling. Faith in the system was replaced by a belief “that the general monochrome level of apathetic existence can be replaced with a society of free persons in which the individual’s capacities can be fulfilled” (Kirsner 371). With all structures and traditions suddenly open to questioning, social change was able to be conceived as both possible and integral to the improvement of the plight of the individual. Broad, structural change was seen as both a reasonable and desirable goal.

An important element of the “traditional” Australian way of life was the influence of Britain and the United States of America. Paul Kelly writes that “The



[post World War II] Australian psychology was trapped between the aspiration to independence and the comfortable dependence on Britain” (11), while Donald Horne describes the British and US influence as a fundamental reference point in the nation’s pre-Whitlam psyche: ”Australia was a little nation that needed a big imperial friend” (5). Alan Seymour, in his 1968 article “To the Gutless Wonders”, satirised Australia’s growing dependence on the United States: “Do not try to extract your father’s tongue from its deeply embedded position in your Uncle Sam’s anus. You will only be wasting your time. The sphincter has locked” (215), a sentiment echoed by some (including opposition leaders Simon Crean and Mark Latham) in the early years of the twenty-first century with reference to John Howard’s relationship to American president George W. Bush (Grattan). In 1968 Seymour’s views were still those of a minority (Seymour himself fled the country in frustration soon after penning the article) but such cynical views on the US alliance were gaining currency, and would come to typify the changing attitudes of the early seventies.

A crucial part of changing attitudes, toward the US in particular, was the growing resistance to the Vietnam War. Whereas in 1968 Clancy notes a lack of resistance to the war (212), the anti-war movement was to become an integral part of the changes sweeping Australian society in the years to come. Rejection of Australia’s involvement in Vietnam became synonymous with rejection of US imperialism, both abroad and, on a cultural rather than militaristic level, in Australia itself. Concurrently, Australia began to take more of an interest in the region around it, to open itself up to influences beyond its Anglo-Celtic heritage. Seymour critiques Australia’s insularity in his 1968 article: “Beware of foreign influences. Except for dear old Uncle who hardly seems a foreigner any more, *seal yourself off*. Above all,

disdain contact with Asians” (“The Temperament of Generations: 5) to the Gutless Wonders” 216). It was an attitude which was changing. The White Australia policy was dropped by the ALP in 1965 and officially dismantled in 1973 (Grant and Papadakis 18). Paul Kelly argues that this change was the result of the alteration in mindset (perhaps the decreasing efficacy of stereotypes of foreign “otherness”, or, less optimistically, merely the metamorphosis of such stereotypes) brought about by increasing immigration at home: “It was the legacy of the post-war immigration program and the transformation of the Asia/Pacific from a region of military threat to one of economic progress which forced Australia to substitute multiculturalism and regional integration for the original idea of White Australia” (4). Whatever the cause, Australia’s growing unhappiness with US neo-imperialism and the new interest and openness to South East Asia became, in the minds of many, inextricably intertwined. Again, this can be related back to the questioning of traditional societal norms and structures. The alignment of Australian interests to British or US desires was a hierarchy built upon tradition and on an accompanying racial and cultural distinction. With tradition itself now the object of critique, the dichotomy of acquiescence to British and US motives on the one hand, and the fear of or antipathy toward the foreign (in regional terms often Asian) “other” on the second, was forced into question. The emerging mentality called for an examination based on Australian interests and critically examined knowledge, rather than unquestioned acceptance of traditional structures and cultural relations. The old dichotomy was subsequently, at least to some extent, broken down.

At home, too, many white Australians were opening up to other races, with Indigenous Australians being allowed to vote for the first time in 1962 (Grant and Papadakis 19) . In 1971 the Prime Minister William McMahon established the

department of Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, although conservatives mocked such concerns as the domain of the “trendies” (Horne 7), a sentiment which would return in the attacks on “elites” and “political correctness” in the nineties, which again frequently portrayed the arts and, particularly, multiculturalism as “fashionable” rather than genuine. Whitlam continued the momentum when he gained office by abolishing (at least overt) racial discrimination as official policy in 1973 (P. Kelly 4). Aborigines were not the only group to benefit from changing social attitudes. Osmond wrote in 1975 that “The rise of the student-based New Left in the middle and late 1960s, and its proliferation into various ‘liberation’ movements and revolutionary grouplets since, is proving to have an immediate impact on Australian historical consciousness” (198). Growing concern for oppressed groups impacted upon public policy, and had ramifications for the rights of women, homosexuals and animals (Grant and Papadakis 34). Together with changing sexual morality, increasing acceptance of divorce, and softening attitudes towards censorship (Horne), these changes saw many of Australia’s traditional public standards rocked, if not shattered. Conservative commentators attacked Labor by warning of the dangers inherent in such a “permissive society”(Horne 12), another term which would be revived during the turn of the century’s conservative swing by social conservatives such as Tony Abbott. In the seventies, however, the rethinking of social norms and the need to undo the social system’s traditional oppression of underprivileged groups (both minority and majority) held primacy.

Interwoven throughout these changes was a socialist or neo-socialist ideology. Whereas Manning Clark writes that the fear of communism was enough in 1949 to bring the ALP to defeat, by the late sixties events in Indonesia and the reduced threat of China and Russia forming a power bloc had significantly lessened

the threat (Clark). Not only did this provide further impetus for Australia's engagement with Asia, but it reduced significantly the support for the US in Vietnam. In 1968 Seymour writes sarcastically of Australia's anti-socialist mentality: "Accept your Uncle's premises in all things. If he says 'Dirty Communist' you must say 'Dirty Communist'. If he says 'Free World', you must echo 'Free World, free world, free world'. It is such a potent phrase. Once it has been uttered, no further thought is necessary" ( "The Temperament of Generations: 5) to the Gutless Wonders" 215). In contrast, following his return to Australia in 1973, Seymour reports happily that there is a "progressive socialist vigour" in the air ("You Can Go Home Again?" 32).

Socialist ideals also permeated the drive for equality at home. Gareth Evans wrote in *Meanjin* in 1976 that Whitlam's ideals "justify the label 'socialism'" (8), in that the party was committed

not only to equal opportunity, an aspiration that ordinary common-and-garden liberals can share, but to equal wealth and income and equal status in society [. . .] being wrought not only through the stepped-up operation of the traditional fiscal measures but also the detailed regulation—and if necessary expropriation—of the key exploitative elements in the private economic sector. (7)

While socialism was still far from an accepted public discourse, it was clearly gaining broader acceptance, and formed a key foundation for many of the policies and philosophies of the era. Again, this can be linked to the fact that the traditional status quo, and hence the capitalist system underpinning it, had been re-envisioned as arbitrary and alterable, rather than inevitable. This notion would be one of the key concepts that nineties economic rationalist ideology would work to undo.

Osmond notes that there also occurred a similar turn to “social history” in the fields of history and education, in keeping with both the desire to question tradition and the socialist impulse to view society as contingent, contextual and most importantly alterable. He writes that “The ‘new social history’ in educational curricula, so popular today, is based upon a perception of the contemporary problems of nationalism, militarism, the capitalist ethos, racism and sexism, etc., and is impelled by the view that in order to contemplate fundamental socio-cultural change in this country, the historical evolution of these problems must be better understood” (Osmond 198). Again, “socio-cultural change” is the optimal end.

Perhaps partly as the result of the students’ part in much of the social upheaval occurring, there also developed a new respect for intellectuals. Menzies had always disliked intellectuals (Horne 3), and Seymour warned the intelligentsia in 1968:

And now a note for the—please pardon the dirty word—intellectuals among you. Give up. Do not be deceived by the false liberal propaganda which suggests your influence may be growing. Turn yourself to the approved bourgeois delights: experimental theatre, Hippy Happenings, LSD. Refuse all temptations to turn your attention outwards to the so-called problems of the world. Turn ever inwards in ever smaller circles until you disappear up the only avenue left. That is your destiny” (“The Temperament of Generations: 5) to the Gutless Wonders” 217)

Five years later he reported that Australians “seemed to feel for the first time in years, for the first time in their lives, the intelligentsia was not being automatically scoffed at, instead was listened to” (“You Can Go Home Again?” 32). This was

perhaps in part an inevitable result of the changing attitudes towards tradition and social control. If one were to endow the individual with the power to shape their own destiny, it became necessary to put some trust in that person's intellectual faculties.

Similarly, the dismantling of traditional behavioural standards led to a renewed focus on morality, perhaps out of the need to fill the vacuum. Whereas Forshaw had written in 1968 that morality seemed to have been supplanted by psychology: "not 'Am I virtuous?' but 'Am I adjusted to society?'" (219) as a behavioural guideline, Kirsner writes that the newly emerging attitudes were heavily predicated on morality:

Those who criticize students for breaking the traditional patterns of behaviour should ask themselves: if they were faced with situations which they regard as morally iniquitous and not the subject of change by traditional means, which have turned out to be useless by themselves, and they felt very strongly about the evil being done, what would they do? If they did nothing, would they not be morally responsible for the persistence of the evil state of affairs? The revolt of youth is a moral one. (367)

Seymour writes that on his return the "rediscovery of old Australian principles and ethics long buried under the rubble of conservative capitalism seemed to tingle in the very air" ("You Can Go Home Again?" 32). Contrary to conservative fears, radicals sought not to abandon morality but to replace the traditional ethics, which emphasised the status quo at the expense of equity and diversity and were subservient to "economic growth and material prosperity" (Grant and Papadakis 33), with a system of values that propounded equality, compassion, "non-material values" (Grant and Papadakis 33) and "quality of life" (Horne 12). Combined with

widespread positive momentum, the thinking of radicals could be described by Kirsner as “‘utopian’ rather than ‘realistic’” (369) with none of the pejorative slant the phrase would carry today.

The playwriting of the late sixties and early seventies occurred against a backdrop which threw into question many of the previous era’s established beliefs and conventions. Tradition and the social structure were no longer seen as stable or even desirable. Australia’s relationship to Britain and the US was questioned, and our attitudes toward other races, both at home and abroad, came under fire. Oppressed sections of society became seen as deserving of equal rights, as part of a broader socialist-leaning move towards social equity and systemic change. Reason and compassion were propounded as the tools with which to replace adherence and obedience. When examined in the light of these attitudes, the drama of the period emerges as very much a product of its time, and the subsequent disillusionment and reaction against these ideals in both the drama and society therefore begs parallel.

### **Drama, 1968-1975: The New Wave**

The playwrights of the late 1960s and early 1970s aimed to rebut the conformity of the time. A new generation of theatre practitioners was looking to overthrow the dominant mainstream style of the day, the largely imported serious drama of Britain and the US, and replace it with a rougher, more “Australian” type of drama. They sought out new forms to challenge the perceived sterility of the mainstream. Thematically, too, the dangers of conformity were tackled, with stereotypes a common site of play. Jack Hibberd’s *White with Wire Wheels* demonstrates this trend

aptly in its portrayal of ritualised male relationships based on conformist masks and social rituals, such as the discussion of cars and girls. Hibberd's characters use these rituals to protect themselves from their insecurities and fears. Relationships are ritualised, both between the men and with women, who are portrayed in their eyes as interchangeable, and functional. The play ultimately argues that the characters are trapped by the facades they have built to protect themselves, which prevent them from attaining any deeper form of communication.

The drama of the late sixties and early seventies was also defined by a determination to break with the dominant traditions of the day. Julian Meyrick, in his book *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave*, describes the changes that took place in the theatre at this time as primarily a conflict between two generations of theatre practitioners. The New Wave sought to challenge and overthrow the dominant values of the theatre of the time, and Meyrick describes the emerging generation's values as in many ways diametrically opposite to those of their predecessors. Nimrod founder John Bell sums up the philosophy in his claim that "Alternative theatre challenges, questions all traditions and conventions" (Meyrick 9). La Mama playwright Jack Hibberd, similarly, writes of the need to completely reconfigure the theatre, which he sees as "imposed", "Middle-brow, middle-class and middle-aged" ("Wanted: A Display of Shanks" 39). The questioning of established traditions and structures was a theatrical, as well as social, movement.

Implicit in the rejection of what had gone before was a search for new theatre styles, more relevant to contemporary Australian society. As Margaret Williams writes in 1972 of the new playing styles at theatres such as La Mama: "The very 'roughness' of performance, of energetic but untrained actors and makeshift accommodation, was itself a revolt against the second-handedness of the commercial



and professional stage in Australia, subsisting on a fare of London and New York successes and having little to say to a young radical generation” (“Snakes and Ladders: New Australian Drama” 179). Leonard Radic writes that the emerging generation desired a theatre that was brash and lively, rather than dull and “worthy” (*The State of Play*). The use of alternative styles of performance, whether it be vaudeville or Epic, is representative of the fact that emerging practitioners saw the challenging of tradition as an indispensable part of their agenda. As New Wave playwright Barry Oakley comments, “In a sense [. . .] the medium was the message” (qtd. in Rees, *Australian Drama 1970-1985* 62).

### **Conformity**

The themes of many of the plays of this period are inextricably linked with this agenda. Margaret Williams writes of the recurrent use of stereotypes in New Wave plays, for example, as related to the playwrights’ critique of the dangers of conformity: “the stereotype is not simply a satirical cartoon, or even a levelling device which reduces the characters to comforting anonymity; it becomes a defensive shell, a protective ‘front’ to cover insecurity and limited awareness, and it springs a deadly trap, locking its victims into their adopted roles through the very ritual patterns that seemed to afford security” ( “Mask and Cage: Stereotype in Recent Drama” 310). The characters in Jack Hibberd’s *Who?* (1967) , for example, are portrayed as virtually indistinguishable. Alex is unable to tell Dinga and Paddy apart (*Who?* 148), but it is also clear that the characters are complicit in their interchangeability, and hence their own demise, through their competition with one

another to conform to Alex's desires. Hibberd comments similarly on the role of ritual in his early plays: "In a lot of the early plays I'm obsessed with rituals, and how in a fairly meaningless and arbitrary world one establishes a ritual to enfranchise your existence and charge it with meaning; and how a lot of those rituals trap one ultimately" ("Interview with J. Davidson" 449). This is in keeping with the questioning of traditions and social structures prevalent at the time, and the need to think outside the dominant discourse.

One of the earliest plays of the New Wave, Hibberd's *White with Wire Wheels* (1967), deals explicitly with conformity. The central characters are three young males, Mal, Rod, and Simon, living together and, it quickly emerges, communicating fundamentally along three basic lines: alcohol, women and cars. In the case of the latter two, the conversation follows remarkably similar tracks:

Mal: What do you think of the new Cortina? [*Showing ROD and SIMON*] Nice looking unit?

Rod: Not bad. Not bad at all.

Mal: Nice lines?

Simon: Very classy.

Mal: Still, there are other jobs I'd prefer.

Simon: Such as?

Rod: Such as this little job here. [*Displaying the magazine*] Just get a geek at those lines, gentlemen.

Mal: What a set.

Simon: Impeccable.

Rod: Like watermelons. (*White with Wire Wheels* 156-57)

Discussing cars, in particular, is depicted as a kind of comfort zone for the three men, a shell of conformity, protecting them from any degree of deeper engagement with the world. This is made more explicit in the less naturalistic eighth scene, in which the three men visit Helen in her apartment upstairs, and each reveals the insecurity beneath their brusque veneers. Simon, for example, shows her his steering wheel, then comments

A lot of people, especially my friends, don't like this sort of steering wheel. But I think it has a real touch of class, truly round with well designed finger-grips, something you can really hang on to. I have nightmares about things slipping away from me, not being able to hang on, slipping down ice-smooth slopes, blood-red slopes, but smooth and slippery. At other times I'm climbing a long ladder in the middle of nowhere. And for every rung I climb the ladder moves down one. I never get any further up the ladder in spite of all my efforts. (210)

The link between driving and the desire for power and control in an insecure world is made explicit here. Elsewhere it is the implicit impetus behind the boys' default return to discussion of cars at moments of nervousness. Simon, chatting Helen up, for example, comments that "Rod's love troubles probably don't interest you. Nothing more boring than talking about people you don't know [. . .] Anyway, let's change the subject. [*Pause*] About Mal's car. It's a new Valiant" (194) It also emerges in times of distress, as in Mal and Rob's conversation following Helen's deception (228). The boys' fall-back conversation topics are rituals behind which they take refuge from the troubles of the world.

Relationships, too, take on a somewhat ritualistic flavour in the play. All of the female characters are played by the same actress, a factor which reinforces the performative nature of the boys' romantic endeavours. Simon's comments to his girlfriend Cath regarding Mal's girlfriend Sue, for instance: "She's a real doll. Beautiful figure. Unique. I envy the bastard" (170), become deeply satirical, emphasising the fact that Simon's jealousy is socially constructed and has nothing to do with Sue's actual looks. Rod's girlfriend, Anne, at least, seems to have some awareness that Rod's feelings for her are manufactured. When he says "I just don't like you any more", she replies "And you never really have" (182). Simon's decision to dump Cath when he finds out that his friends are now single further emphasises the fact that the men in the play have no interest in any actual women, beyond their role as an accessory to the fulfilment of the various stereotypes required at any given moment by the dynamics between "mates". The boys' anger at Helen's setting up dates with all three of them is rendered particularly ironic by the fact that their dates have always been purely functional and to all intents and purposes identical at any rate. In these examples, romantic love, one of the traditional driving-forces of theatrical conflict is reconfigured as nothing more than ritualised conformity, devoid of any deeper affection. The play critiques self-serving stagnation which masquerades as "love".

The play makes it clear that the three boys are the victims, as well as the perpetrators, of the stereotypes they have created. The middle section of the play breaks down the semi-naturalistic style of the earlier scenes and offers a surreal glimpse behind the characters' masks. This section lends the characters a tragicomic feel. It is clear that each of them is deeply unhappy the way they are, as is evident in the verse they each separately recite:

My head is not exactly clear,  
I don't know what I'm doing,  
My dreams are thick with fear,  
I'm frightened  
And unenlightened,  
I think there's something brewing (212)

All three men desire a different kind of life to the one they lead now, but they are unable to alter it. They are trapped, just as Hibberd comments above, by the masks they have themselves created, their defence mechanisms preventing them from attaining relationships of any greater depth than their by-now-deeply-ingrained ritual communication will allow. The play represents a clear critique of conformity, arguing that not only is it based on a false veneer, but that even in functional terms this veneer, while offering the surface promise of protection and belonging, in fact offers only increased fear and isolation, and stifles the chances for more genuine interaction.

*White with Wire Wheels* offers a vision of conformity as futile and self-defeating. The characters' ritualised relationships with one another and with women are displayed as illusory and functional, curtailing any more genuine communication in service of stereotypical modes of behaviour which are designed to protect but which in fact only stifle and isolate. This play ties into the New Wave's attempts to challenge conformity both thematically and stylistically, a desire intrinsically linked to the wider social questions being asked in society at the time.

## Social Regulation

The conformity attacked in plays such as *White with Wire Wheels* is a form of self-regulation. New Wave authors also found similar cause to attack regulation or imposition of tradition from without. Government, religion, police, and the prison system were all subject to the same type of critique as the more personal conformity above. These structures were portrayed as problematic in works such as Hibberd's *Proud Flesh* (1970), David Williamson's *The Removalists* (1971) and Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), and their acceptance as unquestioned enforcers of social mores undermined.

One of the most prominent areas where social conformity came under attack was in the area of censorship. Productions of Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* (1967) and Romeril's *Whatever Happened to Realism?* (1969) both provoked arrests as a result of foul language. The latter, inspired by the former, courted such by encouraging the audience to scream obscenities en masse in the La Mama carpark (D. Carroll 259; Rees, *Australian Drama 1970-1985* 15). J. D. Hainsworth notes that Hibberd's *Proud Flesh* clearly linked censorship and other forms of social bigotry, such as racism, anti-intellectualism and homophobia, with Kevin blaming the existence of pornography on "a boatload of migrants late last night", and equating censorship with "Killing the Cong" (Hainsworth 36). Kevin describes himself as "an ordinary Australian citizen". In sharp contrast to nineties political rhetoric, in the hands of an author such as Hibberd this is clearly an insult. Censorship is another example of mindless social conformity, of the potential of the individual being trodden down by society's superficial mores.

As well as the protests which accompanied the arrests above, police became increasingly frequent characters in contemporary plays. Finola Moorhead notes that Martin Esslin, visiting Australia in the early seventies, described Australian playwrights as “obsessed with police”, not to mention “prisons” (32). The most obvious examples are David Williamson’s *The Removalists*, which clearly links police corruption and violence to social conformity, in the shape of the desire to preserve images of masculine virility, and Jim McNeil’s prison plays, including *The Chocolate Frog* (1970), *The Old Familiar Juice* (1972), and *How Does Your Garden Grow?* (1974). Religion, too, came under fire, from both light-hearted caricatures such as Hibberd’s drunken Father O’Shea in *Dimboola* (1969), to more in-depth character studies such as Ron Blair’s *The Christian Brothers* (1975), which came under attack from conservative Bob Santamaria for its portrayal of Catholic education (Wood). All of these plays deal with the constricting nature of social regulation and the need to alter or reform the traditional structure.

Dorothy Hewett’s *The Chapel Perilous* (1971) depicts religion and education as the twin oppressors of the central character’s idealism and individuality. The play deals with the central character, Sally, and her coming of age, and the difficulties she experiences in exploring her sexuality and her politics amid the stifling pressures of conformity. Sally is portrayed as a rebel. The Sister, from Sally’s school, recalls: “I remember her bold eyes staring me down at the foot of the altar. She would not bow. SHE WOULD NOT BOW” (*The Chapel Perilous* 16). Sally is therefore seen as morally suspect. The religious order’s moral high ground is clearly dubious: the Canon’s mind is driven by his lust for his dead wife’s sister: “She had such breasts on her”, and the potential judgements he faces as a result: “Oh! I remember how they sat and giggled. Nasty little females, sitting in the pews with their wet thighs pressed

together” (15). The Headmistress’s comments, too, reveal a morality based first and foremost on fear of that which cannot be controlled: “I find Sally... unwholesome, both precocious and evil. I really can’t bear that much individuality. It really frightens me and it should frighten you” (20). Education and religion are thus presented as not merely oppressive, in their attempts to constrict Sally, but also, perhaps more importantly, as unstable. The fear which governs their aggression contains an implicit awareness of the tenuousness of their grasp on that power, portrayed here not as “natural” or inevitable but as arbitrary and therefore constantly in danger of overthrow.

Institutions and forms of social regulation are depicted by New Wave authors as hypocritical and self-serving, and just as lacking in genuine confidence and belief as the personal conformity of characters such as Mal and Rod in *White with Wire Wheels*. Forms of top-down regulation such as censorship, the police, prisons, religion and education are all problematised with a view to questioning the conformity which these structures enforce, as well as throwing the blind acceptance of many of such structures as unchangeable open to question.

## **Nationalism**

The drama of the New Wave reflects the national re-imagining of the pre-Whitlam and Whitlam periods. Theatre practitioners rejected previous notions of overseas “standards” and acceptance as a barometer for artistic worth, instead producing a drama aimed at, and portraying, Australian subjects. The US, in particular, was criticised for its imperialist action in Vietnam, while militarism in more general



terms was also criticised as an oppressive structure. Plays such as *Norm and Ahmed* and John Romeril's *The Floating World* (1974) deconstructed the attitudes of the returned soldier. The latter, in particular, reveals the prejudices that the central character adopts in order to take refuge from the horrific experiences he endures, and exposes the futility of this conformity, as well as critiquing the military structures of oppression which are responsible for creating the problem. In these plays, acquiescence to the desires of nations such as Britain and the US is attacked in a similar manner to the conformity and social regulation in Australian society. It is similarly seen as an unchallenged form of conformity, and structure of oppression, which was neither inevitable nor advantageous but problematic and open to change.

As mentioned above, an important element in the liberation of society from rigid imposed structures was the declining reliance on Britain and the US as cultural barometers. David Kendall has described that, when he was seeking actors for Jack Hibberd's *White with Wire Wheels* in the mid sixties, "no one wanted to be in an *Australian* play. Too dreary. Too boring" (Radic, "Fertile Years Recalled"), an example of the degree of acceptance of notions of overseas superiority. Meyrick notes that Australia's previous theatrical generation's concern with "standards" was very much a result of the influence of British theatre practice and beliefs, and the desire to measure up to international standards, and hence an implicit acceptance of the international/local hierarchical distinction. By contrast, the New Wave sought to be judged purely on its own terms, as a national drama aimed at a national audience, as opposed to the mainstream which New Wave author Michael Boddy described as attempting to export "French champignons to France" (Brisbane, "Preserving the Disreputable" 41). Jack Hibberd recalls a desire to create a "distinctively Australian theatre" ("Twenty-One Tomorrow" 16). David Williamson claims that the new

drama's success was in large part the result of tapping into a broader nationalistic feeling, a desire among audiences to see *themselves* portrayed on stage, however critically:

Australia has long exhibited a so-called 'cultural cringe' in the area of the arts [. . .] It is thus perhaps not surprising that Australian playwrights of the late 1960s, writing precisely of the gaucheness and ineptness of Australian social communication, found little response to their scripts from the large state-subsidised theatre companies, who more often than not saw their function as one of 'educating and uplifting' the beer-swilling populace.

The beer-swilling populace, however, by its enthusiastic attendance at the small 'alternative' theatres, showed that they wanted to see the rather unflattering but not entirely unaffectionate analysis of their social styles and processes being offered by the writers. ( "From Cultural Cringe to Community" 24)

Julian Meyrick neatly sums up the change in attitude toward overseas influence when he claims that in the late sixties and early seventies, "Artists went from cultural cringe to cultural lunge" (12). In the theatre, as in society at large, Australia was revising traditional conceptions of its place in the world.

Anti-US feeling is a common theme in the plays themselves. Pieces such as Romeril's *Chicago Chicago* (1969), and *He Can Swagger Sitting Down* (1972) critique American social indoctrination (D. Carroll 254, 61), as well as presenting "parallels with Australian society and inferences about American cultural imperialism" (Fitzpatrick, *After the Doll* 95). As it was in society in general, nationalist anti-imperialism was in many plays inherently tied to the situation in

Vietnam. Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis's hit *The Legend of King O'Malley* (1970), which helped launch the success of the Nimrod, is in large part an argument against conscription. As O'Malley argues "To me it makes no sense to fight for freedom against Prussian militarism if we have to become Prussians to do it [. . .] To me it is not freedom if men are not free to choose the freedoms they will die for" (Boddy and Ellis 73). *King O'Malley* deals with the Great War, rather than the Vietnam war, but the parallel is obvious. O'Malley's comment that "Feeding Australian boys into the mincing machine of English sentimentality to preserve the sugar-coated hogwash of English sonnet writers is not my idea of sense" (64) bears obvious comparison to Australia's sending soldiers to America's war in Vietnam in the name of "freedom" and "democracy". Parallels with the current situation and the need for contemporary resistance are drummed in when O'Malley asks Angel "Is there any chance of me coming back?" "When will the world need the likes of you again, O'Malley?" Angel replies, to which O'Malley answers "You never know..." (76). Here the critique of conscription and Vietnam is tied to the critique of colonial and neo-colonial genuflection and conformity to national hierarchies and their accompanying clichés.

Critique of the Vietnam War, as well as state control, often emerged as satire of militarism in general, as in pieces such as *Biggles* (1970) and *Bigotry V.C.* (Radic, *The State of Play*). Alan Seymour had already critiqued Australian ex-soldiers in *The One Day of the Year* (1960). Alex Buzo's character Norm in *Norm and Ahmed* is a much more critical portrayal than Seymour's Alf. Norm is presented as racist, homophobic, and obsessed with maintaining the status quo. Here militarism and its associated attitudes is directly linked to other kinds of mindless conformity satirised by New Wave authors elsewhere.

John Romeril's *The Floating World*, similarly, while perhaps presenting a more sympathetic central character, makes it clear that Les's military history is responsible for his current xenophobia and mental instability. The play deals with an ex-soldier and his wife travelling on a cruise to Japan. Les is an alcoholic and his relationship with his wife is difficult at best. "He hardly knows me anymore", she confides to Robinson (*The Floating World* 65). Les is full of racist talk. He asks Robinson for yellow tickets, "four-yellows—four little Nips—four little Nips" (20), refers to the Malay waiter as "that Jap waiter" (68), and comments that Filipinos "work for sixpence, those jokers" (46). Little by little throughout the play, the horrors of Les's experiences in a prisoner of war camp emerge, helping to shed some light on his attitudes. He is haunted by dead companion McLeod, who tells Les "You're a bit of a smash-and-grab [scab]" for his trip to Japan: "Who'd have thought Les Harding'd scab on his mates" (27). His words haunt Les throughout the play. Les attacks the waiter and tells McLeod proudly "Les Harding doesn't scab on his mates, right!" (75), and repeats the same words while abusing Robinson (80). Eventually Les's demons become too much for him and he goes insane. As with the treatment of stereotypes in plays such as *Who?* or *The Front Room Boys*, *The Floating World* also deals with "the relation of the Australian male stereotypes to the individuals underneath". The play's climax reveals that Les's dirty limericks are just a facade behind which he hides the pain of experiences he has felt unable to speak of, trapped, like those characters, by the protective mask he dons: "Sat on it, McLeod—I've sat on it for thirty years. Burns a man up inside" (82). Les's final breaking, however, comes too late to be of any positive use, and the play's finale, as Fitzpatrick argues, ultimately "confirms Les's secure imprisonment again among stock prejudices and reflexes, and old memories much more intensely real than the

present” (Fitzpatrick, *After the Doll* 94). Like the characters in *White with Wire Wheels*, Les’s conformity is revealed as less a refuge and more a prison.

The play makes it clear that what is under critique is not the Japanese soldiers, but militarism itself. Les comments that “The Nips were morons, Robbo [. . .] But we weren’t much better [. . .] We had no idea...” (41). Japanese propaganda is juxtaposed with Australian (41-42). The real criticism is reserved for the officers, on both sides. McLeod says of one of the Japanese soldiers “He says they slap us about a bit [. . .] But he gets slapped as well [. . .] His own officers beat him black and blue and yellow” (44-45), while Les refers to the Australian officers as “Homo Officerus [. . .] The white nip” (40). Contempt is also extended to those on either side who put profit over people. Les recalls:

Boots, McLeod, boots were a racket—and you reckon we were better than they were. Fifteen hours a day on hot rock as sharp as shit, barefoot, and the bloody criminal element sitting on two and three pairs—the criminal element and officers—and you reckon we were better than they were. We were disgusting [. . .] cunts come in all colours. (86)

Despite the at-times-despairing tone of the play’s final scene, with comments such as “reality is too much to bear” and “this world is not fit for human beings” (93), what these scenes argue is that, no matter what one’s position or race, the worst instances of human behaviour are at heart the result of a lack of fellow-feeling, “evidence of some monstrous crime against ourselves” (95), and that only by attacking not those who perpetuate such actions but the power structures which lead to their actions (“All crashes have causes”) can the desire “not to suffer the world but to change it” (94) be achieved. *The Floating World* is a call for analysis and criticism of the

structures and mental conformities that perpetuate suffering. What distinguishes it as a play directly attached to the philosophies of the sixties is the fact that it portrays not just the horrors of war, but the horrors of war as *alterable* and intrinsically linked to conformity, capitalism and the status quo.

Romeril's 1975 play *The Dudders* perhaps even more explicitly links Australian military support for the US with economic imperialism in its final song:

They took our sheilas so  
We took their bloody dough  
Half the time a dollar wasn't worth a bloody dime  
But thirty years later  
We're sitting in a bloody crater  
And Uncle Sam's the one who's doing fine  
Did we dud em—did we ever  
We thought we were so flaming clever.  
Did we dud did we what  
Did we win in the end  
I'm afraid we did not  
Did we dud em did we ever  
We thought we were so flaming clever  
They've got burgers they've got fries  
They've got hot apple pies  
At McDonald's  
They've got it all. (qtd. in Griffiths 126)

Again conformity, in this case the acquiescence to US global military imperatives, is turned to for protection, and again it results in the opposite, in this case economic

exploitation. Without the implication that Australia's war experiences were the result of kow-towing to overseas designs, it may have been difficult to reconcile the seemingly unpatriotic critique of the returned soldier with the New Wave's nationalistic ambitions. But by arguing that Australian soldiers were fighting not to further our own country's needs, but rather doing the dirty work of Imperial powers, authors such as Romeril were able to posit a brand of nationalism which could encompass the peace movement whilst not abandoning the notion of national pride so important to other agendas. An awareness of this aspect of their nationalism is essential in contextualising the New Wave agenda. Reliance on Britain or the US was rejected due to the realisation that these alliances were based on structural hierarchies no different to those operating in the national context: arbitrary, alterable, and thus open to challenge when they do not work in the best interests of those at the bottom of the power dynamic.

### **Women and Minorities in the New Wave**

Women and minorities are notable in their absence from much Australian drama, and while the New Wave did not address this imbalance to any great extent, it did offer a critique of the values of the white, male norm. New Wave plays frequently satirise and question the blind acceptance of, and participation in the distribution of, racist values. They also satirise the sexism of the "ocker" white Australian male. Concurrently, there was a movement encouraging women writers. Female authors who achieved success, such as Alma De Groen and Dorothy Hewett, displayed a similar desire to critique the stereotypes and social structures which reinforced

female oppression. In De Groen's *The Joss Adams Show* (1968), the author satirises the indoctrination of both men and women into sexist values and their off-handed naturalisation of sexual oppression. Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous*, similarly, deconstructs the hypocrisy of socially prescribed attitudes of purity and chastity, and reveals them to be functional terms which the powerful wield or ignore at will. Hewett draws parallels between the structures that oppress sexuality and those which oppress politically. Sally's rebelliousness, while unsuccessful, offers the sense that resistance is possible, and that structures of sexual and political oppression are changeable, not immutable.

Critics have described the New Wave as "Anglo-Celtic and male" (Gilbert, *Sightlines* 2), a criticism which is true in a sense, but also misleading. It is correct that the majority of the playwrights who achieved success in this period were male and white. While there were notable exceptions, such as Dorothy Hewett and Alma De Groen, the most dramatic steps in the growth of playwriting from women and minority groups were to occur in the decade to come. It is also true that the plays of this period tended to be dominated (and again there are exceptions) by white male characters. However, it would be dangerous to suggest that the dominance of the "ocker" at the expense of other voices (Fitzpatrick and Thomson) implies a tacit acceptance of his exclusionary values. To a large extent, white males dominate the landscape of New Wave play specifically *because* they are the object of critique. A play such as *White with Wire Wheels*, for example, is fundamentally about the male characters. But it would be ludicrous to suggest that the play is an affirmation of male Anglo-Celtic values. To a certain extent, the New Wave's political and stylistic agenda, namely the critique of established values and mores through the use of stereotype and caricature, meant that, if any feminist or anti-racist arguments were to



be made, it was almost inevitably through white male characters that this would occur. While it is accurate, then, to argue that women and minorities are often under-represented in New Wave plays, and that the increasing voice given to playwrights from these groups in future years was of vital importance in combating their oppression, it is problematic to suggest that the emancipation of these groups was not, to New Wave authors, a concern.

Racism is often satirised in New Wave plays. As well as the serious treatment given to it in *The Floating World*, there are off-the-cuff comments littered through many of the plays that demonstrate the thoughtless racism of mainstream Australian speech and action. Norm compliments Ahmed by telling him “You’re not like all those Chows down in Dixon street that jabber away in Chinese half the time” (*Norm and Ahmed* 33), while Robbo in *The Front Room Boys* makes constant mention of Vittorio’s “volatile Latin temperament” in spite of the latter’s obvious calm throughout (Buzo, *The Front Room Boys* 37). The boys in *The Chapel Perilous* talk about Sally “doing it” with “The boongs from the Catalina Base” (34). It is the off-handedness of these remarks that is so telling, particularly as they are often unquestioned by the other characters. Attitudes towards Indigenous Australians form the basis of Jack Hibberd’s fantasy *Captain Midnight V.C.* (1972), which satirises hypocritical attitudes towards Aborigines, and culminates in the foundation of a separatist state in Tasmania (D. Carroll 271). Throughout the drama of the New Wave it is clear that racist attitudes are an ingrained part of the mainstream Australian attitudes that the movement seeks to critique. The APG’s collaboration with the Nindethana Theatre on *Brumby Innes* (Radic, *The State of Play*), and the establishment of the Black Theatre in Redfern were important movements toward the next step, that of endowing minorities with a voice of their own.

Women, similarly, were rarely the subject of New Wave playwrights, but the sexist attitudes of mainstream white males certainly were. Hibberd's men in *White with Wire Wheels* are one example. Buzo's front room boys are similarly unable to distinguish between the acquisition of women and automobiles (*The Front Room Boys* 48). The men in Williamson's early plays are almost unerringly male-chauvinistic. In the majority of cases, the boasting of the male characters is somewhat out of touch with the reality of their romantic endeavours. Women are treated as status symbols and weapons in the power games between men. Hibberd's *Peggy Sue* (1974) is a more explicit critique of the exploitation of women, dealing with single mothers forced into prostitution. *Peggy Sue* reverses the casting dichotomy of Hibberd's earlier play, with all of the men played by one actor, and all sharing the same name, Aussie (Hainsworth 45). Romeril's *Mrs Thally F.* (1971) took this method a step further, with a dummy representing the central character's husbands. Vonnie's mother makes the meaning of this "doubling" quite clear when she asks "Will he smoke, drink, gamble? What man don't? Will he hit his wife? What man don't? Will he bring home his pay regular? Who can tell" (*Mrs Thally F.* 91). The focus with regard to the women in these plays, as with the men, is on the socially constructed nature of their gender roles, and the way that they are oppressed by those roles constructed for men. Authors such as Hibberd, Romeril, Buzo and Williamson make clear that the structures and stereotypes in which many of their characters take refuge are exclusionary, and incompatible with the equal treatment of women or other races. While these authors do not always point to alternative modes of being, it is clear that racism and sexism are a part of the unstable structure they wish to see undone.

Claire Dobbin writes that the absence of plays by women playwrights during the early years of the APG was chiefly due to the fact that women “didn’t write” (Dobbin 129). While it must be recognised that many women *did* write outside the mainstream theatre frame, Dobbin’s comments accurately reflect the lack of women represented in the dominant industry spaces, and the implicit discouragement that was thereby transmitted to any woman wishing to write. With the changing attitudes of the seventies, this attitude began slowly to shift. Dobbin describes the emergence in the early seventies, partly as the result of the growing interest in the women’s movement worldwide, of “a great blossoming of women’s theatre” (131). In Melbourne, at the APG, this blossoming took the form of the Women’s Theatre Group, an offshoot of the APG designed “to represent our views [. . .] It was completely new to go to ourselves as a source of material”. Dobbin describes the work of the group as “political content, didactic content in a sense [. . .] explicitly feminist” (130-31).

Of the women playwrights who did emerge in this period, the most successful were Dorothy Hewett and Alma De Groen, and, while there were differences (Hewett for instance had been writing for some time already, and her influences might be traced as much to Patrick White as to the New Wave), both produced work thematically and theatrically comparable to that of the male playwrights of the New Wave. De Groen’s *The Joss Adams Show*, for example, satirises contemporary women’s plight, with Joss’s poor treatment ultimately leading to the murder of her baby. As with much New Wave drama, though, this is achieved not through high drama but through comedy and satire, with sexist attitudes portrayed off-handedly. Joss recalls the tale of her rape casually, recounting for instance that when it was over “I was lucky. I caught a bus that took me right to the

door” (203). This nonchalant telling belies the horror of her experience, and alludes to a world in which rape is to some degree sanctioned and commonplace, an impression reinforced by her childhood experiences: “I remember a game. We called it Wild Horses. The girls were the horses and the boys had to catch us. They'd round us up and tame us, hold our arms behind our backs and throw us down in the grass. I wasn't very good at it because I always fought too hard and you weren't really meant to” (213). Society's hypocrisy and denial of women's experiences is also evident in men's casual attitudes toward her. The doctor does not give her any information regarding her pregnancy, instructing her instead to “ask my nurse for the baby book” (204), while Joss's husband refuses to stay home with her for the birth: “I told him it was coming but I don't think he believed me”(206). De Groen's play is another example of the New Wave focus on systems of oppression, and on the need for social, rather than individual, reform. It critiques a society which indoctrinates women to accept oppression as commonplace, and offers an awareness or education which might facilitate more liberated modes of being.

*The Chapel Perilous*, likewise, focuses on the way in which it is social structures and traditions which are most responsible for female oppression. In the early part of the play Sally's rebellion takes the form primarily of a sexual rebellion against the numbness and lack of emotion she sees around her: “I'd like to take you in my arms and shake some feeling into you, you cold, cold bitch. I want to feel everything. To tell everything, to walk naked. That's my protection” (Hewett, *The Chapel Perilous* 18). In denying the ideal of chastity and purity placed on her from above, Sally frustrates both her religious mistresses and masters, and her parents, who are unable to perceive her sexuality as anything other than an attack on them (33, 34). To the extent that they are representatives of thoughtless conformity, they

are correct. The hypocrisy of the Canon's expectations of Sally's purity, mentioned earlier, is mirrored by that of her lover Michael, who tells her "I can't love you after I've lain on you like a dog [. . .] Why didn't you refuse? Why weren't you revolted, normal about it?" (29). Michael is in turn fascinated and disgusted by Sally's sexuality. He uses it to draw her away from Thomas, asking her "Where's my brave wild girl gone now?" (68) and then scorns her, saying "I like my women virtuous" (75). Chastity and purity are "virtues" which society constructs, emphasising them when it is useful and ignoring them when it is not. They are tools by which the powerful can manipulate the oppressed, rather than concepts with intrinsic meaning.

In the second act Sally's idealism extends into the political arena, although her sexuality remains intact, a fact which Leslie Rees argues was quite revolutionary in itself:

it fully illustrates, perhaps for the first time in theatrical history, that an intensely joyous, rich and exploring sexuality in a woman is not inconsistent with a reforming intellectual idealism in respect of the moral-social state of the world and its people. So often it has been assumed by playwrights that a woman has to be one kind of person or the other, profane or sacred, never both. (Rees, *Australian Drama 1970-1985* 148, 49)

Sally as a character breaks the binary mould that women throughout the world were likewise trying to shatter. Whether or not the audience identifies with Sally as a character (she is presented as both idealistic and flawed) what *is* clear about this comparison between sexuality and political idealism is that the social structures and traditions which attempt to repress female sexuality extend the same oppressive authority into the realm of politics, too. Following the bombing of Hiroshima, the

Headmistress comments that “The dropping of the bomb was done by military men under military orders”. The Sister replies that “we are supposed to carry out orders, not question them” (50). The Authority figures who fear Sally’s sexuality are the same ones who put her on trial for her revolutionary political beliefs: “You own the courts. You are the judges”, she points out (64). While, as Joanne Tompkins argues, a temporally linear interpretation of the plot could lead to the perception that Sally’s final bowing lends the play a defeatist tone, there is also a great deal of idealism and hope, in broader structural terms, in the fact that “The main character, Sally Banner, continually breaks the rules that have dictated women’s roles for generations [. . .] perhaps other girls at the school and members of the audience will be able to experience and offer more in life than Sally, *because of Sally*” (“Time Passed/ Time Past: The Empowerment of Women and Blacks in Australian Feminist and Aboriginal Drama” 16, 17). Typically of New Wave plays, its idealism lies not in the central character’s journey but in the accompanying demonstration of the constructed nature of repression and ritual, and therefore of the potential, however difficult, of achieving broader, structural change.

The drama of the New Wave questions the accepted attitudes of society toward gender and other races. While the advances in granting women and minority authors a voice were limited, the authors who emerged in this period were influenced by the social climate around them, and they sought to critique the dominant ideology of white-male-centred discourse. They satirise the casual acceptance of racist and sexist beliefs among many men, and the unquestioned nature of such assumptions. Women writers who emerged at the time, similarly, offered a critique of the sexism implicit in structures of thought and social organisation. Alma De Groen’s *The Joss Adams Show* deals with the casual attitudes of society toward oppression and sexual

assault, and the lack of voice offered to women regarding their depiction in non-male-centric terms. Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous* critiques the hypocrisy of society's rhetoric of "purity" and "chastity", and suggests that such discursive weapons are utilised by the powerful purely on oppressive, manipulative terms, and thus as constructs, rather than due to any genuine currency they may hold. The play draws parallels between the silencing of sexual and political dissent. It shows the structures of dominant discourse, while successful, to be unstable and therefore changeable rather than "natural", therefore aligning the play with the materialist feminist project and the broader aims of sixties radicals who sought to break down acquiescence to the system and offer instead hope for broad social change.

## **Socialism**

The interlinking factor which joins all of the above themes and methods is, at least in a large percentage of cases, the commitment to a socialist or neo-socialist ideology. The Australian Performing Group was demonstrably committed to socialism, with a socialist-style structure and a commitment to taking the theatre to a broader audience, in particular the disenfranchised. Thematically, the deconstruction of structures of oppression as arbitrary and alterable, and the faith in individual reason as an anti-conservative measure adhere to socialist ideology. Critiques of the US and of militarism were also bound up with the socialist desire for workers' emancipation, as well as the desire for compassion and fellow-feeling. Concern for women and other races also followed a structural rather than individualist line, and in their critique of the constructed nature of sexual and racial oppression display Marxist

leanings. Alex Buzo's play *The Front Room Boys* is a clear satire of capitalist ideology. It contrasts the rhetoric of egalitarianism with the actions of the characters. The workers are unable or unwilling to see the contradiction between their oppression and their belief in "hard work" and a "fair go", principally because they are unable to conceive of their situation in structural rather than individual terms. It is clear that socialist tendencies underpin many aspects of the New Wave philosophy, just as they related to the drive for change in society at large.

Jack Hibberd writes that, at least from the arrival of the "Monash Maoists" in 1969 onward, the A.P.G. had a heavily socialist-leaning political commitment. ("Twenty-One Tomorrow" 14). This was clear in their basic structure as a company, which eschewed top-down models. Instead, as Radic writes, "The APG was established as a collective with a commitment to the notions of participatory democracy and worker control [. . .] Members had to pay their dues, attend meetings on a regular basis, and generally pull their weight. In practice, that meant taking turns at the ticket office, sweeping the floors, cleaning the lavatories, helping with the publicity and set-building, and running errands" (Radic, *The State of Play* 88). The A.P.G. also sought to broaden the traditional theatre audience. Dorothy Hewett writes that Jack Hibberd saw the new theatre "as a conscious attempt to bring the theatrically deprived back into the audience: the working classes, the young, the old, women, migrants. Aboriginals, the new middle classes". Hewett links the New Wave's methodological experimentation and work in non-traditional theatre spaces with its ideological commitment:

it did make attempts to spread out into the community, the factories and the trade unions. It had learned its tactics in the Vietnam demos, the University sit-ins and the anti-conscription marches. The use of



theatre in the streets had not been so successful since the old heady days of the Workers' Art Guilds' Living Newspapers, and the Referendum skits on the back of trucks for the Sydney New Theatre.

(“Shirts, Prams and Tomato Sauce: The All-Australian Theatre” 318)

In its structure and in many of its methods, the APG reflected a commitment to socialist ideals such as equality and inclusiveness. In this case at least, it reflects the growing interest and acceptance of socialist ideals in the broader community.

While it is true that individual members were not all avowed socialists (Hibberd, for example, never committed himself fully to the cause the way playwrights such as Hewett and Romeril did), and the A.P.G.'s collective structure and street theatre was not reflected by the Nimrod in Sydney, the ethos of socialist or neo-socialist thought permeates, methodologically and thematically, the work of many such artists. For example, there might initially seem a conflict between the ethos of socialist collectivism and the promotion of individuality over group mentality implicit in plays such as Hibberd's *White with Wire Wheels* and Buzo's *The Front Room Boys*. In fact, however, distrust of individual reason is a conservative tendency running back at least as far as Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, and the faith in individual reason a recurrent antidote. Plays such as these, by displaying the characters' behaviour as social and as constructed, reinforce the important belief that society and its structures and traditions are themselves arbitrary, not “natural” but man-made and therefore alterable. As Dennis Carroll writes with regard to the work of John Romeril: “Behind these plays is the urgent insistence that the characters have been made the way they are by society—and that society needs to be changed” (D. Carroll 254).

Needless to say, at the time of the Vietnam War opposition to the US was a necessary part of any socialist agenda, and the plays of the New Wave which critique US militarism frequently demonstrate socialist leanings. Boddy and Ellis's O'Malley, for example, in arguing against conscription, displays firm socialist beliefs. Commenting on the demise of ancient civilisations, O'Malley pleads "Do not let us repeat to all subsequent ages their folly of wasting the energies of millions to preserve the pleasures and passions of the few" (36). He asks with regard to parliament, "How is it possible for me to carry any reforms for the benefit of the helpless in a House constituted as this one is of worldly men, influenced more or less by rich bosses outside the House who are past-masters in the law of self preservation?" (49). Here critique of militarism is inherently linked to the critique of western-style capitalist democracy. *The Floating World's* focus, similarly, on class relations in the form of unsympathetic officers, rather than national boundaries, and on a lack of fellow-feeling as the primary causes of military conflict is also compatible with the author's socialist agenda.

*The Chapel Perilous*, likewise, establishes a clear parallel between sexual oppression and class oppression in Sally's trial, in which criticism of her politics intermingles with criticism of her sexuality: "Blasphemer, pacifist, atheist, Communist. She defied God" (64). The focus in the work of playwrights such as De Groen and Hewett on the social structures which oppressed women necessitated that their brand of feminist theatre was of a similarly leftist bent to the work going on at the A.P.G. and elsewhere. Whether we might label the feminist theatre of the seventies "Marxist" is an argument best avoided at this time. The drive for equality, with regard to women, Indigenous Australians, other races, or homosexuals, was, during the early seventies, a drive intertwined with the ideals of the socialist and

neo-socialist left. Both movements sought to tear down traditional structures of thought and to replace them with new ways of thinking and living.

Many New Wave plays deal with the superficiality of capitalist consumerism. Hibberd's *White with Wire Wheels* and Williamson's *Don's Party* are just two examples of plays parodying the emerging middle class. Alex Buzo's *The Front Room Boys* offers a clear critique of workplace relations and the capitalist mindset. Again the emphasis is on conformity. When the new typist introduces herself as Sandra, Thomo comments that "that's a bit stupid, isn't it? Why didn't they call you Sandra?"(28). The rhetoric of the office workers is of honest old-fashioned egalitarianism, evident in Robbo's tribute to Thomo: "he's a good bloke and he does the right thing by the other blokes who do the right thing by a bloke they know is a bloke who'll always do the right thing by a bloke"(35). Buzo is quick to deconstruct this oratory. Robbo goes on to claim that "You're not one of those hoity-toity, la-di-da, stuck-up bloody upper-crust snobs with their fancy accents bunging on side, who reckon they're a bit above having a beer with a bloke"(35), and Vittorio, inspired by his remarks, throws a portrait of Prince Philip out the window. The gesture is not appreciated. Later, when strikers march past the window, the front room boys' apparent egalitarianism is once again tested. Gibbo reads the placards: "Down... with... bosses. Down with bosses? That's outrageous!"(53). When Jacko says "good luck to the blokes on strike. They're workers, just like us", Gibbo replies "I'm not a worker [. . .] I'm a... white collar office employee" (64). Any solidarity exists in word only.

The workers, for the most part, remain unaware of the gap between their speech and their actions. This is drummed in when the workers prostrate themselves before Hendo. "Hey Robbo," says Jacko, "I thought you didn't hold with la-di-da

bigwig nobs who bung on side. I thought you believed no man was better than you.” Robbo replies “That’s right, mate. I don’t knuckle under to anyone. I don’t kow-tow to any bloody bigwig nob. I’m just as good as any man”. Then he kisses Hendo’s feet (99). Similarly, the majority of the boys seem unaware of the superficiality of their speech about “hard work”. Gibbo, for example, claims Hendo’s success is the result of the fact that “he’s a good bloke”, and claims similarly that “I got here by the sweat of me brow. I come up through the school of hard knocks” (59) despite the abundant evidence that success in the department is primarily the result of social climbing and ingratiation, while failure, in the case of Jacko, is the result not of any lack of hard work, but of an unwillingness to kow-tow to the organization’s ideological propaganda. In short, they are unable to see their workplace dynamic in anything but individualist terms, and thus are blind to the system that oppresses them. As Jacko, the one worker who does see through it, tells Vittorio “It’s all a shabby racket, Vittorio. Don’t try to crawl your way to the top of a pile of dung” (84). The implicit violence in the capitalist system is made explicit when Jacko, the only objector, tells his workmates “You’re all slaves and you worship your masters,” and finds himself tied up and beaten (120). *The Front Room Boys* is a scathing satire of faith in the capitalist system, and in the ideological rhetoric that comes attached to it.

Socialist ideals permeate much of the New Wave drama. The APG in particular had a socialist structure and was committed to reaching underprivileged groups. Thematically, many New Wave plays critique structures and traditions as constructed and alterable, putting faith in reason over conformity and offering the hope of radical change. Critiques of US imperialism and of war were often linked to class issues, and the need for human solidarity. The emancipation of women and

other races is also a concern in many works, and the critique of the constructed nature of gender and racial oppression aligns it with Marxist ideals. Alex Buzo's *The Front Room Boys* stands as an example of a New Wave critique of the capitalist system, in particular the inability of proponents to recognise the divide between the rhetoric and reality of exploitation, and the ability of discourse of egalitarianism to mask the structures of oppression. The play demonstrates how the capitalist system reproduces itself through myths and rhetoric and, when this fails, by violence.

The drama of the late sixties and early seventies in Australia is clearly related to the broader social movements occurring at the time. There is a concurrent criticism of tradition and conformity as a negative rather than positive thing, and a critique of social regulation as arbitrary and enforced, and therefore alterable. There is an attack on US imperialism and Australia's traditional perception of itself in terms of regional and world hierarchies. Attitudes to other races are criticised as conforming mindlessly to racist stereotypes, and attitudes to women, likewise, are problematised in terms of their hypocrisy and subservience to structures of oppression. The capitalist system is critiqued as constructed, rather than "natural", and the ideology which serves it shown as hollow. Overall, the drama of the New Wave sees a focus on change and on the potential for and need to overthrow existing structures of thought and oppression.

## **Chapter Two**

### **1976-1988**

This chapter deals with the period from 1975 to 1988. It argues that the drama and politics of this period both saw a decline in the optimism and radicalism of the preceding period. Politically, many of the reforms of the Whitlam government were slowed if not reversed. Economics became increasingly viewed as the primary consideration in any bid for reform. In the theatre, there was a clear loss of momentum, as the New Wave authors either disappeared or were pulled into the mainstream. The drama of this period is marked by a declining sense of radicalism, and an increased pessimism about the potential for changing the world. In both drama and politics, there was a fundamental shift from changing the structures of society to working within them. This slowing of the pace of reform and turn to more “realistic” aims helped to set the scene for the drama of the time to follow.

### **Political Context**

This section will argue that the politics of the period from 1975 to 1990 marks an important shift from the radicalism of the preceding period. The dismissal of Whitlam marked the end of that epoch’s reforming zeal. Whitlam became increasingly seen as “unrealistic”, and his predecessor Malcolm Fraser worked to rein in spending and to promote “economic growth” as a priority. The ALP took a similar turn, as did many social democratic parties worldwide, focusing on reforming within the system rather than reforming the system itself. Reform came to be seen as

limited by external, global forces, and “realism” was slowly replacing idealism as the guiding principle. Under Hawke and Keating in the 1980s, pragmatism reigned. The ALP shifted from systemic reform toward working within the existing framework. Increasingly the Federal Labor government argued that the only way to tackle disadvantage was to stimulate economic growth, and that the scope for social reform was limited. This led to deregulation and the dismantling of protection. In society, the questioning of traditional values in the early seventies was being clawed back by a conservative religious-based reassertion of family values. In the women’s movement, a shift occurred from materialist to liberal feminist aims, with the rise of “femocrats” working within existing structures replacing the earlier calls for society’s restructure. With regard to Indigenous rights and the rights of migrants, there was also a reduced idealism, and a slowing of reform in the face of a growing public backlash. In all areas of society, it seemed, idealism was being replaced by a brand of sceptical pessimism which labelled itself “pragmatism” or “realism”, but which in effect amounted to a slowing, if not reversing, of the previous era’s reforms.

The period from 1975 to 1990 was defined to a large extent, not surprisingly, by the repercussions of the dismissal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975. While many of the reforms of the earlier period continued under Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and then Bob Hawke, their reforms lacked in the main the revolutionary zeal which characterised the changes argued for so strongly by Whitlam and his supporters. “The Dismissal”, as it has since become known, shocked the nation and provided the dominant contextual referent for the development of both Labor and Liberal parties in the decades to follow. Retrospectively, perhaps, Whitlam came to be seen by many commentators as the

epitome of ideologically-driven revolt (although many more radical leftists might take offence), of the privileging of idealism over pragmatic concerns, “doomed from the beginning” (Hollier 107).

Paul Kelly writes that despite his ambitious designs, “Whitlam embodied the 1960s grandest delusion—that continuous prosperity was Australia’s destiny and that politics was about the distribution of wealth, not its creation” (21). This lack of “realism” was played upon by both his opponents and subsequent Labor leaders. Fraser won office with the promise to rein in the Whitlam government’s excessive spending:

Their first priority was the restoration of economic growth and the creation of conditions that would rouse business confidence, stimulate investment and bring back the cheap credit and low unemployment of the 1960s. They believed that the surest instrument for this policy was government spending cuts. (Bolton 248)

Fraser’s reforms, however, despite five years with Senate control, were limited by a post-Whitlam nation-wide fear of bold initiatives, to the extent that by the time Labor won office again in 1983 Fraser was seen by many members of his own party as an obstacle rather than an asset to their aims (P. Kelly 39, 52).

Chris Pierson writes that radical parties worldwide faced the task of re-imagining themselves in the wake of the sixties and the subsequent economic crises of the seventies: “leaders of social democratic parties and their advisers sought to re-define their political programmes in ways that were, as they saw it, both more viable and (hence) electorally more attractive”. Labor leader Bill Hayden, writing in 1982, describing a pamphlet he had published in 1968, claimed that: “of the many weaknesses in that 1968 pamphlet [. . .] the absence of sufficient discussion about



revenue raising and economic management is most significant” (“The Contemporary Implications of Democratic Socialism” 4). The rhetoric of the ALP in this period was dominated, like that of Fraser, by the need to focus on reform *within* the system, rather than reform of the system itself. Hayden’s 1980 prescription for Labor success, while it retains some level of humanitarian concern, is a far cry from the radicalism of the early seventies:

Labor’s cardinal principle is economic prudence, and reforms will be made in strict accordance with the ability of the economy to sustain them [ . . . ] One of the crucial lessons of the Labor government between 1972 and 1975 is that we must base our preparations for government on working within a predetermined structure, which will have little inherent flexibility. The aim of Labor government would be to use the existing structure, making internal adjustments where necessary and co-ordinating and directing it so that it is responsive to the party’s philosophy and policies. (“Facing Economic Reality” 240, 41)

Clearly, expectations had been lowered. Fred Gruen, in the same publication, argues that increasing globalisation had limited national governments’ power to such an extent that: “Labor supporters need to recognise that lasting improvements in the employment situation are likely to take some time to devise and to put into practice” (231). Labor supporters were also asked to accept “the limited extent to which income (and wealth) redistribution can be achieved without adversely effecting efficiency” (226). Gruen argues that redistribution of wealth is not conducive to economic growth (an argument also detailed by Pierson). If this was accepted, it became impossible for the structural change espoused in the former period to

continue to function alongside economic priorities. Already it was clear that working within economic parameters, and *implicitly* working within and reinforcing the status quo, was to take the place of any more radical structural change.

This factor was of course to emerge more clearly in the economic rationalism of Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his treasurer and successor, Paul Keating, following the ALP's election to office in 1983. Hawke made it clear on a number of occasions that pragmatism would dominate over idealism during his tenure: "I am not in the business of being able for some indefinite period to sit under the banyan tree and scratch myself and say, 'What a jolly good bloke am I' (...or...) to reside in that posture of ideological purity" (qtd. in Mills 9). Under Hawke and Keating, economic growth became the predominant method for tackling disadvantage, and this growth became seen as integrally linked to deregulation and the dismantling of protection. While some leftists saw this change as a betrayal of Labor principles, others saw it as "the least worst outcome", as a "rearguard action to hang on to as much social protection (or compression of income inequality) as it could in the face of powerful economic forces pulling it in the opposite direction" (Pierson). This notion that structural change, or reform of the status quo, was no longer possible, and that the best that could be done was to minimise damage and work as much as was possible within the existing system has led Chris Pierson to describe the period under Hawke and Keating as "social democracy on the back foot".

The period under consideration saw broader social developments which also sought in some respect to reclaim the institutions challenged under Whitlam. Geoffrey Bolton writes that during the late seventies "American cultural influence was reflected in a revival of fundamentalist Protestantism", and a number of other religious groups seeking to fight the declining faith, who used "their influence to

urge politicians to stand fast against permissive values” (255, 56). Meanwhile, despite the fears of conservative commentators in the earlier period, “the family ideal still flourished” (Bolton 262). Clearly in regard to family and religion, too, the status quo was proving more difficult to undermine than had originally been imagined.

The feminist movement, too, turned away from broader structural change as a goal. Whereas in the early seventies a common theme had been that “only by changing the entire social and economic system could women’s demands for equality and social justice be met” (Curthoys 20), this ambition became more and more diluted as the decade went on. The rise of “femocrats” working within the system rather than subverting it was to become an important aspect of Australian feminism during the seventies (Bulbeck 33). This brand of liberal feminism ultimately came to dominate over those feminisms which argued for wider change, and “By the early to mid-1980s, the socialist feminist tradition had become very much a minority stand within the women’s movement” (Curthoys 21).

In race relations, too, advances were stalled. Even under Whitlam in 1975 new legislation encountered difficulties due to bureaucratic hostility, as Charles Perkins observed: “If only the Labor Party knew how much the Public Service personnel in many areas deliberately undermine their policies and programs, they would not sleep at night” (qtd. in Hollinsworth 177). Under the Fraser government Aborigines were among the worst hit by the changing attitudes towards the economy and subsequent funding cuts. Lorna Lippmann writes that in the late seventies:

bureaucratic control was as severe and restrictive as in the Whitlam years, while funds were substantially tighter, making it more difficult for Aborigines to organise on a national scale or to run their local organisations autonomously. Hopes for rapid change were now

blighted and Aboriginal communities recognised that resistance to oppression was going to be even more gruelling under a conservative government respecting mining and pastoral interests than was the case previously. (60)

Disillusionment increased in the wake of the Federal government's inability to curb rebellious state governments who wished to ignore the press for land rights, such as the Nationals in Queensland under Sir Joh Bjelke-Peterson and the Western Australian government of Charles Court (Hollinsworth 182-83). Again, reform of the system had been undermined and was becoming seen increasingly as unrealistic.

The Hawke Government promised to alter this tendency on gaining office, but Dennis Carroll notes that having found "a way to override State governments on specific cases of refusing to cede tribal lands" it then "began dragging its feet after the 'mining rights' issue on such land rights became a major bone of contention" (347). Hollinsworth writes that this abandonment by Labor of its ideals with regard to race relations was "part of a broad shift to pragmatism" (193), the same shift which saw Labor move from "lofty" to "realistic" goals in regard to the redistribution of wealth. With regard to immigration, too, the argument became increasingly frequent that the liberal ideas of the seventies had "gone too far". Opposition leader John Howard commented that "although the original intent of multiculturalism may have been desirable, it has gone off the rails" (qtd. in A. Markus 219). Markus argues that in the early to mid eighties,

While it is difficult to pinpoint the transition precisely, a reaction developed to the broad consensus that had characterised policy in the mid-1970s. These years are characterised by overt attempts to return to the past; the perception that change was going beyond acceptable

bounds, and threatening to alter the basis of society, led to a drive to withdraw or halt the extension of special privileges to sectional groups, particularly with regard to land rights policy; to modify immigration policy to more clearly favour European groups; and to reaffirm what were depicted as Australian values. (175)

In regard to immigration and Aboriginal rights, as with socialist and feminist advances, the backlash had come thick and fast, and post-Whitlam Labor was afraid to tackle it head on. Aboriginal and migrant rights, it was increasingly being realised, were not going to be achieved as quickly as the advances of the seventies may have implied.

The politics of the period under examination, then, is best characterised as a re-evaluation. The reforming zeal of the previous era was tempered by circumstances and changing attitudes, and evolved into a more guarded determination to achieve change within rather than reform the system. Idealism was replaced by “realism” based often on perceived economic pragmatics. In terms of social reforms, this led to varying degrees of abandonment of the previous period’s ideals, as campaigners in the field such as economic disparity, feminism, and racism turned to less optimistic goals which could be achieved without broader social restructuring. A growing conservative backlash began to take back some of the ground taken by radicals, and socialist ideals were replaced by more market-driven concerns. Reforming the structure of society was no longer seen as a viable goal, replaced by the “realities” of making smaller reforms within the system. In short, the “Time of Hope” was over.

## **Drama: The Decline of the Left**

The drama of the late seventies and eighties reflected the changing attitudes in politics and society at large. There was a similar loss of momentum regarding the former period's reforming zeal and optimism. Funding purse-strings tightened, and smaller companies in particular were disadvantaged, while in larger companies growing concerns with costs led to a level of reduced ambitiousness. Thematically, playwrights began to focus on individuals rather than on groups, veering away from the former portrayal of social structures and stereotypes. Works by David Williamson during this period, such as *The Department* or *The Club* epitomise the era's growing frustration in their depiction of ideals stifled by economics and bureaucracy.

In the drama of late seventies and early eighties, there is a noticeably similar shift away from the radical upheavals which marked the early years of the New Wave. Fitzpatrick writes that "By the mid-1970s, there was a distinctly post-boom feeling about theatre in Australia" (*After the Doll* 157). As early as 1976, Dorothy Hewett commented that "the great excitement engendered by the 1968 revival" had "calmed down" ("Shirts, Prams and Tomato Sauce: The All-Australian Theatre" 319), and that "The race of old Australian '68-70 theatre buffs are already wistful for the good old days of the Old Nimrod and early Pram Factory, not to mention La Mama" (317). By the late seventies this impression was widespread. Leonard Radic wrote in 1979 that "The boom years are over" ("State of Play in Australia" 98), going on to list a number of New Wave playwrights, such as Buzo, Hibberd, Romeril, Blair and Kenna, whose best work appeared to be behind them (99). Hibberd wrote in the same year that "My distinct impression is that the mood of

Australian theatre at the moment is one of eerie calm. It is neither the calm of confidence nor the calm of catatonia—thought there is attendant an air of languor, *ennui* even” (“Proscenium Arch Blues” 126). Fitzpatrick comments that perhaps “the drama was simply holding up the mirror to a society which by 1975 seemed to wear a particularly grim and wary face” (*After the Doll* 157). Hibberd would seem to agree, writing that “Certainly the present economic and political atmosphere, with its Spartan and costive clamping down on options, pleasures and social experiment, has contributed substantially” (“Proscenium Arch Blues” 127). It is clear that the dismissal of the Whitlam government and subsequent crisis of belief among the Australian left extended to playwrights as well.

This sense of frustration at stalled hopes is also evident in the theatre industry. Hibberd hints at bureaucratic conservatism within the theatrical establishment in his longing for an era “when politics in the theatre was not an entirely dirty word” (“Proscenium Arch Blues” 127). Radic reinforces this notion, writing that “playwrights write to be produced; and the economics of the theatre being what they are, the pressure on them is to be safe, conservative and technically unambitious” (“State of Play in Australia” 100). In this sense there is a direct connection with the broader political situation, as Fraser tightened funding and available money was directed more and more towards the major “flagship” companies at the expense of smaller groups (Fitzpatrick, “After the Wave: Australian Drama since 1975” 163). It is no surprise therefore that many New Wave artists “seem to have been drawn in spite of themselves into the commercial theatre” (Brisbane, “Australian Drama” 279). Working within the establishment was to replace tearing down the mainstream and starting anew, which no longer appeared an accessible goal.

Thematically, too, this disillusionment was to emerge also as a dominant factor in the playwriting of the period. The most obvious example is *Whitlam Days* by Anne Brooksbank and Bob Ellis, which Collin O'Brien describes as "an ironic look back at the fading of the hopes and aspirations of the near-left intelligentsia who saw in the election of Gough Whitlam's Labor Party the hope of an upsurge in both money and freedom for the arts"(33). Other examples are less direct. However the tendency away from revolutionary reform toward working within the system is clear. Alex Buzo, for example, came to look back on his earlier work as his "angry plays", from a time when he still believed "a playwright's function was to change society's thoughts", as opposed to his more recent focus on "individuals in Australian society, rather than how society forms individuals" (McCallum, "Coping with Hydrophobia: Alexander Buzo's Moral World" 60, 62). Carroll writes similarly of a wider trend whereby "group stylisation gave way to themes of self-exploration and self-definition" (290). Hibberd came to believe that politics in the theatre could only survive if it was "insidious" ("Interview with Geoff Sirmai" 265). Fitzpatrick argued that in Williamson's work there was a change from portraying humans as socially constructed to a more Freudian analysis (although Williamson disagreed) (*David Williamson*). A focus on individuals over groups, and the reduced belief in the efficacy of effecting widespread political change, can be seen as offering philosophical parallels to the decline in the popularity of Marxist and neo-Marxist structural thought worldwide.

Certainly the difficulties of maintaining radical ambitions while working within the system is a theme of Williamson's plays of the era. Katharine Brisbane writes in his *Collected Plays Volume II* that "The primary themes covered in these plays are bureaucratic pettiness, artistic and professional integrity; committee-room



power games; and the legacy of ideologies” (“Introduction” vii). Perhaps the strongest example of this is *The Club*. Under the guise of a depiction of the machinations behind the scenes at a football club, Williamson delivers a tale in which the ideals of past generations are portrayed as crumbling in the face of self-serving bureaucracy and economic rationalism. Little wonder the play successfully transferred to Berlin, a city experiencing a similar disillusionment (Perkins, “Too Real or Not to Reel- a Decade of Directions in Australian Drama 1969-1978”; Macainsh). Even before the dismissal, though, it is clear that Williamson had begun to lose hope, as the ideals of the Whitlam government struggled with the difficulties of the constitution and an unco-operative senate. Brisbane writes that *The Department* shows “Australia in 1974 as Williamson saw it—divided and incompetent, its workers patching up old engines and old methods while the bureaucrats bicker over their vested interests and dream of the elusive world of power” (“Introduction” ix).

The drama of the late seventies and eighties reflects the changing dynamic of society at the time. There was a concurrent decline in the optimistic fervour of the previous period, and a growing sense of disillusionment. Funding issues reduced the viability of many smaller, more radical companies, while economic issues impacted on the larger companies by reducing the likelihood of such companies taking risks. Playwrights began to turn away from the previous focus on social constructs and stereotypes, centring their works instead in individuals. Williamson’s work during the period typifies the increasing loss of ideals and frustration at the stumbling blocks put in place by bureaucracy and economic rationalism.

## **Caught Up in the System: Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra.**

The early plays of Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra bear comparison in the light of society's declining ideological optimism. Both present an international awareness which may reflect the growing awareness of globalisation and particularly economic interdependence. Both present a vision of change which is not particularly hopeful. Nowra's *Inner Voices* and *The Precious Woman* both depict the extent to which the oppressed internalise the standards of their oppressors and thereby reduce any rebellion to a rebellion in name only, leaving the social system and its values in place. This can be clearly compared to the ALP's declining faith in its ability to overturn aspects of the capitalist system. *Inside the Island*, similarly, depicts rebellion as created by the oppressors, but offers no hope of positive change; indeed, the rebellion strengthens rather than weakens the current system. Sewell's early plays, similarly, often depict a loss of ideals rather than hope. *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea* depicts a revolutionary party drawn by its compromises into the mainstream. In *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, the central character gradually loses his belief that any alternative to the current system will ever emerge. *Dreams in an Empty City* does offer hope of resistance, but confines it to the level of individual redemption rather than broad social change. All of these plays reflect a sense of hopelessness and the growing belief that the rebellion of the sixties had come to naught.

Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra are perhaps the most successful of the playwrights to have emerged in the period after the New Wave. Both were produced throughout the eighties and by the early nineties were among the most produced and best known names in Australian mainstream drama. Both reflect the growing

awareness of globalisation, as well as the fading of the nationalist agenda of the earlier authors of the seventies, in the fact that the early work of each of them eschewed Australian settings for overseas locales. Jack Hibberd, for one, reacted critically to this development, stating that the English-oriented theatre establishment emitted “sighs of relief when playwrights such as Louis Nowra appeared” (“The Myth of an Australian Theatre” 11). Nowra, meanwhile, was critical of the New Wave’s limited vision of Australian life. He claims to have been put off by its “preoccupation with beer, women, cars and sport”, as well as its maleness and “middle-class sensibility” (“Autobiography”). Nevertheless Nowra and Sewell shared with the New Wave authors the desire to critique power structures and the status quo. A significant difference, though, lies in the pessimistic nature of these emerging works. In Sewell and Nowra’s early works, there is widespread critique of systems. There is little sense, however, of any potential to alter them.

Veronica Kelly writes that Louis Nowra’s early plays were often seen as “dark and difficult high-culture parables” (*The Theatre of Louis Nowra* ix), and Fitzpatrick’s description of Nowra’s work as “a series of powerful associated images which defy the penetration of reason”, offering “no firm political standpoint” (“After the Wave: Australian Drama since 1975”) would seem to attest to the difficulty of any firm interpretation of these works’ meaning. Certainly they lack the political signposting evident in the work of authors such as Romeril and Hewett.

Nevertheless, there are certain recurring themes. In particular, plays such as *Albert Names Edward* and *Inner Voices* deal with indoctrination, and the methodical subsumption of individuality (limited though it is in the cases of Edward and Ivan) to social norms. In the case of *Inner Voices*, Ivan is indoctrinated by Mirovich in order to facilitate the latter’s political ends... the overthrow of the Russian monarch. Ivan,

as Kelly notes, “is shown to have learnt all too well not only the verbal text but the motivational subtext of the ‘education’ meted out to him by his mentors” (“A Mirror for Australia: Louis Nowra's Emblematic Theatre” 436). While Ivan does rebel, killing the grotesque Mirovich, and thereby achieving some form of liberation, it is clear that his rebellion itself has been fundamentally shaped by his own treatment, his own “education”. Ivan’s revolution is one in name only. The means by which he will rule are no different to those of his predecessors. While Kelly argues that he does achieve some personal growth and increased sense of responsibility (“A Mirror for Australia” 435, 41), the story ends with Ivan as torturer, his empire seemingly doomed to crumble, and thus “as the play ends this remains a largely undeveloped potential, an image of a path not followed” (“A Mirror for Australia” 435). The systems of oppression are here depicted as powerful; far from being doomed to crumble, they successfully rewrite rebellion as conformity. Genuine revolution, a revolution of structural change, appears unlikely, if not impossible. In terms of its relation to the changing political landscape of Australia, *Inner Voices* certainly seems to conform to the tendency of portraying revolutionary change as hamstrung by an all-embracing and ideologically self-replicating system.

This theme is continued through Nowra’s subsequent works: *Visions*, *Inside the Island*, and *The Precious Woman*. *The Precious Woman* tells of a rebellion against a tyrannical ruler, and the way in which the central character, Su-Ling, learns, like Ivan, to utilise the means of those she wishes to overthrow. As John McCallum notes, “the cold pragmatism which is needed to effect change [. . .] is provoked by the passionate humanitarianism which discovers the need for it” (“The World Outside” 121). Radic writes that “Nowra has called *The Precious Woman* his ‘most optimistic play’. I found it, on the contrary, austere and pessimistic”.

Admittedly, compared to his previous works, the tag “most optimistic” is, perhaps, hardly a great claim. However, Radic’s argument that ultimately Su-Ling “has learnt one of life’s important lessons—namely ‘that the weak will always be slaughtered by the strong... that compassion in this world is a vice, a weakness” (Radic, *The State of Play* 189) does seem the most likely interpretation (see also D. Carroll 319-20). While Su-Ling does display some contrition, like Ivan’s growing self-awareness it is overshadowed by the violence surrounding her, and provides at best potential for personal moral development, but never widespread change or hope. Again, the ruler may change but the ideology driving the system itself will survive.

*Inside the Island* transplants the action for the first time to Australia, and the plot deals with a colonial family’s ill-treatment of the local workers. The wife, Mrs Dawson, feeds the workers poisoned flour in order to save money, with the result that they are sent temporarily insane, and murder her husband and daughter. Dennis Carroll argues that the contemporary resonances are in this case stressed at the expense of its aesthetic appeal: “The significance of the play is bludgeoned into the audience in both the monodimensional unpleasantness of Mrs Dawson and in the stressed idea that the ergot has merely released impulses already implanted in the men through the ‘teaching’ of autocratic systems”(318). Regardless, the flour as a metaphor is perhaps more directly relevant to the economic rationalist cost-cutting of Australia at the time than is the lust for power of Mirovich (although his extraordinary gluttony might, with a little imagination, enable a similar interpretation). As with Ivan’s revolution, the primary result is violence but not genuine ideological change. In a political sense, there is a direct comparison to Marx’s argument that capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction, but little sense of a better life to follow. The fire that engulfs the homestead might be read as a

harbinger of change, but the fact that Mrs Dawson survives at the expense of her kinder husband and daughter is perhaps a sign that the old mentality is not gone, and that the attempt to overthrow the system will result ultimately in its reinforcement, this time with those elements of more liberal philosophies removed. The argument would seem to be, then, not that economic rationalism is doomed, but that any rebellion which its oppressions engender will only succeed in reaffirming, if not increasing, its position of dominance.

Stephen Sewell might at first glance seem an odd choice of playwright to include in any argument for the loss of ideological momentum, given that his early work was avowedly Marxist and that some critics referred to his plays as “relentless propaganda pieces” (Fitzpatrick, “After the Wave: Australian Drama since 1975” 174). Nevertheless, whatever the basis for his work, in practice they fit very much into the frame described above. For a playwright wishing to examine the fading of socialist ideals in the face of practical difficulties, it was hard to look past Russia for inspiration, and it is perhaps no surprise that in its final years the APG staged two plays in such a setting<sup>5</sup>. Sewell’s *Traitors* is set following the Russian revolution, and depicts “the death of Marxist ideals under the pressure of Stalinist totalitarianism in the Russia of the 1930s” (D. Carroll 298). His earlier play, *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea* (1978) deals with similar themes. It tells of a father and son, across two time-frames, presenting scenes of unemployment in the late fifties, and a revolutionary uprising in the near future. The play dips its hat to the broader, worldwide, context in the form of a montage of struggles worldwide (36, 37). However, the play ultimately presents a somewhat despairing picture. Following violent reprisals and military opposition the revolutionary party agrees to make

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<sup>5</sup> Phil Motherwell’s less successful *Dreamers of the Absolute*, dealt with pre-revolutionary socialist terrorism (Radic, *The State of Play: The Revolution in Australian Theatre since the 1960s* 160)

concessions and to join the parliamentary system. Dan, the central character, doesn't want to compromise but finds his ideals fading in the wake of his growing disillusionment with the people around him: "Healthy, vibrant people enjoying themselves look like monsters. You can't stand to talk to people. And slowly the things that caused you to join the struggle—the compassion, the outrage at injustice—die" (37). While Dan's anti-communist father is a clearer example of ideological indoctrination, Dan's journey is comparable to Nowra's rebels, in that he finds himself unable to move beyond a social system which is mentally pervasive to the extent that it structures and reshapes rebellion against it into its own image. As Sewell writes in his author's notes, "slowly I found out where Australia fitted into the scheme of things and how there weren't any madmen in control, that the whole monstrous machine was mad and out of control". As with Nowra's plays, the system is critiqued but there exists little if any hope for change.

Sewell continued the argument in his following works. After *Traitors*, he wrote *Welcome the bright world* (1982), and Radic writes that "Where *Traitors* had taken as its theme the collapse of the communist ideal under Stalin, the new play took as its subject the collapse of idealism in Western Germany today (and by extension, in Western democracies at large)". He returned to Australia as a setting with *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1983), which deals again with failing ideals, this time within the Australian political system. Allen is a socialist who slowly turns away from his beliefs as the result of his frustrations with the system. He is egged on by seductress Rose, an American agent, in a plot Fitzpatrick compares to "the story of the damnation of Faust" (*Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* 18). Rose convinces him that the corruption of the world "is the perfect reflection of the human heart" (134), and he loses all hope in achieving change within the system:

The appalling beauty of capitalism is that it creates the illusion of our freedom; that it makes us think we can change it or alter it—that we create it. But that’s not true. It creates us. It makes our desires and our thoughts—[. . .] all we are, are momentary carriers of its power and what’s finally real is capitalism; draining living things of their substance; a rapacious horror that’ll never end until it’s finally eliminated human life completely and replace it with its own self-reproducing machines. (122)

Again, genuine rebellion, structural rather than mere regime change, seems close to, if not impossible. The play does end with what may be the start of a revolution, but again, as with the plays discussed above, the audience is presented with a tiny glimmer of hope in the midst of despair. As Radic writes, “The proletarian giant is dancing. But is it a dance of triumph or a dance of death? Sewell leaves it to his audience to supply its own answer.”(*The State of Play* 194). The play’s final image, of Louise, one of the play’s few true idealists, screaming, does not augur well.

The play which followed, *Dreams in an Empty City* (1986), follows similar lines. *Dreams* depicts something of a secularisation of the Christ-story. An ordinary man is caught amid the cynical self-serving dealings of the financial world. He rejects violence in favour of faith and hope and is subsequently betrayed and killed. The play, like *Blind Giant*, offers a vast panorama of characters and scenes, which has the potential to conform to the Marxist emphasis on structure and context; the characters’ actions are clearly part of an intricate web of broader contexts, and their motivations social as much as individual. As Fitzpatrick notes, in these plays, “the social fabric is, to shift a metaphor, a delicate web, in which movement at any single point will have direct implications for every other one. Such a model of



interdependence is transformed very easily into a metaphor for moral responsibility” (*Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* 16). In another sense, though, the play is representative of the growing sense of dislocation felt among communities increasingly at the mercy of globalised forces. Sewell himself recognised the danger “of tempting the audience into what they believe anyhow; that the world is incomprehensible and so why bother” (qtd. in Fitzpatrick, *Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* 17). While *Dreams* does offer some kind of hope in the form of Chris, there is arguably even less chance of wider social change occurring in this work than in *Blind Giant*. Chris is offered up as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind, but, like the story of Christ himself, any salvation is indefinitely deferred. “Hope”, in Chris’s case, lies in defiance, but it is a chance for personal redemption rather than any revolutionary change, which appears in this play a very distant goal. As Dennis Carroll writes with regard to *Blind Giant* and *Dreams*, “The three plays (including *Bright World*) end in an apocalypse in which social revolution is either useless or doomed to failure. In the two plays set in Australia, the reason that any change is doomed is because of Western—specifically American—capitalism, and the political and economic stranglehold it has on Australia”(D. Carroll 300). Personal morality may be asserted, but structural change has been replaced, as with the Hawke government in the eighties, by surviving as best one can within.

The early plays of Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra represent a clear indication of the growing loss-of-faith in the efficacy of broad social rebellion or change. Both reflect the increasing awareness of globalisation, both in their settings and in the portrayal of characters at the mercy of forces beyond their power to change. In Nowra’s *Inner Voices* and *The Precious Woman* he depicts the internalisation by the oppressed of the standards of the oppressors, and the likelihood

this creates of the perpetuation of the dominant discourses despite any apparent uprising or change. *Inside the Island*, too, portrays rebellion as strengthening, rather than overturning, the social structure of society. Stephen Sewell's early plays tend to deal with loss of ideals, for example in *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea*'s political compromises or in the central character in *The Blind Giant is Dancing*'s loss of faith in the potential for capitalist structures and thought to ever be overthrown. *Dreams in an Empty City* appropriates the story of Christ, but again conforms in that Chris's death, while offering the chance for personal redemption, offers little hope for a better world to come. In many of these plays, there is a clear critique of the capitalist system, but in all of them the previous era's hope for, and belief in, widespread structural change is undermined. This is a telling reflection of the change in Australian social beliefs and ideals.

### **Generational Conflict, Families: Sewell, Gow, Nowra.**

Just as the late seventies and early eighties saw the return to certain notions of family which the sixties had sought to question, so the drama of the period in question saw a growing number of family reunion plays. These plays all examine in some way the generational tableau, in particular the relationship between the radical '68 generation and their parents. Michael Gow's *Away* (1986) initially appears to present a generationalism similar to the previous era, with radical youngsters overthrowing the mindset of the conservative older generation. However, its retrospective nature lends it a pessimism not applicable to the New Wave plays. The emerging generation

brings hope, but is already doomed to die, and lasting change is unable to surpass the individual level. Louis Nowra's *Sunrise* (1983), too, initially presents a conservative older generation in conflict with a younger, more radical mindset. However, as the play progresses the younger generation is revealed to be far from united, while patriarch Clarrie's conservative notion of human nature and his rejection of reason and fellow-feeling are to some extent validated. Stephen Sewell's *Hate* (1988) offers a similar vision of generational conflict, with father John's conservatism comparable in its rejection of compassion and reason in favour of a darker "human nature". John's simplistic populism is presented as appealing to some of the younger generation. Indeed, rather than being portrayed as an ailing force, John is painted as the country's likely future. The generational portrayal of these plays, then, has shifted from the radical overthrow of the previous more conservative generation's mentality, toward a recognition of the limits of this revolution and the recognition, if not validation, of many of the values of this generation, previously thought dispensed with.

As detailed in Chapter One, one of the hierarchical structures which came under attack in the seventies was the family, through changing notions of divorce, sexuality and women's rights. Generational conflict and generational change formed a part of plays such as *The Chapel Perilous* or *The Christian Brothers*, but the percentage of successful plays set predominantly within a family situation during this period was small. It is perhaps a sign of the confidence of the "Generation of '68" that the family is most evident in its absence; there was, perhaps, little need to critique an institution which was becoming less and less relevant to contemporary society. It is perhaps, then, a sign of the family's resurgence as an ideal, or at least its unexpected continuance as an institution into the eighties (Bolton 262-64) that the

eighties saw the emergence of familial gathering plays, often dealing with generational conflict and inheritances, a genre which was to become increasingly prominent in the nineties. At this time the Boomer Generation was aging and many of the former lifestyle radicals moving into more conventional familial situations themselves. These plays provide a further depiction of the changing ideals of Australia during the eighties.

Michael Gow's 1986 success, *Away*, takes place at Christmas, 1967, at the dawn of what was to be a seminal year around the world. In the course of the play, Gow clearly details the sea-change in attitudes which was occurring throughout the country at the time. *Away* attempts to recapture the feeling of revolutionary zeal associated with the late sixties. In that sense, it is a forward-looking play. With the benefit of hindsight, Gow offers a snapshot of the pre-Boomer generation's fading ideals. Meg's parents Gwen and Jim represent the generation of Australians who survived the Great Depression: "Sacrificed! Gone without. Gone through hardship so what happened to us will never happen to you. So you'll never know what we saw—never, never, never. Never see people losing jobs and never finding another one, never be without a home, never be without money for a decent meal, never be afraid that everything will fall apart at any second" (32). Gwen's attitudes reflect her era: "If we're going to have any sort of reasonable holiday we're going to have to pay for it" (16). She is cynical about Tom's family because they are migrants: "No one asked them to come out to this country" and because they are poor: "They both work, don't they? In a factory, isn't it [. . .] They shouldn't be going on a holiday if they can't afford one" (11). Fear of immigration is also reflected in the attitudes of the "regular" campers at their campsite: "some of the New Australian campers need to be reminded of the way proper Australian families run a holiday" (35). At another

resort, meanwhile, Coral is attempting to cope with the loss of her son in the war, and in particular her husband's need to move on from the tragedy. While some of Gwen's attitudes towards money might have had a renewed relevance in 1986, contemporary Australia was, at least publicly, attempting to put war and racism behind it. In that sense *Away* mirrors the plays of the seventies which critiqued the attitudes of the establishment as outdated and in need of reform. The older generation represents many of the ideals (concern with money, family, racist attitudes, perpetuation of the social classes) which the New Wave authors wanted to critique.

Ultimately, it is through the younger generation that the characters are able to come to terms with these experiences. A storm forces Gwen and Jim to flee their caravan park, and they end up at the same beach as Vic and Harry. Daughter Meg convinces them to join the holiday of her friend Tom, and the problems of the migrant family force Gwen to alter her perceptions, to place her worries in perspective. "Come on, down to the water," she tells Jim afterwards. "The water's so warm" (47). Meanwhile Coral is drawn out of her shell by Tom, who helps her to let go of her son's ghost and "Return to human life again" (54). The younger generation in *Away* is presented as more open, more forward-looking, and, Tom's illness notwithstanding, ultimately present an optimistic view of the future. The generational passing of the baton is reinforced by Tom's final monologue, from Shakespeare's *Lear*: "'tis our fast intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we/ Unburden'd crawl toward death" (57). In many ways, then, *Away* might seem to represent a similar mindset to the plays of the sixties and early seventies. However, the play's 1986 context adds another dimension to this message. *Away* cannot be judged as a contemporary drama.

The fact that it is set in a time past, particularly one so renowned for its revolutionary zeal, lends it a nostalgic feel. The play represents not the dawning of a new age of rebellion, but the dawning of an age already (to the audience) past, an important distinction. The fact that Tom, the primary representative of generational change, is ill with a deadly disease, adds to this impression. The play's tone is not of hope but of loss; it is a homage to a time already too soon gone, a chance at emancipation let slip, a theme Gow was to tackle again in his bicentennial play *1841* (1988). What hope does exist in the play is portrayed on an individual scale. This represents a revision of the New Wave's hopes for structural change.

Louis Nowra's *Sunrise* also deals with generational change, as aging patriarch Clarrie gathers his family together at his country estate. Clarrie's son Richard offers a glimpse of Australia's possible future. His view of the potential benefits of Australia's proximity to Asia, and our rich Indigenous culture, for example, prefigure the multiculturalist agenda of the ALP in the decade to come. He is violently opposed to his father's colonial mentality, telling him "What I'm looking forward to is you becoming extinct. The last of a people who believe that if you have the money you can buy up all the land you want and build a fairyland at the expense of everyone else and have obligations to no one. This is the twilight of your era, Clarrie" (39). *Sunrise* then, like *Away*, is to an extent a play about the passing of an age, focussed within the microcosm of a family unit. Clarrie's death will represent the passing of outdated attitudes.

Clarrie is deeply distrustful of Richard's idealism, and indeed his generation. He tells Richard, "Only idealists could have developed the atomic bomb [. . .] It isn't old people who are going to destroy us, it's the young because they're never aware of the consequences of anything they do [. . .] I don't like you, Richard, you're a

child in long pants” (40). In true conservative fashion, he is cynical about humanity. Like patriarch Presley in Michael Gurr’s *A Pair of Claws* he sees politics as separable from personal life: “Jesus, I hate this era where people see their lives and others through ideologies and politics. There is no such thing as the state; there is only hunger, imagination, pain, pleasure, love and friendship” (41). Clarrie sees the world, then, unlike the sixties writers, in individual rather than social terms. His cynicism is due to a belief that man is unable to fully control his own nature, a belief which might at least in part be attributed to his fears regarding his own baser instincts: “When I was killing the sheep I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to shoot and shoot and shoot. When I think of what’s inside me, what wants to escape, I am frightened for those around me. This fear, this terror, is so great that I don’t think I can make it... but I do... Every day the feeling becomes harder to fight, more difficult to fathom” (55). The distrust of ideology in the face of “natural” human behaviour is an argument mirrored in broader conservative arguments about the failure of socialist project to encompass “human nature”, as well as in the growing argument for an end to neo-socialist controls on the “natural” life of the free market. It is, of course, also a direct repudiation of the sixties ideal of individuals governed by reason and compassion.

As the play progresses, Clarrie’s point of view is to a certain extent validated by the other characters. Rather than the younger generation representing a rejection of Clarrie’s mentality, as the character of Richard seems to suggest, as the play progresses they reveal similar thoughts. Irene recalls being caught up in a protest: “So violent, so full of hatred [. . .] If that’s what it means to believe in something then I’d sooner believe in nothing” (28), while David believes that “history always proves the pessimist right” (17). “Rational” ideology is contrasted with nature and

found wanting. “One day when I’m an old lady I’ll have complete control of myself”, Irene hopes (52). Vince is an example of the futility of combating nature, still full of intelligence but unable since his stroke to express it. Venice, the child, clearly disturbed by her experiences in Africa, is the character who most eludes rational thought, and at the end of the play she kills Clarrie (56).

Like Gow in *Away*, Nowra uses natural disaster to symbolise the passing of an age, as fire threatens to engulf and destroy the colonial homestead. While Clarrie is hardly a likeable character, there is little certainty that there are better times to follow his demise. The next generation is represented not as unified but as multifarious. While the nature side of the nature/culture binary is not totally romanticised as a traditional conservative argument might do, it is clear in this play that rational ideology is limited and unreliable as a belief system. The end result of the generational handover is ambiguous, but what is clear is that *Sunrise* advances the philosophy echoed increasingly by David Williamson in his work, that “we are not quite as nice, rational and decent a species as we like to think we are” (Featherstone). If there is any hope in the play’s sunrise, then, it is a hope which is guarded and bleak, and one which rejects much of the mentality of the previous era. It would seem, then, more likely that Clarrie’s beliefs will ultimately win out.

The father-figure in Stephen Sewell’s play *Hate*, John, similarly, is a conservative politician who is deeply cynical about humanity. As his son Michael comments, “He believes life’s a fraud, that human beings are disgusting; that the only saving grace that any one of us has is the instinct to grab whatever we can and trample whoever we can destroy”. John, too, espouses his own particular brand of what he sees as pragmatism in contrast to the idealism he sees around him, claiming “you can’t run a welfare state when every man, woman and child in the country owes



seven thousand dollars overseas! [. . .] you can't develop a nation when you're handing back half of it to those drunken Neanderthals that sat on it for forty thousand years without even figuring out how to make a clay pot!" (64). Again, the hope in reason and compassion held by the New Wave's generation is seen as unrealistic, in the face of "nature". Unlike *Away* or to a lesser extent *Sunrise*, the result of the generational battle is, in *Hate*, far from clear cut. John aims to pass his fortune onto daughter Celia, who despite her abuse at his hands as a child still admires her father because "he's prepared to fight for what he believes!" (81). This can be seen as a harbinger of the populist appeal of the conservative conviction politicians of the nineties such as Hanson and Howard, whose commitment to "the way it is" would overshadow for many voters questions of compassion. Compared to Richard's confidence in *Sunrise*, *Hate*'s son Raymond's view of the future is much less rosy. He claims that Australia will

be lucky to get out of the political turmoil they'd cause before the end of the century. This isn't the old Right we're dealing with, Michael; this is straight forward populist reaction. Can't you already hear them shouting from the wings: the capital punishment crowd, the anti-Asian league, every small town little Hitler with a chip on his shoulder straining at the leash just dying to get their hands on the Jews and the poofers and every other child-molesting son of a bitch that's supposed to have his thumb on the windpipe of the country? [. . .] Their jaws set with hatred, their eyes flashing with resentment as they march down the street waving their flags they're so proud to carry because they're Australian. (70)

In *Hate* it is not the winds of progressive change, as in *Away*, or even the ambivalent undercutting of ideological commitment, as in *Sunrise*, but the conservative patriarch who is portrayed as a “force of nature”. The older generation, and its conservative values appear not as a spent force, but as a powerful tyrant, trying with all his might to preserve his beliefs in the face of a no-longer-so-indomitable Generation of ’68.

The period under discussion saw a number of generational conflict plays which redefine the beliefs of the previous period. Gow’s *Away* initially seems to be a play welcoming the radical boomer generation. However, its retrospective context and the impending death of youth rebellion lend it a more pessimistic tone, and rebellion is confined to individual rather than broader social or structural terms. Nowra’s *Sunrise*, similarly, initially appears as a validation of a radical youth’s rejection of their predecessors’ conservatism, but takes a quite different track, subverting the notion of radical youth while also validating to some extent the older generation’s conservative beliefs. Sewell’s *Hate* presents a generational tableau wherein the older generation’s conservative values regarding human nature are welcomed by sections of youth, and indeed appear the country’s likely future. These plays, then, as a whole, represent a clear revisioning of the previous era’s generational overthrow, an acknowledgement of the clawing back of the pre-sixties generation and its ideals.

### **Women and Minorities in the 1980s**

Drama by women and minorities in the period under discussion again bears comparison. Women’s theatre groups began to focus less on overthrowing the

present theatre system, and more on the liberal feminist aim of helping women to find work within it. Again, this followed a loss of optimism and momentum, and a frustration at the slow pace of change. There was a similar turn away from political drama, seen increasingly as “propaganda”. Community theatre also saw a shift from Marxist style agit-prop to pieces more informed by multi-culturalism. Much migrant drama also focussed on the difficulties of existing within a (unfamiliar and often hostile) system, a tendency also present in the growing Indigenous drama in the work of playwrights such as Jack Davis.

In feminist drama, by the eighties the worm had begun to turn away from the political and methodological norm of the seventies. Carol Deagan wrote of the 1981 National Playwrights’ Conference that there existed an increasing dichotomy of thinking whereby “what ‘we’ write is drama, but what ‘they’ write is propaganda” (Deagan 30), exemplified by Katharine Brisbane’s comment in regard to the Nimrod’s call for plays which “take a stance”: “the Marxist Feminist Mafia... are looking for playwrights with the correct attitude” (Deagan 31). Claire Dobbin noted in 1984 that “women’s liberation is very passé now. It was new and exciting when we were doing this stuff in 1971-72; we were going to change the world. Women today have seen what happened to that idea, so many of them are put off by the hopelessness of the struggle” (Dobbin 136, 37). Again, the change, according to Dobbin, is the result of changing priorities of the establishment. She claims that “part of the responsibility lies with theatre managements and with funding bodies. In order to flourish, theatre needs financial support and venues for performance. It’s now clear that funding bodies were initially attracted by the novelty of women’s theatre, but had no real support for the concept [ . . . ] This is also true of Australian theatre in general; the great advances were made in the 1970s, and since then it’s been a

struggle to maintain ground” (138). Again, the parallels to the disillusionment, and frustration with the obstacles preventing widespread change, within the women’s movement as a whole are clear.

Dobbin’s arguments relate chiefly to the Melbourne scene. Ros Horin argues that “The feminist wave of the 1970s had come and gone without causing much of a ripple on the impervious Sydney theatre scene” (140). While the seventies may have differed between states, the end result was the same: in the eighties there was an emerging belief that it was necessary for women to advance *within* the traditional patriarchal theatre industry, rather than create alternative spaces. Horin describes the Women and Theatre Project, for example, as primarily concerned with providing women with a leg up into the industry. Chris Westwood, one of the instigators, comments that “I realised quite early on that people were really frightened of being called feminists”(qtd. in Horin 145), no doubt fearing reactions such as that of Brisbane above, and seeking to distance themselves from the increasingly unpopular radical and materialist strands of the women’s liberation movement. Peta Tait notes, too, that in the content of their productions, The Women and Theatre Project’s “political message was liberal feminist rather than socialist feminist” (Tait 139). Playworks, established in 1984, similarly “supported the liberal feminism of equal opportunity over other feminisms”(Tait 48) Carol Stevenson writes with regard to Adelaide Women’s theatre group Vitalstatistix:

The need to successfully negotiate the contradiction between their essentially oppositional position and their reliance on state funds influences Vitalstatistix’s publicly asserted stance, the nature of productions and the approach to their marketing [. . .] they are much

more likely to avoid making overt political statements in favour of adopting a diplomatic, non-confrontational manner. (C. Stevenson 38)

Feminist drama which undertook socialist or radical feminist projects continued to exist outside the mainstream. However the dominant trend during the eighties was towards the liberal feminist desire to achieve change from within. As with feminism as a whole, the decline in faith among the left had led to a decline in faith in the marriage between Marxism and feminism too. Many practitioners expressed the attitude Williamson captured in *Travelling North* (1979) through the character of Joan: “Having known some of the men intent on leading us to the socialist future, I think I’ll stick to the sidetrack”.

In much community-based drama, traditionally a site for the resistance of oppressed groups, David Watt notes a similar shift, from “social disadvantage to cultural difference”. Leftist agit-prop drama went into decline and there was a rise instead in multicultural community drama groups such as Doppio Teatro, or Sidetrack Theatre. Migrant drama bears some comparison to the trends above, in that migrants frequently found themselves caught up in an unfamiliar “system” to which they had no choice but to adjust, both in terms of language, and customs. While contextually dissimilar to the plays of white Australia, the themes of works such as Tes Lyssiotis and Janis Balodis touch on similar areas of frustration, dislocation and powerlessness. Aboriginal drama, similarly, bears some comparison, although again it is important to note the differing cultural context. Aboriginal drama, unlike that based on Marxist or feminist ideas, did not have any real “dawn” in the seventies, in terms of any mainstream acceptance, and any “false hope” existed in the imaginary only. Despite the minor advances of Kevin Gilbert’s *The Cherry Pickers* (1968) and the work of the Nindethana Theatre, it was not until the late seventies, with the

establishment of the Black Theatre in Redfern and the emergence of the work of Jack Davis, that Indigenous drama began to gain broader acceptance. Indeed, Davis was one of the most prominent playwrights of the 1980s. However, the broader social faltering of the promise of reforms, as first state governments and then the federal Labor government under Hawke began slowing the pace of reform, offers some room for comparison, and indeed, Davis's plays touch on similar territory, with self-serving bureaucracy and a sense of hopelessness a common theme. Radic, for example, writes that the theme of Davis' play *The Dreamers* (1981) is encapsulated in Worru's poem which speaks of "a desert ahead and a desert behind" (*The State of Play* 197), an Aboriginal people unable to find a place in contemporary society, but unable to recover what was lost. *No Sugar* (1985), too, demonstrates the difficulty of surviving under white domination, with Aboriginal families forced to move onto a settlement at the behest of political expediency<sup>6</sup>. Comparatively, it would be suspect to relate the plays of Aboriginal or multi-cultural playwrights to those of white Australia too simplistically. However the similarity of certain themes *might* explain to a degree their growing acceptance among white critics and audiences.

The drama of women and minorities of this period mirrors to some extent the broader theatrical trends. Women's theatre groups began to focus less on broad social change and more on working within the existing theatre system. There was also a similar frustration at the lack of change, and a loss of optimism. Community theatre, too, moved away from workers' theatre with a radical agenda and more towards drama by and for migrant groups. Migrant drama and Indigenous drama began in this period to gain popular acceptance and flourish. While these dramas less

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<sup>6</sup> This form of control cleverly reversed in the play's original staging—see Radic, *State of Play*, 199)

directly parallel the other dramas discussed in this chapter, the similar focus on how to work within the system lends room for some degree of parallel.

Overall, then, the period from 1975 to 1988 is marked by a revision, both at a political and at a theatrical level, of the previous era's radical aims. Politicians and playwrights alike turned from reforming the system toward working within it, and hopes for radical change to a large extent died. Works by upcoming authors such as Nowra and Sewell emphasise this shift, dealing with decaying ideals and the internalisation by the oppressed of the standards of their oppressors. The generational shift was re-cast and the perception of a youthful generation overthrowing the beliefs of their more conservative predecessors was reconsidered and cast in more hesitant, if not completely pessimistic, light. In drama by women and minorities, too, the focus shifted to working within the system rather than overthrowing it. Clearly the politics of the eighties is to at least some extent reflected in the period's drama, and the decline in radical aims and optimism evident therein.

## **INTERLUDE**

### **Chapter Three: The Return of Conservative Politics.**

The politics of the 1990s saw a swing further away from the ideals of the sixties and a reclaiming of ground by the conservative parties. The “Fall of Communism” in the late eighties and early nineties aided conservative commentators’ portrayals of socialism as “unnatural” and “proven” to fail, while capitalism and the underpinnings of it, encapsulated in the ideology of economic rationalism, became seen as “natural” and “realistic”. Conservatives broadened their attacks to encompass social justice, presenting “political correctness” as a totalitarian monolith comparable to communist Russia. They utilised the nature/ideology binary to posit the notion that “political correctness” was imposed upon an unwilling citizenry, just as socialism had been in Eastern Europe.

The right appropriated “radical” terminology in order to posit itself as rebellious in the face of a supposedly dominant left. This perception was aided by a number of formerly radical Boomers who shifted allegiances, utilising the ascendancy of the Boomer generation to posit leftist control, even while they contradicted it by their newly-found conservatism. Increasingly, the right portrayed those who sought to fight for social justice and equality as “elites” out of touch with “ordinary” people. This move also encompassed a reversal of power dynamic, whereby oppressed groups, such as other races, women, the unemployed, were endowed with power and seen as dominating “ordinary” Australians. These shifts



were legitimised by politicians such as John Howard and Pauline Hanson and were to form the dominant context for the theatrical developments of the nineties.

### **The Fall of Communism**

The overthrow in the late eighties of communist governments in the German Democratic Republic and USSR was seized upon by the right. Particular political situations were related unproblematically to a dichotomy which opposed “imposed”, “unrealistic” communism, which, it had been “proven”, was unnatural and had failed, with capitalism, which was by extension realistic and “natural”, a simplistic distinction accepted even by sections of the left.

The fall of communism, or, more accurately, the transition in a number of Eastern European nations from governments proclaiming themselves to be “communist” to those purporting to be “democratic”, offered an unmissable opportunity for opponents of the left to indulge in some mass-media point-scoring. The notion that nations such as the former U.S.S.R. or the former G.D.R. had made a simple choice between capitalism and socialism was a gross oversimplification. David Robinson writes, for example, that the initial overthrow of the G.D.R. government was intended to usher in a “liberal socialist state independent from West Germany”, but that this desire “was soon overwhelmed by resurgent nationalist sentiment (the Eastern protest marchers’ slogan changed from ‘We are the people’ to ‘We are one people!’) and by the electioneering from the better-financed Western political parties” (Robinson 4). The complexities were ignored by many Western commentators, however. Katrin Sieg writes that the West German media re-coded

the uprising in terms more favourable to its ideological agenda, “reinterpreting the impetus of a diverse and diffuse uprising against the SED regime within the East-West dichotomy, and ascribing to it a single direction—westward ho!” (Sieg 2)

This re-coding was something that had been going on prior to 1989, as the right and elements of the left re-coded the military and economic effects of the Cold War on communist nations as an inevitable result of their ideology, as Aijaz Ahmad writes:

The post-revolutionary states which grew out of the socialist currents of anti-colonial nationalism had been contained and consigned to the worst kind of ossification of the productive forces. Anti-communist ideologies which had permeated most of the new radicalisms were now mobilized to *prove* that socialism does not work. (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* 33)

The fact that the “Fall of Communism” was a concept imposed from without to cover an oversimplified version of a country’s reaction to both internal and external forces is all too frequently ignored. The result is an amnesia regarding the positive aspects of the various revolutions: “What remained was the memory only of the failures, the distortions, the bureaucratization; that there had also been other kinds of solidarities no longer mattered”. Terry Eagleton writes with irony of the breadth of acceptance of this historical over-simplification, noting that “Devout anti-essentialists speak of the failure of marxism”(Eagleton 11). It was no great surprise that the right should attempt to use the change of government in these nations as a chance to discredit the left “once and for all”. More revealing is the degree to which this “victory” and the accompanying “end of ideology” was accepted by the left as

well; revealing in that it emphasises how far from its revolutionary ideals the left in many Western democracies had come.

To defenders of economic rationalism, the “fall of communism” was a goldmine to excavate for “evidence” of inevitability which could aid pseudo-Darwinian world-descriptions in which communism and capitalism were seen as experiments which had now been proven, through observation, right or wrong. Capitalism had won the “survival of the fittest”. This lent further credence to the rhetoric of economic rationalism, which claims to deal with “the ‘natural’ workings of the free market”(Manne, “The Rift in Conservative Politics” 52), and which aims, through privatisation, to allow “the private sector to do and own things which the private sector does better and more naturally owns” (Howard, qtd. in Battin 18). Tim Battin argues that this naturalising language allows the proponents of small government to posit a false binary whereby “ideology” is seen as the opposite of “pragmatism” or “reality”, as evident in John Stone’s claim that “economic rationalism is not basically about political ideology at all (and hence not about cultural or moral positions either), but chiefly about *what works*” (qtd. in Battin 13-14). Communism was unsuccessful, according to this set of beliefs, not because of particular sets of social circumstances, but because it wasn’t the *natural* state for the economy to be in.

In an atmosphere where, as described in previous chapters, the left had already come to some extent to see socialist ideals as untenable in the face of the existing system, perhaps it is unsurprising that so many commentators were willing to toll the death of Marxism. What is clear, though, is that not only did such discourse tie together a number of politically disparate situations in various countries, ignoring both the internal and external contexts, and generalise an

unalterable *law* which would presumably cover not only past but also *all future situations*; that communism “doesn’t work”, but that many commentators adapted discourse which would naturalise this argument more fully by couching it in terms borrowed from science in order to further cement capitalism’s immutability. This discourse would be central in defining conservative, and indeed society’s ideology in the decade to come.

### **Political Correctness**

At first glance, one might wonder how this anti-communist rhetoric might be utilised in an Australian political context where, as detailed in the previous chapters, any movement toward socialism had become increasingly unfashionable on both sides of the political spectrum. The answer lay in transposing the debate into cultural terms, picking up on US debates in which the predominantly campus-based movement to fight sexual and racial discrimination had been generalised and exaggerated by the right so that it might launch an attack. “Political correctness” became, to right wing commentators, the new symbol of leftist “dominance” into which death-of-communism rhetoric could feed.

In terms of mainstream Australian politics, it could be argued that by the late eighties the argument over government economic intervention had to a large extent already been decided. Under the Hawke government the ALP had increasingly abandoned any pretence at conforming to socialist ideals. Economic policy during the eighties had already farewelled the redistribution of wealth in favour of “economic growth” as its primary goal. In this respect, the events in countries such

as the Soviet Union would appear to offer the right little ammunition with which to attack the dominant Australian left. The answer to this quandary, perhaps unsurprisingly, came from the U.S.

John Taylor, an author for *New York* magazine, published an article in 1991 which criticised the influence of “political correctness” on contemporary society, and provoked considerable debate (McCarthy 13). Sarah Dunant traces the evolution of what would come to be known as political correctness in the U.S. back to the evolution of multi-culturalism on

American campuses in the mid-to-late 1980s. Focused largely on the arts and humanities faculties, it was an attempt to open up the literary canon to include the work of more non-white and women writers, to rethink the ways in which history was taught and to promote sexual and racial equality by means of certain kinds of positive discrimination and, in some cases, speech and behaviour codes on campus. (Dunant viii-ix)

David Hay writes, similarly, that “PC” codes of behaviour arose due to the increasing number of hate crimes against minorities on campuses during the late eighties, and the resulting proposal that “legal action be taken against people who display, either through words or action, violence towards minority groups” (Hay 32). In this sense, political correctness can be seen as following the lead, to a large extent, of the increasing multi-cultural awareness, and the increasing awareness of disadvantaged groups in general, that was the legacy of the critique of white male dominance that emerged in the sixties. Dunant takes this a step further, arguing that political correctness at its inception offered a tool for the legacy of sixties inclusivity to utilise against the conservative forces which were trying to turn the clock back:

With Americans in the grip of a sustained period of right wing government, preaching aggressive free market economics and reduced government welfare, issues of race and gender (issues always associated with the left) had been more or less knocked off the political agenda. PC, both on and off campus, has helped to put them back on. (Dunant ix)

From this perspective, it was perhaps inevitable that political correctness would come under attack from conservative quarters anxious to prevent a revival of radical sensibilities.

For the right, in countries such as Australia and the U.S., political correctness became the monolith of left-liberal power which “end of ideology” rhetoric required in the absence of any strong communist movement. Brad Minor, defending John Taylor, argued that “PC-ness is essentially rooted in discredited Marxism” (McCarthy 13). PC was portrayed as an example of leftist ideologically-driven totalitarianism, evident in such labels as “new fundamentalism” or allusions to Nazi book-burning or Mao’s cultural revolution (Annette 1). This required skewing analyses of the trend. While there were examples of the legal enforcement of such standards being taken to extremes, Taylor was criticised by some for “portraying the fringes of the PC movement as typical” (McCarthy 13), a manoeuvre typical of those media elements who wished to portray the PC movement as more totalitarian than it actually was. Similarly, the pervasiveness of political correctness was frequently exaggerated. John Annette notes that, despite claims to the contrary, changes to actual university courses were minor: “Shakespeare, much more than Alice Walker, is still required reading for undergraduates in English in American

universities”(Annette 9), while charges of “McCarthyism” levelled at any criticism of lecturers’ behaviour were somewhat out of perspective:

Under the influence of McCarthyism in the 1950s, large numbers of academics were prevented by the government from teaching and received little or no support from university administrators. There is no evidence that any academics today have been prevented from teaching or have been dismissed by the administration because of their perceived political views. Like students on the left who continually cry fascist when confronting university administrators, the new right critics devalue the powerful meaning of the term McCarthyism. (Annette 4-5)

It is clear that tirades against political correctness are as much in danger of essentialising or simplifying as those which proclaimed the end of Marxism.

Despite these inaccuracies, however, the adoption of anti-PC discourse by politicians such as George Bush and, in Australia, John Howard, have given these accusations political credence, and perpetuated their continuance as reference points in public perception and debate. In Australian politics, the rise of Pauline Hanson in the middle of the decade, with her controversial attitudes towards Asians and Aborigines, was, according to Robert Manne, seen by many Liberals (including Howard) as “an understandable reaction to the regime of political correctness imposed upon us by Paul Keating” (“Politics II: The Counter-Revolution in Sensibility”). John Warhurst notes that Howard’s election in 1996 was seen portrayed by the Coalition as a victory over political correctness, with deposed minister Gary Johns commenting that “The electorate was sick of listening to the chant of the cult of rights—the Greens, the gays, feminists, ethnics and disabled”

(122). This would seem supported by the Coalition's election slogan: "For All of Us"(184). Warhurst notes that "By the end of the year the following comment was common, 'There is now a much healthier attitude towards the special interest groups that had begun to dominate the Labor Government and control and suppress national debate'" (122). Indeed, the spectre of political correctness remains a tool in Howard's armoury. In 2004, he opposed new laws allowing gay adoption as examples of "political correctness" ("Children Need Mum and Dad: PM"), an indication of the continued currency of the term.

The absence of any widespread communist movement in Australia in the late eighties meant that the death-of-communism discourse had to be broadened in order to attack the contemporary left. To achieve this, the right utilised the concept of political correctness, begun on US campuses in the 1980s, which attempted to address interpersonal and canonical discrimination. Generalising and exaggerating extreme cases, the right adopted political correctness as the monolith of totalitarian leftist dominance, imposed upon an unwilling populace. In Australia, the conservative Howard government utilised this rhetorical tendency in order to gain and hold power and to enforce its political agenda.

### **The "Radical" Right**

The turn away from radicalism by many on the left allowed the right to appropriate the left's radical terminology, presenting itself as a force for change in opposition to the left's stasis. This was aided by the cultural dominance of many of the boomers, despite the fact that many members of this so-called cultural establishment now



critiqued the radicalism they had formerly espoused. Like the new right, these former radicals also portrayed themselves as oppressed rebels battling a dominant left. Using notions such as political correctness, the right misrepresented those who fought for social justice in order to portray those seeking equality as “elites” in contrast to the “ordinary people” represented by their own ideology, a ploy which served firstly to undermine the left’s social justice agenda and secondly to mask its own position of power.

The use of political correctness as a rhetorical facsimile of the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall is indicative of a fundamental change in the dance between left and right in Australia. Andrew Moore writes that traditionally,

most right-wing movements in Australia had followed a conservative tradition influenced by Edmund Burke that was predominantly opposed to change [. . .] As the 1980s proceeded a delicious irony unfolded. “Radicalism” increasingly became the (New) Right’s domain. Conservatism, especially in the sense of resistance to change, was now espoused by the ALP. (128)

By the early nineties the New Right had to a large extent become the Liberal Party mainstream (132). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the critiques of the left offered by the right in the early nineties often appropriated terminology which gave it “radical” credibility. Damien Cahill argues that it was actually the ALP’s turning *away* from principles of class conflict that allowed the right to do so; by creating a vacuum they offered the right new ground on which to build. Cahill claims that:

It is testament to the ascendancy of the Right, but also to the relative weakness of the Left, that such terms as “New McCarthyism” and the “New Totalitarianism” have been employed by conservatives to

support their claims of new class dominance of cultural institutions.

The language of the Left is being turned upon itself in a perverse example of political amnesia. (161)

Having abandoned any hope of smashing the system, the former radicals of the sixties had unwittingly become it, and the arguments for change were being aimed at them from the right.

Mark Davis, in his book *Gangland*, argues that in the increasingly powerful realm of culture there is a valid argument that the radicals of the sixties *have* come to power:

There is a group of figures, born somewhere between the late 1930s and early 1950s, who now dominate the media, who set the tone of debate on popular social issues from feminism to education to multiculturalism [. . .] They share similar backgrounds too. Take the remnants of the 1970s scene based around the Pram Factory and La Mama theatres in Melbourne, and put it with the leftovers of the Sydney Push and associates, and from David Williamson to Helen Garner, from Frank Moorhouse to Germaine Greer, from P. P. McGuinness to Robert Hughes, you have a surprising proportion of the cultural figures setting mainstream agendas today. (22, 29)

This cultural “New Establishment” perhaps aided perceptions of leftist dominance. The Boomers had ascended to positions of incredible cultural, and hence political, influence. Critics from the right might, then, have had some grounds for believing that the left represented a cultural monolith which they were “radically” rebelling against.

As Davis points out, however, there is a hole in this argument. It assumes that the political positions of these dominant Boomers remains unchanged. Under examination this doesn't hold true:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s it seemed a truism that the left had the moral upper hand in debates on social issues. A self-fashioned generation of poets, novelists, playwrights, academics, film-makers and journalists spoke to an equally self-fashioned new audience about new political causes—class conflict, feminism, race relations, Vietnam. Two decades later the right came into the ascendancy, and suddenly books, plays and newspaper columns were dominated by feminist-baiters, anti-multiculturalism campaigners and complainers about academic theorists and leftie 'political correctness'. Thing is, they were much the same people (Davis 32)

Like the New Right, these former leftists co-opt those philosophies they may wish to oppose: (feminism, multi-culturalism, Marxism) into an imagined "establishment" which allows them to paint themselves as a "radical" alternative to the calcified leftist "system". Davis notes with irony that "Armies of the night, it seems, are on the move, even if the 'conspirators' are forever on the sidelines, their voices oddly absent, while their supposed 'victims' monopolise the field" (37). The image of radicalism had been subverted by the conservative establishment to attack ideals of social equity.

Just as the decline of communism became portrayed as a peoples' movement against an imposed regime, so the right sought to portray its own ideology as a grass-roots movement against an imagined dictatorship. As Cahill writes, "By caricaturing the left, and social justice claims in general, the Right can claim to represent the

‘ordinary’ citizen, in opposition to left-wing or liberal cosmopolitan elites” (Cahill 161). The “regime” of political correctness was, then, depicted as a demonstration of power by an unrepresentative left-leaning clique of cultural and political insiders, whose ideology was “imposed” upon an unwilling citizenry. Cahill writes that this notion of “elites”, picked up by John Howard in particular, in his false dichotomy of “elites” versus “battlers”, was borrowed from the U.S. New Right’s critique of the leftist “new class”, and that it is a portrayal which serves to obfuscate the traditional leftist critique of power relations and discourse: “Their populist appeal to the rhetoric of the ‘masses versus the elite’ serves to mask the power and privilege of the very conservatives who bemoan the influence of the new class” (Cahill 162). It was necessary, or at least desirable, during the late eighties and early nineties, for the right to create an image of a dominant leftist elite, not merely as an identifiable ideological target, but also as a smokescreen for its own position of power and its agenda’s continuing rise.

In the increasing absence of any radicalism within the traditional Australian political left, the right began in the period under discussion to appropriate the image of radicalism which had formerly been the domain of the left. They portrayed leftist ideology as “the system” they were fighting against. They were aided in this task by many former leftist boomers who, now in positions of cultural power, abandoned their former ideals and regurgitated many of the same conservative ideas. Socialist ideals’ absence from discourse was masked by attacks on political correctness, in which conservatives appropriated the leftist notion of representing “the people” against “the elites” and subverted it for their own ends, both undermining any ideal of equality or social justice and, at the same time, masking by populism their own interests and the inherent inequalities of the status quo.

## **The Power of the Poor**

Part of the reversal of power relations in the discourse of the conservative elements gaining force in Australian society in the nineties is the endowment of the disenfranchised with all the power, and the traditional “oppressors” with none. Largely this was done by an increasing focus on the individual over groups, and on the above mentioned perpetuation of notions of economic rationalist capitalism as “natural” and any kind of social justice movement as therefore aberrant. Under the new schema, for example, unions became increasingly portrayed as “intimidatory”, in their interference with the economy, and something which individuals needed protection *from*. Similarly, welfare increasingly became seen as unnatural, and individuals consequently held responsible for their own unemployment, and for any potential solution. With regard to feminism, there occurred a backlash whereby feminism became increasingly seen as imposing unnatural restraints on women against their will, and a concurrent turn toward seeing women’s oppression not as the result of systemic controls but as the result of their own “victim” mentality. In each of these cases it is clear that focus on the social structure has to some extent been replaced with a focus on the individual as the one holding the power, and therefore responsible for their emancipation. The power dynamic has been reversed. The disenfranchised are, in this portrayal, seen as holding all the cards, and those working towards change at a broader level, such as feminists or unions, are seen as achieving nothing but lip-service to an outdated “ideology”.

It was necessary, to perpetuate the notion of the left as dominant, that examples of oppression be re-cast, positioning the powerless instead as holding all the cards. Andrew Moore writes that the success of Jan Pendarvis at Mudginberri abattoir in 1986 in suing a Union for damages incurred as the result of a strike led to cries of joy from Liberal Party leader John Howard, and henceforth “The New Right increasingly saw itself in heroic terms as protecting ‘defenceless’ employers against union intimidation, tyranny and ‘anarchy’” (Moore 129). Images of unions as aggressors rather than defenders of workers’ rights were to proliferate during the nineties, and the Liberal Party’s Industrial Relations policy since it won power in 1996 has been to “liberate” workplaces from collective bargaining (Burrow 11). As above, Union action is portrayed not as sincerely helpful, but as imposed. Wage regulation is portrayed as interference with the “natural” workings of the economy, and hence not beneficial to “society”, with which “the economy” has become interchangeable.

Similarly, blaming the unemployed for their lack of employment became increasingly common. John Tomlinson writes that unemployment around the world increased from 1975 onward, and that “Associated with the rise in the level of unemployment has been, in the Australian and New Zealand context, an increase in the official vitriol directed towards those whom government and industry policy excluded from the paid labour force” (Tomlinson 237). Again, the tendency came from the U.S., and again, it was based on a reappropriation of arguments from the sixties left, in this case the “culture of poverty” hypotheses of Michael Harrington and Oscar Lewis (O’Connor 222-24). Brendan O’Connor argues that during the eighties this notion was adapted by authors such as George Gilder and Charles Murray (influential theorists within the Reagan government) who “dismiss the claim

that some people simply cannot find work as an excuse that leads to the unemployed too easily adopting anti-work attitudes and lifestyles”(225). Unemployment, in this schema, is not an unfortunate circumstance, but a choice, consciously made. Gilder argues that “real poverty is less a state of income than a state of mind”(226), and that welfare should be cut in order to reduce its “negative impact on motivation and self-reliance”(227), while O’Connor writes that Murray’s “work is underpinned by a Social Darwinist understanding of human motivation. He clearly believes that people need to compete and struggle to gain ground economically and, in turn, morally. Thus if welfare is removed as an ‘option’, people will be forced to change their dependent and permissive behaviour”(229). The government’s duty, then, becomes not to end unemployment, but to provide disincentives in order to discourage people from *choosing* it.

In the nineties this attitude has infiltrated mainstream politics in Australia. As Bob Bessant writes: “The emphasis is on the unemployed solving their own individual problems rather than job creation schemes initiated by government” (11). Once again concern for the underprivileged is portrayed as an example of “ideology” over “reality”: “There is no place in this system for compassion. Concepts of social justice and equity are seen as peripheral manifestations of the work of pressure groups. By their actions these groups are seen as ‘political’ and therefore outside the economy, yet dangerous because they may interfere with the operation of the free market”(Bessant 11). Welfare, providing aid for the unemployed, is by this scheme “unnatural” as it is outside of the selected social Darwinist frame. Under an economic rationalist philosophy, the unemployed are to blame for their plight and must “help themselves”. Schemes such as “Work for the Dole”, which mask a punitive blame-the-victim mentality behind the façade of “helping the unemployed

help themselves”, have increased steadily under both Keating and Howard. Again, the powerless are endowed with all the power. The system has not failed them, they have failed the system.

Other races, too, under the Howard government, became tarred with a similar brush. The Howard government’s consistent refusal to offer an apology to the stolen generations is indicative of this shift, with Howard constantly critiquing the “black armband” view of history which entails recognising past wrongs. The implicit insinuation is that Indigenous Australians need to let go of the past and overcome their “victim mentality”. While denying white responsibility for the plight of Indigenous people, however, the Howard government has increasingly taken away from them the means by which they might change their situation (Manne, “Mabo: A Moral Crisis Festers”; Rintoul; Carr). Again, the rhetoric of the level playing field is an illusion by which to deny continuing inequality. Similarly, the Liberal Party’s increasingly harsh refugee policy, which has drawn criticism from many quarters, has been justified by a denial of the power relations implicit, if not an outright reversal. Federal Minister Phillip Ruddock, for instance, claimed that asylum seekers represent the “greatest assault on our borders in history” (Bhuta and Costello). The linking of asylum seekers with potential terrorism also served to reverse the power dynamic, endowing them with all the power and casting white, mainstream Australia as potential “victims”. The emphasis on “deterrence” as a justification for the detention of asylum seekers also aided the perception that “these people” were not victims, but were making a clear choice.

Gisela Kaplan writes that women’s rights were also increasingly becoming seen as undesirable, too, as ideas such as affirmative action were also outside the “natural” economy: “In the 1980s and 1990s [. . .] along with the rise of market



economics, we find a return of anti-female and anti-social attitudes which are defended by reference not just to personal prejudice but to economic rationalism”(Kaplan 159-60). Feminism was a chief scapegoat of the war against political correctness, with sexual harassment in particular becoming a bone of contention. Helen Garner, a well-known Boomer feminist, caused a stir with her book *The First Stone* (1995), which attacked two young women who made accusations of sexual harassment. Davis writes that “In *The First Stone* Garner argues that a kind of moral decline has taken place in feminism, which she suggests has embraced a cult of punitive victimism”(Davis 22). Garner describes the girls as “priggish and pitiless” in their actions against the Master of Ormond College (21). Newspaper columnist Bettina Arndt wrote that in sexual harassment cases “The assumption is always... it is the powerful man who lies. The women, universal victims, always tell the truth” (qtd. in Mead 17). Again, the oppressor/victim binary is reversed. Garner’s “priggish” comment tapped into the arguments of certain “Third Wave” feminist writers, as Kate Pritchard Hughes writes: “United States writers Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfeld and Naomi Wolf (to a lesser extent) accuse second wave feminists of a morality which outlaws sexual relationships with men and generally errs on the side of puritanism”(22). This reversal of the seventies’ sexual revolution posits the *left* as the side now bound by structures of obedience, their pleasures subservient to ideology. Once again, the argument is that women’s rights are trying to deny “nature”.

The nature versus ideology binary is also evident in another emerging strain of anti-feminist discourse; the argument that feminism forces women to deny their biology, either in terms of the desire for men or the desire for childbirth. Virginia Haussegger, for instance, in an article entitled “The Sins of Our Feminist Mothers”

(2002), criticised her mother's generation of feminists for promoting her ability to choose career over child in contradiction to her "biological clock"(Haussegger 11). Again it is assumed by these arguments that feminism is the dominant force in society, and that alternative desires are helpless beneath its might. This image helps not merely to prop up the right's "under siege" mentality, but also to de-legitimise feminist grievances. As Kaplan writes, "The most distressing element in the backlash against social justice is that it is presented as if the liberation of women were a *fait accompli*, as if women now dominated public debate, had the best incomes, positions, and housing, and had freedom to move in every direction. They have nothing of the sort" (167). This perception, writes Hughes, is indicative of "third wave" feminists, such as Naomi Wolf, who argues that women's lack of power is the result of their own choice, due to the fact that "they are unused to seeing themselves as anything other than victims"(25). Like the authors of the New Right, third wave feminism, Hughes argues, is able to posit such a notion only by ignoring contextual factors such as class and race, and particularly by ignoring the authors' own positions of relative privilege: "The starting point for many of the 'third wave' writers is that women's oppression is less overwhelming than feminists have previously argued. For these smart young women at elite American universities it may well be the case"(22). Again, the onus is placed on the oppressed individual to change themselves, and the need for any kind of broader social change is written off as an outdated "ideological" mindset.

During the nineties, the attitudes towards power held in the sixties were totally reversed. Whereas the previous period had focused on the need to alter power structures, in order to enable individuals to have a better life, in the 1990s there was an increasing focus on the need for an individual to empower him or herself. This

was linked to the increasing depiction of economic rationalism as “natural” and anything which interferes with it (unions, welfare) as therefore unnatural and (in a negative sense) “ideological”. Other races, whether Indigenous Australians or refugees, were increasingly cast as responsible for their own problems, even while the means to improve their lives were being taken from them. There occurred a similar backlash against feminists, seen as forcing “unnatural” measures on women in their attempts to free women from the expectations of childbirth and reliance on men. Again, many third wave feminists began to argue that change was the responsibility of the individual, and that it was only these individuals’ “victim mentality” which kept them oppressed. In each of these cases, the system is seen as devoid of any responsibility; after all, it is only doing what comes “naturally”, and all responsibility and therefore all power is placed in the hands of the disenfranchised, rendering any continuing disempowerment “their own fault”. Groups who work for social justice, under this rhetoric, achieve nothing but promoting such a “victim mentality”, and, as the system cannot be “naturally” changed, their desire for reform can be perceived as nothing other than outdated acquiescence to discredited “ideology”.

The 1990s saw a swing back to conservatism in politics. The right seized upon the fall of communism and utilised it to perpetuate the idea that Marxism had been “proven” to fail, and was therefore imposed and not “natural”, and that therefore capitalism was natural and “realistic”. In the absence of any strong socialist ideology within the Australian left, the right instead attacked “political correctness”; that is, the attempt by many to redress the imbalance between dominant white males and other genders, sexualities and races. The right adopted notions of political

correctness as a totalitarian monolith, supposedly dominating society, in order to facilitate the notion of leftist domination. The left's turn away from radicalism during the eighties allowed the right to appropriate "radical" terminology, casting itself as radical in contrast to the supposedly calcified left. This was perpetuated by many members of the Boomer generation, which now dominated society, who had turned away from their earlier radicalism toward more conservative views. Notions of the left as dominant, perpetuated through mythology of "battlers" and "elites", allowed the conservative right to mask its own power in society, as well as to undermine attempts at social justice. The right during the nineties utilised the nature/ideology binary in order to attack the oppressed. Thus unions and welfare were seen as "unnatural" because they were outside the economic rationalist frame, and therefore "imposed" and "ideological", a façade. Power dynamics were reversed, with "political correctness" and "ideology" used as tools to facilitate notions that the unemployed, low-income workers, Indigenous Australians, asylum seekers or women were holding all the power, and that "ordinary" Australians were being held hostage by them. Anti-Aborigine and anti-immigration sentiments were harnessed by conservative politicians. Anti-feminists tried to reassert more "traditional" relationships by criticising the notion of choosing not to have children as "imposed" and "unnatural" and by claiming that notions of women's oppression was merely the result of their "victim mentality". By the turn of the century, most of these attitudes had come to dominate Australian society and were legitimised by the Howard government. They were to play a large part in sculpting the drama of the decade.

## SECTION TWO

### 1988-1995

This section deals with the period from 1988 to 1995. It argues that during this period, many plays reflect the tendency toward conservatism evident in politics as a whole. The dominant themes of the swing toward conservatism: acceptance of economic rationalism, cynicism toward compassion, reversal of oppressor/victim dichotomies and a backlash against women and other races, are all evident in the playwriting by mainstream playwrights of the period.

Accounts of the nineties appear to confirm the trend of the eighties, away from the politically radical ideals of the New Wave and towards a more conservative vision. In a sense, this was the inevitable result of the economic rationalist tendencies of the Hawke and Keating, and subsequently Howard, governments. As Veronica Kelly notes, the ability of theatre, particularly at its high-cost “mainstream” end, to critique social institutions does not always exist totally independently of its financial needs:

The state companies have been increasingly impelled by governmental policies to seek corporate sponsorship, with resultant reining-in of risk-taking or critical plays attacking the social outcomes of public corporatism, or presenting to mainstream audiences dystopian versions of Australian history. (“Old Patterns, New Energies”)

Whether such censorship occurred directly or not, in any case, in the context of the times it could be argued that a decline in plays critical of the social system need not have been forced upon the theatre by sponsors or government. The loss of the

“socialist alternative” as a contrary form of social organisation left many playwrights trapped by the widespread sense of capitalism’s inevitability. Similarly Kelly writes of the effect of diminishing cast sizes, another effect of downsizing, and Nowra’s concern that: “The eighties ‘epic’ vision is in danger of being lost: ‘somehow there has to be a way of presenting a world on stage that is larger, deeper than the vision of a nuclear family in a living room, a way of presenting the dynamics of groups, individuals, class and power’” (5). While not wishing to deny the effect of any of these economic factors on the subsequent ideological preconceptions of much mainstream drama, it is important to balance this recognition with an awareness of the accompanying ideological shifts in society as a whole, detailed in the previous chapter. While economic constraints were, and continue to be, a potential editorial hidden hand, the gusto with which many playwrights adopted elements of the rhetoric of the new right suggests more than simply an acquiescence to dictatorial edicts regarding content. In Althusserian terms, state and ideological repressive apparatuses would seem to have operated hand in hand.

Peter Fitzpatrick and Helen Thomson, in their analysis of the drama of the early nineties, note that “it does seem that becoming part of the mainstream involves a loss of political focus”, citing for example Williamson’s development from social criticism to works which are

compassionate, even indulgent; there are still traces of the tension between satiric exposure and celebration which marked a lot of his earlier work and in *Don’s Party* produced an interesting ambivalence of tone. When the moral analysis is largely pre-empted by the rush to general forgiveness, though, as it is to some extent in *Top Silk* and even in the painfully recognizable complications of his marriage play

The Perfectionist (1980), the result can be a less productive kind of ambivalence. (Fitzpatrick and Thomson 4)

While Fitzpatrick and Thomson refer to Williamson's career up to 1992's *Money and Friends*, the tendency of a "rush to general forgiveness" is perhaps even more noticeable, and more revealing in its relationship to conservative ideology, in his later works such as *Brilliant Lies* and *Dead White Males*. These later works go beyond "forgiveness" to a clear reinforcing of the capitalist system and the conservative ideology underpinning it.

Similarly, the authors comment that Sewell's post-*Hate* "work shows signs of [a] turn to the values constructed in private relationships"(4), rather than his earlier political concerns, while in Louis Nowra's work "a far less intellectually and artistically challenging naturalistic reflection of recent history seems to have lowered the emotional temperature of his drama, a direction Sewell's drama also seems to be taking" (8). Certainly there is a trend in the writing of both toward more intimate stories in comparison to the grand scale of works such as *Dreams in an Empty City* or *The Golden Age*. Again, this can be related to the changing attitudes of the early nineties. If Sewell and Nowra's eighties work argued the pervasiveness of systems of domination in the face of futile rebellion, plays such as *Cosi*, *Summer of the Aliens* and *The Garden of Granddaughters* are telling chiefly in the absence of these frames of reference. The difficulty of overthrowing the system is not relevant, as there is no longer more than one "system" at all. Capitalism has succeeded in naturalising itself to such a degree that not only is there no need to rebut an alternative, there is no need even to speak of its own victory. In New Right terms, ideology is gone, "reality" remains.

Emerging playwrights such as Peta Murray and Joanna Murray-Smith, who emerged during this period with some degree of mainstage success, also display similar ideological leanings in their work. To some extent, then, it would appear that arguments that the increasingly commercial nature of mainstream theatre led necessarily to a more conservative politics in the pieces included in repertoire might have some grounding. However, it is necessary to avoid overly determinist hypotheses regarding the influence on playwrights' creativity of either commerce or broader social trends (not that the two are unrelated). The degree of agency which individual writers are capable of exerting in the face of social forces is not a matter for detailed discussion here. For the purposes of this study, the following sections will avoid such chicken-and-egg debates by focussing on texts and their possible interpretations rather than a definitive "meaning" or authorial intent. The purpose of the following chapters is not to lay "blame", but merely to illustrate the degree to which the mainstream writing of the early nineties is a product of its time.



## **Chapter Four. Economic Rationalism.**

The move toward an unquestioning acceptance of economic rationalism and its ideology is evident in a number of works of the early nineties. David Williamson's *Money and Friends*, Katherine Thomson's *Barmaids* and *Diving for Pearls* and Tony McNamara's *The John Wayne Principle* all reflect the changing tide in that each of them portrays a society in which economic imperatives are dominant to the extent that no alternative is seen as possible. While these plays are not necessarily in *favour* of this development, the extent to which they accept it is indicative of the pervasiveness of the conservative rhetoric which attempts to construct economic rather than social bases of behaviour as "natural" and thus as irreversible goals.

### **Money and Friends (1992)**

David Williamson's play creates, as the title suggests, a dichotomy of sorts between friendship and money, that is, between loyalty and kindness toward one's friends on the one hand, and service to competition and greed on the other. Those who oppose economics are portrayed as "out of touch". Their idealism is "proven", in the context of the play, to a large extent wrong. The play portrays a world in which greed dominates, and altruism can only exist where its needs and those of economics coincide.

The title of the play flags the debate that occurs within. The play juxtaposes the "greed is good" ethos of the eighties with the mateship ideal of the Australian legend, and places them in direct contact. The result, as one might expect, is the

revelation that the two are not compatible, and that the choices made by individuals are driven by a myriad of factors. The end result is a somewhat cynical view, which develops little from Margaret's initial admission: "I went to a psychotherapist for years. He said I was a very hostile person due to the fact that the world had fallen well short of my expectations. He told me that I had to start believing that life was essentially wonderful, but failed to come up with any significant evidence" (Williamson, *Money and Friends* 2). Williamson, unlike the psychotherapist, does provide a little evidence to contradict the play's cynicism, but not much.

The plot of *Money and Friends* deals with a group of friends who holiday beside one another year after year at the beach. All are fairly well-to-do upper middle-class folk, mostly "professionals": surgeons, lawyers and so forth, and most of them are obsessed to some degree or other with making money. Peter and Margaret, the central characters, are academics, more pleasant perhaps than their colleagues but quite out of touch. Margaret comments on Peter: "He says nothing he's ever discovered has proved of use to anyone, which has given him an extremely high level of status in his chosen field" (3), while she admits of herself, to Justin, "I've spent so much time refining my intellect and tastes that just about everything I hear from everyone is a cliché. The only people who *really* interest me are a handful of authors and social commentators who I'm never likely to meet in my life" (74). Margaret's attitude is criticised by Vicki, who claims "What I find really hard to take is her intellectual pretentiousness. Who'd *want* to read the books she reads except a small clique of overeducated pseudo intellectuals hell bent on self congratulation" (21). While this is a minor undercurrent to the play, and the two academics come out of the piece a lot more positively than most of the other characters, the fact that Margaret eventually comes to agree that her attitude is "pretty sad" (74) serves in

hindsight as something of a harbinger of Williamson's anti-intellectualism in *Dead White Males* a few years later. In terms of the dominant theme of the play, it also serves to undercut any alternative. Margaret tries to offer friendship as a worthwhile value in opposition to greed, but the portrayal of her as "out of touch" serves to marginalise this belief in terms of society as a whole, and to undermine it.

It would be unfair, though, to label *Money and Friends* an entirely conservative play. The greatest criticism in the piece is reserved for those characters concerned primarily with money. What Williamson does reflect of the early nineties philosophy, though, is the pervasiveness of financial concerns and priorities. Conrad relates financial competition to evolution of the species in a manner that would make any proponent of the New Right proud. When Vicky asks "Why *does* the human species have this awful need to conspicuously consume?" he replies that

It's a form of male display, like the tailfeathers of a peacock [. . .]  
That's why older men like myself are in such demand [. . .] Younger men might look good but their genetic material is relatively unproven. They might turn out to be wimps who are never going to earn more than \$50,000 per annum in their lives. Jacquie took one look at me and her subconscious computed "Proven superior genes". (12)

Margaret offers a counterpoint to the other characters' shallow economic rationales. When it emerges that Peter is in serious debt, she claims "Peter, friendship is more than just a herding ritual—a little social gavotte we do to be entertained and amused. It involves the concept of help and support. If friendship had any reality, money would be *the* test" (18). In other words, Margaret believes that altruism and kindness, even when, perhaps particularly when, they contradict economic "common sense", are valuable ideals. Ultimately her optimism loses out. The spirit of friendship is

revealed less important than financial concerns. Alex suddenly decides that “if I had to name my twenty best friends—to be honest he wouldn’t make the list” (68), Vicki is swayed by the thought that to help Peter she might have to give up a boat (70), and Conrad rationalises his reluctance, again with reference to evolution: “A blood relative shares some of our own genes—and when we help that relative, we’re in a sense helping our own genetic immortality. No matter how much we *like* Peter our lack of shared genes makes us feel deep level resistance” (71). For Alex, as for many commentators from the right, compassion and sharing may be a nice dream, but are impractical: “Vicki, I’d like to help the homeless kids on the street, I’d like to help the pensioners who can’t pay their heating bills. The world’s a tough place” (70). Compassion, then, however desirable, is seen as impossible because it does not accord with economic “reality”.

In a sense, *Money and Friends* offers an optimistic ending, as Margaret’s loyalty to Peter sees him through his hard times, and his other “friends” ultimately agree to chip in. Notably, though, what motivates Alex and Conrad to do so is pure self-interest; they are anxious not to be seen to be outdone by Margaret’s selflessness. For these characters, it is implied, kindness is an option only when it facilitates the furtherance of competitive urges, a suggestion which seems to support Conrad’s evolutionary model. Margaret’s kindness does win out, but only against the odds and through a coincidental congruence with the greed of others. Together with the portrayal of Peter and Margaret as out of touch, the play, then, while it does in its satire appear to support the notion of selflessness over self-interest, appears also to reinforce to some degree the notion that such attitudes are on the wane and outdated. It suggests that the present “reality” is inevitably going to be dominated by the Conrads, Vickies and Alexes, rather than their less pragmatic companions.

The reviews for *Money and Friends* were mostly positive, with many of the positive comments reflecting the level of acceptance of the pervasiveness of monetarist ideals. Matt Byrne, for instance, commented that “Williamson has the answers to what makes us tick”(79), while Peter Goers, describing it as “certainly the funniest Australian play ever written”, claimed that “Every gag (and there are hundreds) also contains the sad truth”(78). Tim Lloyd, in his (positive) review, noted the possible dark undertone to this acceptance: “Money and Friends is remarkable among Williamson plays for having no idealists, few convictions and a very soft centre. If this is Williamson’s social critique of 1992, we should laugh while we may”(78). The few negative reviews suggested that Williamson’s use of farce robbed any social critique of its bite. Jeremy Eccles commented that “Money and Friends takes us back down the road to castigating the horrors of the eighties-- but not far enough”(64), while Murray Bramwell critiqued Williamson’s attempt to hide from criticism under the guise of comedy: “He can hardly persuade us his plays are really bits of fluff when patently they’re not. And he can hardly be surprised if there are occasional objections when he takes a serious issue and reduces it to a bit of fluff”(“Reversals of Fortune” 80).

*Money and Friends* echoes conservative rhetoric to the extent that economic imperatives are portrayed as pervasive, and any resistance to them only the province of those who are “out of touch”. While recognising a degree of satire in Williamson’s use of economic rationalist evolutionary rhetoric (although latter plays by the author might suggest at least a small degree of sympathy for evolutionary models), the fact remains that as a whole, the play reinforces the growing perception of economic rationalism as an inevitable and unstoppable force.

### **Diving for Pearls (1992)**

It would be dangerous to attempt to apply the tag “conservative” too strenuously to the work of Katherine Thomson. Both *Barmaids* and *Diving for Pearls* can, on one level, be read as critiques of the growing pervasiveness of economic rationalist thought. However, again, it must be recognised that within these works, economic rationalism emerges as an unstoppable juggernaut. *Diving for Pearls*, in particular, deals with the manner in which the central characters imbibe economic rationalist rhetoric, and attempt to conform to its rules. While the play makes clear that this conformity is in many ways harmful, there is little sense, as there was in the New Wave plays, of this conformity to the system being precarious or able to be challenged. Despite its harmful nature, it is clear that economic rationalism has won the battle.

*Barmaids* (1991) is the less overtly political of the two plays, focussing predominantly on the interpersonal interactions between old and new barmaids at a city pub. Nevertheless, the spectre of downsizing and economic pragmatism hangs over the otherwise comic piece like a guillotine. Nancy and Val, the barmaids of the title, are able to see through the managerial discourse. Nancy claims that “Accountants and syndicates cannot run a pub. No idea of service which means loyalty which means security” (7). She points out that “the emptiest pub in this town is the most renovated and fancied up and no one wants to drink there” (17). The barmaids, then, attempt to reassert non-economic values in the face of nineties conservative rhetoric. Ultimately, though, this knowledge is useless to them. They are powerless to stop the introduction of younger, scantily clad barmaids. The

message would appear to be that facts are unlikely to halt economic rationalism. The play's portrayal of these loyal workers is a pessimistic one: "You find an older barmaid today, you find someone hanging onto her job like her life depended on it" (33).

*Diving for Pearls* deals with a middle-aged couple, Den and Barbara, trying to come to terms with the changes in society around them, particularly those caused by economic rationalism. Barbara comments that

You could divide this city in half, I reckon. They're getting everything up there [. . .] We used to feel sorry for them stuck out on bloody cliffs, living in their poky little shacks. 'Oh, Barbara, people are coming down and paying a quarter of a million dollars for our little miners' cottages!' They used to be bloody communists. (*Diving for Pearls* 3)

Both attempt to play the game; neither has any real interest in bucking the system. Den claims he is happy in "a quiet corner with a cowboy novel and a couple of devon sandwiches" (3), and when things begin to change at his factory he initially accepts the rhetoric of privatisation unproblematically: "There's talk of running us more like a business, not so much like a government enterprise [. . .] A private mob couldn't be any worse [. . .] Be a bit hungrier, I've always thought that" (4, 70). Barbara is studying a deportment course with the aim of securing a job at a new international hotel, and is equally ready to accept notions of a global marketplace: "You know what international means? They know how to make a go of it and they know what the fuck they're doing" (22). She takes on the ethos of her new professional persona, even into her personal life, telling Den "Don't you know anything? Only very common people fuck in the afternoons" (69). Conformist

upward-mobility thus pervades the personal. Barbara's mentally disabled daughter Verge alludes to her mother's competitiveness, citing a story of her mother and aunt:

Two little sisters who couldn't swim, and one walks out a bit too far. Then she reaches and grabs the cossie of the other one and pulls her out further and below, under the yellow water, and struggles up on her shoulders like water-ski wonderland on telly [. . .] 'It was your fault, you climbed on me.' 'Don't be ridiculous, Barbara, you pulled me out. You were the one. You climbed on me.' So if your number came up, which one would you rather be in the water with... which one...( 33)

The story transfers fairly aptly to the relationship between her mother and Den.

The best laid plans of both Barbara and Den come to naught. Barbara is not offered a job at the hotel: "Those snotty bitches, they give you your shitty diploma, all over you like a bad case of hives, and one week later it's looking right through you" (68), while despite assurances that his position was safe for the next ten years, Den is made redundant. The central characters differ in that Den believes his treatment to be wrong, and is unable to accept it. When he considers rejecting the payout on principle, Barbara is angered: "It's what people do when they get retrenched. Use the dough to set themselves up and never look back. Keep flying through, fuck you all and thanks for the memories" (74). Den asks her "Is that the answer to all our problems? Seventeen thousand entrepreneurs", and she replies:

Jesus, we're just lucky they don't line us up against the wall and chop off all our heads when they want to get us out of the way. No—they say sorry and shove a check in our hands [. . .] You've done fuck-all for twenty-five years and the day the bosses decide to give you what



is fair, and legal and—coincides with the day you think you might  
just fart in their faces. (79)

Barbara has clearly imbibed the right-wing reversal of the victim-perpetrator relationship with regard to industrial relations. There is no presumption of the right to equality in her argument. Rather, she reinforces the notion that they must play the game, because it is the only game there is. Den on the other hand tries to incite rebellion in the workplace, but fails miserably. Rebellion is thus portrayed as no more a threat than obedience. The dominant ideology simply cannot be stopped. In some ways, *Diving for Pearls* echoes Buzo's *Front Room Boys* in its portrayal of the pitfalls of playing along with the capitalist band. Tellingly, though, while Buzo's Jacko has to be beaten into submission, Den is defeated by mere apathy and ineffectualness. Like *Money and Friends*, *Diving for Pearls* depicts a world where economic competition is paramount, and offers no real alternative or hope. Perkins' review reflects this lack of optimism. She writes that "If the play has a message it is that Barbara and Den left their thinking and training too late" (197). In broader terms, it seems in this play that it is "too late" for any kind of socialist or pseudo-socialist rebellion, too.

*Diving for Pearls* received predominantly positive reviews. Peter Goers called it a "heroic proletarian howl for justice in the workforce [. . .] *Diving for Pearls* gives hope to the Australian theatre and our unemployed"(100), while Peter Ward noted that "audiences are receiving it with the shock of recognition [. . .] The madresses and legacies of the eighties have arrived"(100). Despite the positive acclaim, a number of critics pointed out the piece's fatalism regarding social change. Mary Nemeth asked "are we meant to be left without hope?"(72) while Olivia Stewart saw this pessimism as intrinsic to its believability, commenting on

“Thompson’s truthful refusal to offer false hope”, and the fact that “Thompson’s ending rang resoundingly ‘sad, but true’”(73). Adrian Kiernander, in an otherwise positive review remarked on Den’s lack of effectualness and Barbara’s capitulation, commenting that:

Some of its images may well prey on the consciences of any economic rationalists who blunder into the auditorium, but instead of sending an outraged audience out into the world in a mood to intervene in events, this kind of theatre risks being seen as a nostalgic elegy for a way of life which is inevitably doomed and for which nothing can be done. (73)

Like *Money and Friends*, its critique of economic rationalism is recognised, but it offers no alternative possibility.

While these two plays critique the ideology of economic rationalism, then, it might be argued that they run the risk of reinforcing it while they do so. For unlike the New Wave plays, conformity is not portrayed here as tenuous at all. In both plays, rebellion comes to naught. There is no sense of the system as likely to be overthrown. The world-view offered is that resistance is no more likely than conformism to affect change, and thus the naturalisation of the capitalist system is not at risk. In this schema it is difficult to see where any progressive social non-conservative rebellion might fit in.

## **The John Wayne Principle (1997)**

Tony McNamara's *The John Wayne Principle* is a later play, but one which might be categorised similarly to the three discussed above. It depicts an individual attempting to maintain his ideals in the face of economic rationalism, but who is progressively drawn into the mindset of the system he previously opposed. Proponents of economic rationalism again attempt to portray it as natural and as the only "reality", and once again, this argument is seemingly reinforced, despite the play's satire, by the lack of instability in the current system and by the lack of alternatives to the belief-system it presents.

*The John Wayne Principle* offers perhaps an even more pessimistic view of economic rationalism's growing influence than do the plays previously discussed. Robbie is, in the beginning of the play, a house-husband, seemingly content with his existence. When his father, a wealthy businessman, shoots himself, he decrees in his will that in order for Robbie to claim his inheritance he must run the company for a year. As a result Robbie moves his family to the city. Initially, Robbie is resistant to the capitalist mentality. When he is told he needs to shed staff, for instance, Robbie decides not to do so, merely pretending he has (12). In sharp contrast is Robbie's workmate Stafford, who is a shameless defender of the capitalist system. Stafford readily admits that "what I do has no value" (40), but claims "You know what? I don't care. It's the system. All the squawking people do when capitalism turns around and kicks their head in, that's what it's about, crushing the enemy, to get nectar for the few. And I like that about it" (41). Stafford, then, sees the worth of economic rationalism not in its social "value" but in terms of its appeal to his

competitive desires. The play depicts Robbie's struggle to exist in between his own beliefs and the attitudes of Stafford and his father.

Stafford exemplifies many common defences of a capitalist way of life. His defence of the weapons trade, for example, echoes gun-lobby groups' utilisation of the notion of personal responsibility over societal control, a typical economic rationalist trope: "To me it's like oranges [ . . . ] Say we sell oranges. We don't tell people they have to eat them whole. They can squeeze them, they can use them as jewellery or they can put thirty in a bag and smash someone's cranium in. But we just sell oranges" (28). As in conservative portrayals of those on welfare, it is individual choice which is paramount, not the social forces which may sculpt such choices. He is indifferent to the exploitation of cheap labour in the facilitation of his own needs, commenting that "the problem with finding a decent nanny is that this country doesn't have a Mexico" (42). His defence of economic rationalism is based on "reality" over "ideology". When Robbie's wife, Jenny, is disgusted by his decision to sue a waiter who tripped over his child, he tells her "But see Jenny, I'm stating a fact, you're stating a wish. Simple fact is I'm a member of the elite, hence I generally win. Not wrong, not right, just is. I mean I understand my place in the world, them and us, simple as that" (17). Yet he also displays a nostalgia for another time, when things were less ordered, reflecting the conservative preference for "nature" over what it sees as an imposed "rationality" driven by such concerns as political correctness: "Crush or be crushed. Still true today I s'pose, but back then... there was something raw and desperate about it, and now it's [ . . . ] Neat. It's all very neat and easy" (29). It would seem, then, that Stafford's only disagreement with the ideology of economic competitiveness is that it has not, as yet, gone *far enough*.

Robbie is ultimately victorious over Stafford, setting him up by planting drugs on him. Like the characters in Nowra's early plays, however, Robbie's victory is not a victory of his own beliefs, but a sign of his growing internalisation of the values of his opponents. As the play progresses, Robbie's attitudes slowly change. He is disappointed that Jenny describes him as sweet, "Not rugged and a man of action?" (30), a clear sign of development from his earlier domestic identity. When Robbie initially discovers that his father hired prostitutes as secretaries, he is disgusted, but when, following his betrayal of Stafford, Sarah tells him that his father "would be so proud", his reaction is to almost take advantage of her. Serena, Robbie's sister, has fewer reservations (48). His wife Jenny for a while seems to offer a glimmer of hope amidst the greed. When Fiona meets Jenny she likes her because "You're real" (41), but eventually she, too, seems to have been drawn into the system, telling Robbie "One day my company'll be bigger than yours, anyway" (50). Similarly, Robbie's decision to cancel the arms deal is overshadowed shortly after when he and Serena turn off their father's life support in order to gain control of the company. Serena echoes Sarah's words: "He'd be so proud", she tells him, again reinforcing the fact that Robbie has become that which he fought against. While the play hardly endorses this shift, it offers little hope to counterbalance it.

Reviews of McNamara's play were generally positive. Most reviewers saw it as a satire of capitalism and big business in particular, with Veronica Matheson referring to it as a "wonderful send-up of self-absorbed yuppies". There was, again, a recognition of the lack of alternatives offered by the play. Brian Hoad commented that "There's no soft and fuzzy hope-for-the-best sort of humanism here"(32), while Carrie Kablean noted that "There is never any doubt that Robbie will revert from sensitive New Age man to morally bankrupt tycoon. This tale has no moral" (both

comments were made in favourable reviews) (“So Greed's the Wayne to Go” 150). Helen Thomson and Fiona Scott-Norman were more mixed in their review, claiming the actor playing Robbie “makes the transition from sensitive new age man to corporate man seem almost inevitable” and commenting that “the play is cynical because it questions too little of what it presents to us”(4). Paul McGillick, similarly, admired elements of the play but had a problem with the play’s lack of hope:

The moral (if that’s the word) is that it is a corrupt world and you have to be corrupt to survive in it [. . .] My credibility problem is with a play which wrings cheap laughs out of what is really a bleakly nihilistic point of view. I don’t mind nihilism-- I feel that way myself a lot of the time. But if it doesn’t spring from a considered moral position, isn’t it a case of: cheap laughs at what price? (“Letters Aren't Drama” 14)

The play’s satire, while evident, is blunted by the inevitability of the social system it purports to critique.

*The John Wayne Principle* is a more pessimistic play than either *Money and Friends* or *Diving for Pearls*. The hope offered by Margaret’s generosity, or even Den’s futile rebellion, is entirely absent from this play’s finale. The only resistance to exploitation posited in the play is in exploitation itself; in accepting the system and playing by its rules to one’s own personal advantage. While the play arguably offers a strong critique of capitalism, in the world of the play there is no alternative. In this sense *The John Wayne Principle* is truly a product of its time.

The three plays discussed in this chapter indicate the growing acceptance of economic rationalism’s naturalisation of itself as the only possible system. Just as

there was a worldwide questioning, following the “fall of communism”, of the potential for any political alternative, so, in these plays, there is a lack of belief in either the instability of economic rationalism or in resistance to it. Resistance in these plays is portrayed as hopeless, and the only form of rebellion posited is the manipulation of the current system for one’s own ends. In this respect they accord clearly with the emerging conservative rhetoric of the nineties.

## Chapter Five. Compassion.

This chapter deals with the portrayal of what might broadly be termed “compassion” in the drama of the early nineties. By “compassion” I refer to altruistic objectives, or attempts to benefit society rather than self. Economic rationalism, as discussed above, operates predominantly at the level of the individual, with concern for others or with altering the society in which they function largely consigned to the dustbin containing socialist thought. The wholesale abandonment of kindness in favour of selfishness was facilitated by its couching in economic rationalist rhetoric. In a world where, as detailed above, economic rationalism is the only possible system, acquiescence to competitiveness becomes less self-interest and more a concession to pragmatism, or “reality”. In the same way, compassion for others, particularly when it goes beyond lip-service and into attempts to aid the objects of one’s compassion through enacting any kind of social change, thus risks denying this “reality”, and can thus be critiqued, not on the grounds of its altruistic designs, but on the assumption that its denial of pragmatics entails a falseness and an impracticality, thus rendering it little more than fashionable posturing, presumably in the service of “natural” and inherent competitive ends. The texts discussed in this chapter, Louis Nowra’s *Cosi*, Michael Gow’s *Sweet Phoebe*, David Williamson’s *Sanctuary*, and Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Redemption*, all enact to some degree this ideological shift.



## **Cosi (1992)**

*Cosi* marked a turn by Louis Nowra to more personal, autobiographical material, and the turn from the social to the individual is evident in the play itself. Through the use of psychiatric patients in the play, Nowra presents a rebellion against social norms. In terms of the play, however, this entails a rebellion more against “politically correct” attitudes than against conservative notions. This is reinforced by their juxtaposition against Nick and Lucy, Marxists whose concerns with social change and justice are undermined as the play progresses, reinforcing Lewis’s preference for the more “universal”—read, bourgeois individualist—concerns of the opera being presented. The play functions to some extent as a validation of the conservative rejection of socialist ideals.

Louis Nowra’s *Cosi*, along with *Summer of the Aliens*, which also appeared in 1992, consolidated his reputation as one of the country’s foremost dramatists. Indeed, Helen Gilbert argues that it was the commercial success of *Cosi* which “persuaded theatre companies that staging a Nowra play could be a commercially viable proposition rather than a worthwhile but risky enterprise”, and established his reputation with audiences outside of academia (“Theatre and Cultural Commerce: Louis Nowra’s *Cosi*” 191). It is perhaps no coincidence that this popularity marked Nowra’s turn away from the complexities of his earlier work to a more simplistic, autobiographical tone. Helen Thomson, reviewing the play along with *Summer*, writes that “These two plays by Louis Nowra, along with Stephen Sewell’s *Sisters* (1991) and *The Garden of Grand-daughters* (1993) have led me to conclude Australian playwriting might be in the midst of a mid-life crisis”, citing the fact that

both playwrights had displayed “A similar turn towards the private world” rather than political concerns. “Heaven help us,” she goes on to say, “if the miserable nineties have narrowed down imaginative vision to the merely personal level, reflecting perhaps the difficulty of mere survival and the apparent futility of idealism and political action” (175). This futility is present in *Cosi* in more than simply the autobiographical focus, as the personal in this case reflects not an abandonment of politics so much as the revision of earlier political tendencies.

*Cosi* tells the story of Lewis, a young university graduate who takes a job working with the patients at a mental institution. They aim to put on the opera *Cosi fan Tutte* by Mozart. Much of the play’s humour lies in the eccentricities of the various inmates who, Gilbert argues, function along quite conservative lines, presenting “politically incorrect” attitudes without provoking any sense of guilt: “Doug, for instance, can give voice to the aggressive misogyny [. . .] because Doug, like the other inmates, performs the dramatic function of a licensed clown who gives audiences permission to laugh without demanding any corrective action” (“Theatre and Cultural Commerce: Louis Nowra's *Cosi*” 193). These characters reinforce by their madness acceptable guidelines of behaviour: “On a slightly different level, *Cosi*’s comedy can also be made to function as part of the required moral instruction since the inmates’ uproarious antics often highlight the boundaries between what is acceptable behaviour and what is not” (197). Despite this caveat, though, the “mad” characters in the play, while not romanticised, are perhaps the most sympathetic characters in that, as Thomson argues “The mental patients are certainly damaged, but they have at least dispensed with hypocrisy” (177).

In contrast to the asylum patients are Lewis’s university friend Nick and his girlfriend Lucy. Both of them are Marxists, and have little time for Lewis’s opera:

“You know, Marx thought Mozart was a reactionary shit” (*Cosi* 14). Nick and Lucy represent desire for change: “Barricades and bombs. Why not? Australians, especially young Australians of my age are getting fed up with our society. We want changes and we want them now!” (18). They place broader, societal concerns over personal ones:

How to understand how capitalism exploits the working class is important. How to stop the war in Vietnam is important. How to make a piece of theatre meaningful is important. After bread, a shelter, equality, health, procreation, money, comes maybe love. Do you think the starving masses of Africa or a Vietnamese peasant thinks about love? Love is an emotional indulgence for the privileged few. (50)

In contrast, Lewis is cynical about major change, viewing it as contrary to Australian character: “The French always believed their own rhetoric, Australians are suspicious of rhetoric” (50). He becomes increasingly focussed on the more “private” concerns of the opera: “It’s about important things like love and fidelity” (50), concerns whose claims to “universality” are to an extent emphasised in the play by their reflections in Lewis’s own life.

Beyond this reflection, the argument is loaded by Nick’s increasingly obvious insensitivity; he mocks Henry’s father’s war medals callously and is uncaring towards the mental patients on the whole, singing “They’re coming to take me away, ha ha, to the funny farm” (41, 69) at inopportune moments. Lucy’s social responsibility is also undermined by her personal infidelities (63). The result is that, as Jim Davidson writes, “Left-wing language has been reduced to Williamsonian simplistics, while Lewis’s girlfriend scarcely provides a feminist perspective” (49).

The Marxists are revealed to be insensitive and selfish, their postulating, as the right would argue, an ideological “mask”. The rebellion of the seventies is rewritten. In *Cosi* it is Lewis who is the rebel, shaking off the fashionable beliefs of his companions. And it is his “reality”, not their “ideology” that is ultimately validated: “The cynical and ideologically unsound opera about female infidelity, derided as reactionary and irrelevant by the political activists Nick and Lucy, actually mirrors real life with perfect accuracy” (H. Thomson, 177). It could be argued that at least part of the reason for *Cosi*’s popularity lies in the fact that it taps into discussions about “ideology” versus “reality”, the political versus the personal, the social versus the universal, and the cynicism towards Marxism and feminism which were increasingly part of the discourse of the right in an increasingly conservative Australian political climate.

Despite some comments on the initial production’s length, critical reception was overwhelmingly positive. Russell Walsh described the play as “characterised by a total lack of either aesthetic or ideological pretension”(43). Alison Cotes wrote that “The audience’s initial politically correct reaction-- ‘Is it proper to laugh at mental illness?’-- is soon shown to be small-minded, because the loonies are the ones with the real insights, and it is they who teach their director Lewis, with his half-baked, fresh-from-university idealism, the value of love”(59). Kate Herbert, similarly, wrote that Lewis chose the inmates over his student friends because “At least they are honest loonies”(43). Amanda Ball similarly endorsed the play’s priorities: “They have a war to stop-- he has a play to perform. It is a tribute to the success of Nowra’s highly personal script that we feel he is the one whose priorities are in order”(60). All of these comments appear to endorse the play’s conservative choice of personal over social values. Helen Thomson and Rosemary Neill were more critical of the

play's subplot, although the former still reviewed the play positively (42; 40).

Murray Bramwell was the critic most savage on the play's politics, writing that

Making the staging of the play in 1970 so significant that Lewis has to choose between directing the production or joining the National Vietnam Moratorium march creates what is known in show business as a false dichotomy. I have no trouble believing that Nowra's student chum was an unpleasant shit but to make him the identikit radical-- directing Brecht, caddishly seducing Lewis's girlfriend, deriding the gentle humanism of the theatre project-- is reductionist and gratuitous. This is not a benign view of the past, it is a falsification. ("Noises Off" 46)

*Cosi* aptly demonstrates the growing cynicism toward social change and an outward-looking rather than inward-looking compassion. The play undercuts the arguments of the play's socialist-leaning characters by presenting them as unsympathetic in comparison to Lewis and the "politically incorrect" inmates, and reinforces the more private, self-centric values of the opera, such as "love" and "fidelity" as more genuine and "real" than "ideological" social concerns.

### **Sweet Phoebe (1992)**

Michael Gow's *Sweet Phoebe* offers a similar vision of internal versus external focus. The play initially appears to be a satire of an inward-looking, self-centred yuppie couple. However, as the play develops and they are forced to engage with society in more broad terms, external engagement is also critiqued. The characters

are overwhelmed by the external world, which takes over their lives and drives them to paranoia and chaos. There is no positive result of their involvement with the world, and the play can ultimately be read as a validation of interiority and self-centredness over broader compassion and involvement.

*Sweet Phoebe* marked Michael Gow's return to writing following some time spent directing. The basic storyline deals with a young Yuppie couple whose lives are thrown into disarray following their decision to look after a friend's dog. In a 1993 interview, Gow commented that the plot was a critique of courses promising self-realisation: "I've never done one of the courses but I know plenty of people who have. There's a difference between doing a course and learning through experience and suffering. It's that whole thing of 'I know something you don't know, pay me and I will tell you'" (qtd. in Tarrant 143). In this sense we might expect *Sweet Phoebe* to present something of a morality tale, in which the protagonists learn of the futility of their prescriptive existence. The latter part of the play, however, reverses this impression.

Certainly, the early scenes satirise the neat existence Frazer and Helen have concocted for themselves. Their lives are ritualised from greetings to love-making (Gow 1, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13). They have clearly made a decision to live this way; Helen says "remember the mess we were in/ before we learnt to take control/ before we eliminated conflict from our lives" (16). Their existence is self-contained; the personal is emphasised over the political. When Jane points out that the company Frazer is hoping to work with stole money from their investors, Frazer replies "if you want to take the high moral ground all the time/ you can find fault with every company/ there'd be no one to market" (6). "Pragmatism" is emphasised here over morality. Helen bullies her clients into accepting designs for their house which they

are unhappy with on the grounds that “it was a great design”, while Frazer sees these new homeowners as “other people/ standing in your way” (3, 4). Similarly, when Libby asks them to take care of her dog, Helen says “I went through university with her”, to which Frazer replies “and you left her behind remember/ like everyone who tried to hold us back/ stop us realising our full potential” (16). Frazer and Helen have clearly chosen the personal, capitalist lifestyle over social responsibility. Their existence is based not on compassion for others, but on those choices which accord directly with self-interest.

Phoebe the dog is, of course, the catalyst by which all of this is forced to change. First the couple become increasingly fond of their new companion, and then Frazer leaves the door open and she escapes, sending the pair into a frantic panic as they try to find her again. The search forces them each into some form of engagement with the broader world, as they go door-to-door looking for clues. Helen tells of her encounter with a “little woman” in Ashfield:

she still had my hand and she was stroking it  
telling me deep voice cigarettes  
how she'd lost a dog never got over it her life ended  
my little mate  
then she grabbed me  
I was like a shop dummy so amazed  
she grabbed me held me close and cried  
[. . .]  
frazer I sat there for two hours more  
not talking just sitting  
all these children watching us

it got dark  
the photos disappeared into the dark  
I couldn't see her face  
I was shivering  
she got up went out the back the toilet I suppose  
I grabbed my bag and ran  
ran  
frazer why did I sit there (35)

The latter part of the play is dominated by these stories to such an extent that the couple scarcely interact with one another; clearly the outside world has come to dominate their lives. The façade of control is torn down: "This is what happens this is what happens you see/ you take your focus off your plans for a second/ you let go for a second and that's it/ chaos breaks out/ look how little time it took/ we didn't care how we lived/ the dog was all that mattered in the end/ chaos" (27-28).

If the play is intended as a satire on Yuppie consumerism, however, it is unclear what it offers as an alternative. While Helen does become a momentary confidante to the bruised lives she encounters, there is no sense that the encounters will extend any further beyond the brief sharing of misery. At no time is it suggested that there is any hope Helen will improve any of the lives she encounters. Frazer, meanwhile, becomes increasingly paranoid and agitated the more contact he has with the outside world, hitting his employee and losing his job and becoming increasingly paranoid about the "nazi bitch" who works at the pound: "I went back to the pound found the bitch/ why do you keep secrets/ she's going sir sir sir/ and I tell her/ I will destroy *you*" (46). Social conscience, then, such as it exists in *Sweet Phoebe*, is portrayed as leading only to obsession, impotence, rage and paranoia.



Reviews of *Sweet Phoebe* were deeply mixed. There was a general agreement among critics that the play satirised “archetypal ‘90s yuppies”(Rundle, 26). Steven Carroll wrote that the search “reveals to them the narrowness, shallowness and dishonesty of their lives”(“Arcadian Rhythm for Stoppard” 26). There was considerably less agreement as to what the result of this breakdown was. David Gyger wrote that “*Sweet Phoebe* causes us to tear out our hair in frustration at our inability to perceive the point we know must be there somewhere”(10). Ron Banks, perhaps somewhat optimistically, saw the journey as a positive one: “The couple must undergo embarrassment, humiliation and even self-destruction before they can reach that sense of enlightenment that is the first stage in the journey to compassion [. . .] it is one of those 90s plays where compassion wins out-- quite a daring thought”(“Dog Day for Dinks” 6). Other commentators saw the play’s reality as less hopeful. Pamela Payne commented that “with wicked perversity, it’s through their excessive despair that Gow provokes this couple into something like an honest confrontation with life”(“A Pristine Marriage” 9), while Diana Simmonds, in an equally positive review, commented that “it ends in breakdown, ruin and despair”(10). More critical reviews included Bob Evans’ comment that “The characters are totally unsympathetic and the process of anecdote is static”(4).

The journey of Frazer and Helen is the opposite of Lewis in *Cosi*. They start out focussed on the personal and are forced into the social. However, once again the natural, or chaotic, is victorious over the rational. Gow does not romanticise the chaotic, as *Cosi* seems to, but nevertheless *Sweet Phoebe* seems again to reinforce the status quo; there is no such thing as a genuine, compassionate social alternative. The play offers two choices: a shallow economic rationalist existence on the one

hand and a broader awareness which leads to misery and despair. In this sense it too reflects the conservative beliefs of the early nineties.

### **Sanctuary (1994)**

David Williamson's *Sanctuary* deals with compassion, in terms of any concern with social justice over individual gain, in a similarly cynical fashion. While the powerful Bob is revealed as selfish and concerned only with competition and greed, the alternative, in the form of youthful idealist John, is undercut by the revelations of the latter's competitive basis for his so-called altruistic ideals. Idealism and the desire for change is portrayed as either selfish competitiveness or as ideological "correctness". There is no sense in the play of a genuine compassionate alternative. Rather, the play portrays a world in which both selfish and "altruistic" behaviours are based on the same self-serving intrinsic desires. The only difference is that one acknowledges "reality" while the other denies it.

David Williamson, commenting on the "message" of *Sanctuary* in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, commented that "It's not a party political message [. . .] It's a message: beware the extent to which we can deceive ourselves and others" (qtd. in Lewis 23). To a certain extent, the play is a critique of media institutions, and those who kow-tow to them. Bob King is a retired journalist who worked for *Time* and CBS in the U.S. and who, over the years, covered up a number of horrors, including massacres in Guatemala, in order to protect his own back and to increase his fortune. John Alderston is a PhD student who visits Bob to interview him for a book he is writing.

John confronts Bob with a litany of his sins: “Your career helped keep America the worst informed, most xenophobic, most profligate, most aggressive, most uncaring, most wasteful and polluting society that’s ever happened to the planet!” (*Sanctuary* 23). John here attempts to emphasise the social view rather than the inward-looking, selfish view. Bob’s reactions begin as regretful self-defence. He claims that “I knew long before I joined that *Time* wasn’t exactly radical [. . .] I thought I could bend its conservatism a little. And I did. A little” (15), and acknowledges that his support for the Guatemalan regime was “Bad judgement, but I didn’t want to believe members of my species could shoot three-year-olds without there being some cause” (16). However, they progress to unabashed gloating when provoked too far:

I don’t give a shit about the suffering of humanity, because I have seen humanity at close range. I have seen three-year-old children with their heads shot off. I know what humanity is like and I want nothing to fucking do with them [. . .] I have been able to amass the only commodity that protects one and gives one sanctuary from the ravages of our own vicious species. I don’t care what you say about me, John. I have forty million dollars and you have fuck all. So go away, grow up, and earn yourself the sort of money you’re going to need to buy your own sanctuary, because the world is getting rapidly worse. (25)

Bob represents a cynicism about idealism and compassion typical of conservative thought. He is able to justify his own selfishness due to his belief that all humans are similarly motivated. In this regard he resembles *Sunrise*’s Clarrie; he fears the

motivations of others because he fears the motives inside himself. Defending his desire to see the killing for himself, he says:

It's only a few centuries since public hangings used to draw hundreds of thousands. It's only two millennium since people flocked to the Colosseum. It killed Roman drama stone dead. People preferred to go and watch men kill each other. Do you think because your universities teach phony courses in human perfectibility that we're any different at the core! (41)

Bob is able to forgive himself because he sees his own failings as universal; not as a betrayal of civic responsibility but as an acquiescence to a basic nature which, however undesirable, fundamentally motivates us all: "Believe me, John, the rest of the world doesn't give a shit about you and your family. No one gives a shit about anything except themselves" (46). This is an explicit expression of agreement with the capitalist dog-eat-dog ethos.

While the play initially seems to be a critique of Bob's beliefs, it transforms into something altogether different, as Bob's boasting goads John into a violent attack which leaves his foe injured and blinded. The second act occurs with a radically altered power dynamic, as debates over politics are interspersed with Bob's pleas for John to call an ambulance. Williamson describes this transformation as something that occurred during the writing: "The initiating thing (for writing the play) was the journalism issue, particularly in foreign affairs [. . .] But when I started writing it developed into a study of the corrosive force of moral ferocity and the question raised is who is the more evil of the two men, Bob King, or the young man consumed with moral indignation?" (qtd. in Gill, "The Play's the Thing" 11). The result is that John's moral superiority is completely undermined. Bob says:

This is really interesting. [. . .] A man of ferocious moral integrity intends to kill a defenceless human being to serve his own interest. The moral equation doesn't quite add up, does it, John? [. . .] Why? Because I'm barely human, beneath contempt—that's exactly the psychology that allows soldiers to shoot three-year-olds, John. (30)

This unproblematised paralleling of differing social circumstances is similar to the logic which allowed conservative commentators to dismiss socialist ideals on the basis of, for example, the atrocities committed by Stalin. John's background begins to emerge: adolescent awkwardness, schoolyard bullying and rape, parental lack of attention. This serves to reinforce Bob's belief that John's attacks are based not on social responsibility but on baser motives: "That's instinctively what you hated when you saw me on the television, wasn't it? At some very deep level you knew that I had never been bullied" (34). John's dislike is thus attributed not to any rational moral dissent, but to mere competitiveness. The result is that, as Leonard Radic commented in his review, "neither of the characters is particularly likeable or sympathetic [. . .] the play reveals both men to be morally contemptible and sleazy. If this is a commentary on two generations of Australian society, it is a sorry one" ("Moral Crusade with No White Night" 17).

John's character, despite the background psychology, can be seen as representative of the left in general, as hinted at in Bob's references to "the Left in Guatemala" who were "as rigid and dogmatic and full of hate as the Right. They just didn't have the firepower" (17). The implication is that beneath the surface those who preach equality and selflessness are just as selfish as those they critique. Bob defends the U.S. against John's critiques, claiming that despite its many flaws, "if I was a woman, a gay, a radical, a hispanic or a black and I had to choose between the

U.S. and Iran, I know where I'd be heading" (31). John's argument, when not being undermined as instinctive hatred, is portrayed as naïve university indoctrination: "You're working inside a very outmoded theoretical framework, John [. . .] The power elites use willing tools like me to indoctrinate a stupid and docile public into behaving in a way that maximises their profits? Marcuse 1960" (8). His belief system is divided neatly into "instinctual" aggression and imposed ideology, and an "outdated" one at that, again echoing conservative arguments that Marxist ideology is no longer relevant. Just as the right would argue that the left offers only ideological masks which hide but cannot stop nature, so John's darker drives win out over his altruistic facade. John proves to be just as much a capitalist as his nemesis. It is Bob's withdrawal of his offer of money, rather than any moral disparagement, which leads to his ultimate murder (48).

While Williamson claims to have identified more with John's character (Gill, "The Play's the Thing" 11), it is clearly Bob who emerges more sympathetically in the play. Ultimately it is his own cynical world-view which the play validates. Together with Bob's seemingly infallible ability to see through John's "ideology" to what lies beneath, the ultimate impression is that both men are self-serving, but that Bob at least is honest about it. He recognises society's instinctive competitiveness while John, like the left, is in denial. That this adheres to the climate of the early nineties is clear. Reviewers recognised the play's critique of "political correctness" (Boyd, "Against the Wind" 14; Larkin, "Cross-Examination Falls Short of Tension"), a link that Williamson makes explicit:

Political correctness is a very good manifestation of moral ferocity [. . .] It's "My minority group has been disadvantaged compared to the rest of society and I am fucking furious so I am going to wreak

revenge on society for doing that”. Often the minority group distorts the amount of persecution they have been subjected to, to generate more moral ferocity, power and indignation. (qtd. in Gill, “The Play's the Thing” 11)

The right-wing notion of victim as perpetrator which dominates anti-PC rhetoric is given physical form in *Sanctuary*'s second act. The left-wing PhD student towers over the cowering form of the powerless wealthy white male representative of the mainstream media, who, having apologised for all of his wrongs, now begs for his life.

*Sanctuary* drew mixed reviews. Angela Bennie seems to have swallowed the play's ideology: “one is as bad as the other. No matter the colour of their surfaces, these two human beings, underneath, have something dreadful in common: their human legacy [. . .] That legacy, we realise with pain, is made up of passion and emotion of a very dark, primitive kind, as much as it is of rationality and reasonableness”(19). Both Fiona Scott-Norman (47) and John Larkin (“Cross-Examination Falls Short of Tension” 7) recognised the play's critique of “political correctness” in John. Kate Herbert, similarly, wrote that the play “exposed the hypocrisy beneath the moral indignation of our political watch-dogs [. . .] Alderston, the holier-than-thou, politically-correct dork, reveals a dark and inhumane streak which makes King's choice to bury the truth about the US Army in Guatemala look like hiding your jam sandwiches at school”(46). Peter Goers, though positive about the play, wrote that “Idealism like that exhibited by [. . .] John Alderston, is something I have not witnessed since the early 1970s. Perhaps it was because I was there that I suspect that young visionaries with deeply traumatised pasts don't come that innocent anymore”(64). Murray Bramwell was more critical of the

characterisation, claiming that “It is possible that two such people might exist but they are so one-dimensional that they cannot sustain ninety minutes’ scrutiny [ . . . ] When ideas and political positions become so crudely psychologised the play has nowhere to go but into ranty melodrama”(“Reckonings” 64). Helen Thomson, in a 2003 review, commented on the play’s conservative nature, claiming that the play:

takes us back to Hobbes’ version of mankind as nasty and brutish, in direct contradiction to the Shaftesburyian optimism which posits an innate goodness in mankind [ . . . ] This seems to be either a cynical position which suggests we are all ultimately the victims of our worst instincts, or it sounds like the kind of conservative, right-wing view that says men are basically evil, not good.(170, 71)

Chris Boyd’s review recognised this aspect of the play whilst forgiving it: “Some, no doubt, will read this as Williamson’s apology for pragmatism. I see it, rather, as fitting into a pattern where Australia’s tallest poppy acts as a keel on the ship of morality. When the prevailing winds of political correctness are blowing hard, he balances them”(“Against the Wind” 14). Boyd is able to reconcile Williamson’s conservative argument by buying into the conservative schema whereby “political correctness” is the dominant ideology, and thus critiquing it becomes an act of rebellion.

*Sanctuary*, perhaps more so than any of the plays above, conforms directly to many of the growing conservative beliefs of nineties Australia. Selfishness is here portrayed as inherent, and unavoidable. There is no alternative to self-centred competition. Any attempt at asserting morality or compassion is, in terms of the debate within this play, deconstructed as a fashionable façade which masks baser motives, as indoctrinated lip-service to “politically correct” notions which have no



basis in “reality”. The play reverses the perpetrator/victim binary. Compassion and the desire for social change, “moral ferocity” in Williamson’s terms, are portrayed as just as competitive and just as dangerous to others, if not more so, than greed and selfishness. In this regard, it serves to support the turn from social justice and compassion toward competition and focus on the individual evident in society as a whole.

### **Redemption (1997)**

*Redemption* is very similar to *Sanctuary* in that it portrays altruism and the desire for social justice as something constructed to mask deeper desires. Within the context of the play, there is no sense of any kindness towards others which is not motivated by selfish wants. The character of Sam attempts to reject insular privilege and to focus on social context, situating his friend’s murderer in the framework of his upbringing and social station, and seeing social change as the necessary antidote. Edie, conversely, is cynical about his “rational” beliefs, and sees attempts at showing compassion as ultimately more harmful than worthwhile. She believes instead in escaping into an insular world of privilege. As the play progresses, it is Edie’s view that is validated while Sam’s is torn down and shown to be a charade.

Joanna Murray Smith claimed in 1997 that one of the driving forces behind her play *Redemption* was “the idea of how the worlds of the privileged and the under-privileged intersect and what the middle-class responsibility is to the dispossessed and the underclasses”(qtd. in Litson 19). *Redemption* deals with a reunion between two old friends following the death of a third. As the play

progresses it becomes apparent that the deceased, Jacob, was Edie's lover, and that he was killed, senselessly, by a young boy for no greater reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Edie and Sam must deal with their own feelings towards the young man responsible, as well as toward each other and Jacob.

Edie and Sam have both rejected aspects of their upbringing. Sam has spurned his privileged life in order to live amongst the disadvantaged who he deals with in his work at a Mission. He claims "You see, I believe we oughtn't to hide behind walls—[. . .] That we have a duty to be out there—[. . .] Where they are" (Murray-Smith, *Redemption* 29). Edie, by contrast, has adopted the lifestyle that she was offered by Sam's parents and her friendship with Sam and Jacob:

Sam: I saw through most of it. The friends and their manuscripts.  
These were people for whom art was a worthy substitute for  
life—

Edie: It *was* a worthy substitute for *my* life. (30)

Both have made choices to be where they are. It is the conflict between the two perspectives; that of philanthropy and that of escapism, which drives the play.

Sam attempts to contextualise the murder of Jacob with reference to the perpetrator's social station and situation. He claims "He had one of those lives—those histories, the ones you read about [. . .] His mother's dead, his father's a drunk. His brother's a junkie"(9, 11, 12). Sam's focus is therefore on social causes, rather than individual reasons, for the attack. Sam sees the murder as retribution for the upper and middle classes' "Crimes without names [. . .] Those times we've looked away—[. . .] Just 'looked away' [. . .] Those insect children with their bloated bellies" (16). Indifference, that is, looking inward, is, according to Sam, the cause of the problem, and society as a whole must bear the responsibility. When Edie asks

“Shouldn’t he pay—?” Sam replies “He’s already paid! And so has his brother and his mother and his father and his neighbour. *He’s paying us back*” (34). The solution must also be social; for Sam, Jacob’s death reinforces the importance of his work:

Edie: Doesn’t it make you--?

Sam: No [*Beat*] It makes me *more* certain—

Edie: More certain of—

Sam: The rightness.

Edie: The—

Sam: The rightness. The rightness. [*Beat*] Yes. (15)

Sam represents the social view of society, in which society creates its citizens and social justice is the best method of preventing individual crimes.

Edie represents the alternative view. It is clear she prefers the personal to the broader political view. She is concerned that too much looking objectively at the world will force her to “See it, with all its minor hypocrisies and delusions—It makes one aware that too much height isn’t a good thing” (6). She is cynical about Sam’s attempt to “Reassert rationality” (7), criticising “The things you say— ‘Formulating’. ‘Methods’. ‘Strategies’. Words that don’t *look* like anything” (8). Within the context of the play, Edie’s rejection of “rationality” is in fact a rejection of any type of contextual analysis, any attempt to deal with the world beyond subjective experience. Sam tells her “You always had a compulsion to romanticise”, to which she replies “Is that a bad thing?” (25). Again, this romanticism is a rejection of the outer world and a turn to interiority; for Edie, the accuracy or otherwise of her perceptions of the world are less important than how they make *her feel*. Edie in many ways represents the ideal economically rational individualist, seeking respite

from the ills of the world by escaping into a world of insular privilege, rather than attempting to alter them.

Given this worldview, Edie is sceptical about Sam's attempts to contextualise. When he tells her that the killer "was abused as a child" she replies "These clichés!" (35). She is cynical about Sam's ideals, just as Bob can't stand John's "moral righteousness" in *Sanctuary*. She tells him "You sit in a room, content, ordered, proud, even. And you decide on likelihoods. You say the rest of us should be frightened—we should be frightened of what is 'out there'. Should we? Should we, Sam? Or should we be more frightened of you?" (38). While Sam's idealism does not lead directly to murder, there is room for parallel in that it is his belief in social justice which led to Jabob's killer's release back onto the streets. Again, we see the reversal of the dichotomy of selfishness and selflessness. Those who aim at doing social good succeed in doing as much, if not more, damage than those whose aims are self-centred. Like *Sweet Phoebe*, *Redemption* depicts social conscience as a problem rather than a solution.

As with *Sanctuary*, altruism is depicted as illusory, a cover for baser motives. Edie tells Sam: "Pushing your privilege so far from you—[. . .] You transpose your self-hatred onto your class [. . .] It's goodness is a by-product of why you do it. Let's be honest here, Sam [. . .] You think you work with the wounded, Sam, but you *are* the wounded!" (33). "Ideology", again, is portrayed as imposed and a mask: "You never speak, you proselytise [. . .] Everything [. . .] an advertisement for your ideology—and underneath, what? A wife? A child? A family? A friend, even? Every chance, you lost" (33, 38). Edie sees Sam's attempts to improve the world as inconceivable other than as a façade utilised in order to cover up the absence or lack of private, insular (and therefore more genuine) achievements such as a "wife" and

“child”. In this respect they serve merely as selfish defences rather than as genuinely compassionate designs. The murdered Jacob’s altruism, too, is deconstructed after his death and recast as selfishness and competitiveness:

Sam: I coveted his wife. He forgave me—

Eddie: Of course he did. That was his weapon— [ . . . ] His goodness was too intense to be benign—[ . . . ] I’m not afraid to say it— Jacob wielded goodness as a way to keep us in orbit—[*Beat*] It silenced us. [*Beat*] He forgave you. Of course he did—he undid your passion by forgiving it (41).

To Eddie, then, Jacob’s kindness, even in the face of her own betrayal, is unable to be conceived as anything more than a selfish attack on her own burgeoning affair.

Deborah Jones seems to recognise the self-serving nature of their argument in her review of the play, claiming “These are mean people; self-absorbed, greedy, blaming a dead man for what he ‘made’ them do” (13). There is no such recognition in the play.

As the play progresses, Sam’s resistance to these conservative arguments is gradually undermined and Eddie’s opinion validated, as he reveals:

Since you left [ . . . ] I’ve done nothing but look outward and everywhere I look I see misery [ . . . ] The more I work, the more I look for ways to make things—to make things—to make it *mean* something—the more I lose myself—[ . . . ] there is something dead, something dead within me too—I have to work this way because if I stood still, I’d lose myself inside the lack of you (42).

In affirming Eddie’s view of Sam, the play clearly privileges the conservative point of view. Within the confines of the play, there is *no* example of altruism or desire for

social justice which is not motivated by denial and/or self interest. In opposition to the “constructed” social focus is set “natural” personal desire: “We suffered from expectations—[. . .] That we could *think* our ways to happiness—Jesus, Sam! Look at us! [*Beat*] The two of us—[*Beat*] Each of us with something lost [. . .] Some part of—some—the *true* self—[. . .] buried my—the essence of me” (41). Turning inward is therefore portrayed as “true” and authentic in opposition to the “mask” of social responsibility. As Kelly notes, “Honesty for them consists of recognising desire without false shame or moralism [. . .] the apolitical ‘personal solution’” (151).

*Redemption* was perhaps one of Murray-Smith’s less successful plays. Deborah Jones claimed “I found no spirit of redemption”(13), while Dina Ross claimed that “the play unsatisfactorily skims the surface of these complex areas”. Ross saw the hypocrisy of the characters’ retreat into privilege: “Horror may have touched these two, yet they are still protected by their comfort zone of designer interiors, music and books”(“Death and Frocks” 50). Alison Cotes, while similarly critical, displayed more sympathy for the play’s premise, claiming that the play “tackles one of the most important dilemmas facing the well-meaning middle class, that to have unreserved faith in the possible redemption of society’s outcasts may lead to other members of society being put at risk”(“Important Issue Lost in Static Pretension” 47).

*Redemption* ultimately serves the conservative ideology of the nineties through its undercutting of social change and social responsibility, of compassion, and its reinforcement of individualism. As with the plays discussed previously, the competitive fulfilment of self-interested desires is here portrayed as the “natural” state for mankind. The argument is enforced via Sam’s gradual “awakening” to the correctness of Edie’s inward-looking philosophy. Again, interest in helping others, in

“rational” discourse, contextual analysis and examining the workings of the world outside the narrow frame of personal relationships is revealed as selfish, misguided, false and doomed to failure.

In each of the four plays discussed in this chapter: Nowra’s *Cosi*, Gow’s *Sweet Phoebe*, Williamson’s *Sanctuary* and Murray-Smith’s *Redemption*, there is an observable critique of those who attempt to argue for social justice or compassion. Each of these plays sets up something of an opposition between looking inward to selfish desires, escapism and insularity, and looking outward to social context, altruism and affecting change. In each case, looking outward is undercut, either by revelations of the insincerity of those who seek social equity or change, and the attendant suggestion that their compassion is merely a mask for more selfish motives, or by the “realisation” by the characters that attempts to make the world a better place achieve more harm than good. In this respect they serve to reinforce the growing rhetoric of conservatism in early nineties Australian society.

## **Chapter Six. Feminism.**

As previously noted, feminism was one of the chief targets for the conservative critics of the early nineties. A number of the plays from the period conform to this tendency, revising some of the beliefs and ideals of feminism, particularly from the sixties and seventies. Peta Murray's *Wallflowering*, Hannie Rayson's *Falling from Grace* and Joanna Murray-Smith's *Love Child* all critique the "ideological" feminist image, as blinded by "imposed" dogma, rather than "real" concern. Each of these plays to some extent rejects aspects of the feminist movement, and returns instead to more "traditional" notions of nuclear family and heterosexual marriage. Each can be seen to conform to and reinforce the backlash against feminism evident in society as a whole.

### **Wallflowering (1989)**

*Wallflowering* predates most of the plays discussed in this section, but its popularity is a clear indication of the growing swing against feminism growing in Australia. In this play a "traditional" marriage, unequal and unwilling to change, comes under the influence of "feminism", and the effects are portrayed as almost entirely negative. Feminism and feminists are caricatured as subservient to "fashionable" ideology, rather than genuinely caring for the rights of other women. Their desire to interfere is portrayed as an unwillingness to accept the "reality" of the happiness of those in more "traditional" relationships. In contrast, the play emphasises the virtues of an



“ordinariness” based on lack of questioning or thought, lack of looking outward, and lack of belief in change, all staples of nineties conservatism.

*Wallflowering* follows a similar line to *Sweet Phoebe* in some ways, but the chief target in this play is feminism. Cliff and Peg Small were “just an ordinary, happily married couple” (2). Cliff is described in the character notes as wearing “relics of the 1950s”; “he is simply of another era” (xi). Peg comes into contact with feminist literature, and, under the influence of her friends, grows to question her relationship with Cliff: “Why is it my femininity is questioned whenever I express a sentiment that distinguishes me from a doormat?” (28). Ballroom dancing, the couple’s favourite pastime, stands as a metaphor for their changing relationship:

Peg: I want to lead.

Cliff: Women don’t lead. The man is supposed to lead.

Peg: I want to lead.

Cliff: No. The man is the one who’s supposed to lead. That’s how we were taught. Remember? (45)

Cliff’s point of view indicates a belief that successful marriage is based on conformity to unchallenged, “traditional” beliefs. Peg, however, is growing away from this notion. She claims “I’m tired of dancing with you. We always do the same routines, the same combinations” (46) while Cliff admits that “They’re all I know, Peg. The old steps, the old ways. You know me...” (49). What seems at first to be a tale of feminist awakening is diverted as Peg realises that her new life doesn’t make her happy. She turns back to Cliff, and the two of them opt to forge on together: “We’re ready to learn a new dance” (63).

Whatever the “new dance” might be, based on the rest of the play it is unlikely to be an overly feminist one. The play’s conservatism is most evident in its

representation of Peg's feminist friends. Their critique of Peg's relationship is portrayed as facile: they criticise her children's haircuts (16), and make broad generalised assumptions about her sex life and domestic violence (16, 17). They completely disregard Peg's feelings. The "feminist" life they offer as a substitute would seem to consist of kissing other women (7), unsatisfying promiscuity: "I said: Well, if that makes you happy... She said: Well, it doesn't" (17), makeovers (22), massages and backrubs (29); hardly the vision of radical change to which seventies feminists may have aspired. The feminist literature her friends force her to read fares just as badly:

I didn't want to listen. All I heard were the terrible things. All I could hear were the terrible things. About hating your mother. About loving your father and him loving you. In a sexual way. About men, and how awful they are. About painful childbirth, and forceps, and the mutilation of women. About sex; about touching and being touched, and in different ways and in different positions [. . .] I could see that all over the state, all over the country, women were giving each other these books, and talking about them. Just like my friends and me [. . .] But I was scared. I thought: What will become of us all now? When we have all finished talking about hating our mothers and loving our fathers, and mistrusting our men, and hating our children for the pain they gave us, and touching each other, and touching ourselves? What will become of us when we have finished talking about these things? What will we have left? (43)

There is no sign that Peg understands any of these concepts, no sign of her contextualising them with relation to her life or the lived experiences of others. In

her interpretation these literatures, like the “feminist” actions detailed above, are presented as de-contextualised rules to be followed blindly, and which alienate women from those around them.

Feminism, then, in this play, is based on superficiality, sex, misery, distrust and blind obedience to its core ideology. It is an attitude to be adopted and put on, an acquiescence to peer pressure rather than a movement based in genuine concern for others, and it achieves nothing practical but takes *away* real happiness:

Peg: They wanted me to prove them right. They couldn't bear to think that it might have been possible. That there might have been something in it after all.

Cliff: No. They couldn't bear to think that she might really be...

Peg: That word. Happy. (18)

As the play progresses it becomes clear that the “feminists” are not even real friends: “The word ‘friend’ is a sort of a mantra to a woman. As if thinking it, saying it, often enough, makes it so” (25). They drive her back into Cliff’s arms with their cruel mockery of her at a party (60). As Helen Thomson comments, “These are a cruel and deluded bunch of feminists, their sexual politics evidently dooming them to lives of unhappiness. So much for the most important social movement of the century” (128). *Wallflowering* presents a view of feminists which would no doubt have caused crows of delight amongst those wishing to discredit the feminist cause.

Apart from some non-dogmatic, non-“feminist” steps toward equality in their relationship, it is also unclear whether anything in Cliff and Peg’s life will change. Alison Croggan writes that the theme of the play seems to be “that identity must be subsumed in the pursuit of happiness, or at least coupledness. The play is a celebration of denial and nothing more than a comfortable affirmation of the status

quo” (Croggan 3). Indeed, it is difficult to believe the couple’s willingness to “learn a new dance” when the preceding acts have served to undermine all non-traditional thought. The “ordinariness” that Murray wishes to affirm is in fact an affirmation of conservative ideology. It consists of anti-intellectualism: Cliff tries to deny his ordinariness by reading and writing, claiming mechanically that “I have started to write. Therefore, I am interested in books” (Murray 3), but he learns his lesson by the end of the play, and instead offers “blissful ignorance” (4). The play critiques questioning and ambition: “she’s trying to tell you what happens when you’re brought up knowing you’re ordinary, and you’re happy that way, and then people start to tell you that you’re not ordinary and you’re not happy. And that can destroy a marriage” (11). The message here is clearly that happiness resides in accepting “reality”, that is, things *as they are*. The play clearly argues for tradition over change: “We no longer looked all right together. That was my first thought. From now on we will look all wrong together. We are no longer complementary, no longer compatible” (25). It also portrays cynical insularity as an ideal. As well as Peg’s distrust of her “friends”, Cliff comments that ““Our friends’ were her friends and their husbands. None of us really cared to know each other” (26), He believes that he has no real friends, although he likes Tom, chiefly based on his lack of socialising or extracurricular suggestions (27). Cliff’s motto is “Love many, trust few; always paddle your own canoe”(27), based on his belief that adults are no more developed than children, a worldview which Peg initially disagrees with, but one which she comes to agree with following her own experiences: “He’s right. We are only tall, nasty children” (61). Insularity, in this regard, is portrayed as a virtue not merely due to its conservative emphasis on the individual and/or couple as opposed to looking outward to help others, but also in the fact that it is based on a distrust of the

motivations of others. All of the “virtues”, then, that *Wallflowering* offers in place of the feminism it critiques: anti-intellectualism, lack of questioning, resistance to change, cynicism toward the motivation of others and the choice to look inward rather than outward, can be seen as closely linked to the growing conservative climate.

Reviews of *Wallflowering* were generally positive, other than notable criticisms from Helen Thomson, Brian Hoad (“Everything but Life”) and Alison Croggan, the latter noting that the piece was “exactly the sort of play John Howard would approve of: it was all the New Conservative nostalgia for a cosily remembered past when The Family was All”(3). Many reviews ignored the play’s politics, although some commented positively despite or because of the conservative politics of the work. Leonard Radic wrote that “thematically, it is the product of conservatism. But it is none the less a lovely piece”(10), Tracey Pollock claimed the piece “finds a fine balance in the feminism versus traditionalism debate”(53), and Bronwyn Watson in the *Sydney Morning Herald* echoed the play’s ideology in her comments: “A lot of very ludicrous aspects of feminism come out. They are ludicrous to me because a lot of them made a lot of women unhappy purely because they felt they should be, rather than actually saying, ‘No, this is the way I am’”(10), a clear reflection of the play’s “feminist ideology” versus “reality” dichotomy. Brian Hoad suggested that the play’s conservatism was in step with the times, writing that “Whatever Murray’s intentions, she has produced a celebration of ignorance, an affirmation of humanity as vegetable. It should prove popular”(“Everything but Life” 7). This prediction was to prove accurate, as Helen Thomson noted when commenting on the play’s popularity four years after its premiere: “Audiences seem to be reassured by the play’s conservatism, its harking back to an old-fashioned

model of heterosexual harmony” (128). During those four years, the play was revived by as many as six productions from mainstream companies, a considerable achievement, indicating that it appealed to both audiences and artistic directors.

Murray’s play is indicative of the growing anti-feminism in the rise of conservative rhetoric in Australian life. Anti-intellectualism, assertion of tradition over change, insularity rather than social responsibility, as well as the critique of feminism as “ideological” and imposed, superficial and inconsiderate, all mark *Wallflowering* as a play representative of the conservative ideology of the early nineties. In this regard it is truly a product of its era and a harbinger of the backlashes to come.

### **Falling from Grace (1994)**

Hannie Rayson’s *Falling from Grace* depicts the friendships between three women working at a magazine. On the surface it presents a portrayal of liberal feminism, an impression reinforced by its critique of Marxist and radical feminisms, and in particular feminism dominated by “ideology”, as present in the form of Miriam. These “feminists” are primarily concerned with intimate relationships rather than social concerns, and are subservient to corporate interests, to such an extent that, ultimately, it is hard to see them even as liberal feminists. Their “feminism” is further undercut by the primacy in the play of the desire for men. Ultimately it validates traditional relationships rather than emancipation and serves to reinforce the backlash of the nineties.

Feminism in this play receives a less black-and-white, but nevertheless still quite critical portrayal compared to Murray's play. At first glance, the play seems to be detailing the triumph of liberal feminism and "femocrats". Here are three women who run their own magazine, which publishes articles on other "strong women". Brock is attempting to print an article on a female doctor working on a cure for PMS: "The fact is that millions of women complain of exactly the same symptoms and if you persist with saying, 'There's nothing wrong with it. It's all in your mind,' then the logical conclusion is that women are by nature—malingerers and whingers" (*Falling from Grace* 10). Miriam, the scientist comments that "the people who make decisions about what gets funded and who designs medical research are nearly all men. That's the way it is. Medicine as we know it is based on the assumption that maleness is the norm" (41). Maggie, meanwhile, cuts an article from a male writer which attempts to delve into "the mind of a rapist" on the grounds that "why would we want to know that for Chrissake? So we can feel sorry for him. So our moral outrage can be dissipated. Oh poor thing. How awful to be so ruled by your dick [. . .] He's such a reactionary [. . .] I am not going to be an apologist for rapists" (21).

Throughout the play, however, Miriam's brand of feminism comes under critique. Brock admits an initial hope that her article doesn't depict Miriam "as a ratbag zealot" (10), and as the plot progresses, this is how Miriam emerges. She is unwilling to even listen to Hugh's arguments: her objections to his accusations are based on blinkered assumptions which have no basis in his comments:

Miriam: My God! I can only assume that along with the rest of the  
male medical fraternity—

Hugh: Don't lump me in that category.

Miriam: Why not? Quite clearly you are not prepared to acknowledge  
Pre-Menstrual Syndrome as a condition.

Hugh: That's not true.

Miriam: ... for reasons which I can only attribute to ignorance and  
prejudice—

Hugh: Dr. Roth—

Miriam: --which makes it entirely predictable that you will try to  
undermine my research (23)

Miriam's feminism parallels John in *Sanctuary* in that her commitment to her ideology prevents her from recognising the damage she is doing. The criticism of her by the other characters emphasises this. Suzannah tells Miriam's husband Michael:

I just think I would have liked her more if I had a sense that she was a bit more compassionate [. . .] I would have respected her more. Not professionally. But privately. Because people who don't express any scruples, any self doubt, are usually very dangerous [. . .] In fact I think you'd better take all this and go make dinner for your wife when she gets in. You wouldn't want that impressive surety to crack would you? You wouldn't want her to falter in her sense of absolute rightness (45).

Miriam's attitude to Hugh also reeks of intellectual snobbery; rather than attacking his arguments she constantly attacks his position as "a G.P." (41). Ultimately, Hugh's viewpoint is validated, and Maggie leaks the story to the press, thus validating Suzannah's rather than Michael's view of Miriam's "purity": "pure, good, noble Miriam. Oh god! You're so deceived. You're so wrong. She's the one who's acted without conscience. She's the one who's the goddamn fraud" (56). Miriam is



not presented unsympathetically. Her cause is presented as admirable, but her methodology, in particular, her ideological blinkeredness, cripples her actions.

To an extent, then, we might see *Falling from Grace* as a defence of liberal feminism over more strident, dogmatic kinds, such as radical or Marxist feminisms. Suzannah wants her daughter to be a feminist, but:

Maggie: You hate decent moral feminists.

Suzannah: Well, I hate stitched up ideologues. (8)

Maggie treats with contempt a (presumably) feminist complaint regarding a scantily-clad model:

I don't think the image was pornographic [. . .] Well, hang on a minute. The photographer was actually a woman [. . .] Well I think the actress herself chose to be photographed in her lingerie [. . .]  
[slamming down the phone] And don't call me 'sister' you miserable cow! (8, 9)

In this conversation she critiques both radical feminist concerns regarding male control and objectification (“The photographer was actually a woman”; “And don't call me 'sister'”) and Marxist concerns with exploitation (“I think the actress herself chose to be photographed in her underwear”). Maggie, Suzannah and Brock are clearly products of a time when liberal feminists have won the ideological struggle within the women's movement, and solidarity and sisterhood are outdated ideological relics.

Even the tag of liberal feminism, however, is hard to make stick on Rayson's central characters. The opening scene sets the pace, with the three friends discussing men, and in particular Maggie's desire for one. Brock tells Maggie “You have to... conjure him up. That's what Isabel Allende did. That's how she found her husband”,

hardly particularly feminist advice (4). Their magazine hardly seems to portray cutting edge feminism either. When Brock is concerned about making Miriam out to be a “ratbag zealot”, Maggie reassures her that “You’ve countered that with all the anecdotal stuff. I loved the story about her going through the wardrobe and trying on every item of clothing” (10). Suzannah, the most successful businesswoman of the three, sells out her principles to advertisers: “This is one of the biggest coups we’ve pulled off and I simply can’t afford to lose them as major advertisers” (24) and then reveals that her life as a career woman is deeply unsatisfying, telling Hugh:

Don’t give me any of your holier-than-thou fucking bullshit. I’m sick of it. I’m just so sick and tired of it. You know, you go on and on about all the things that are wrong with me, but the fundamental difference between you and me is that you’ve got a wife and family. You’ve got someone there who really does care that you’re O.K. [. . .] I was in Castlemaine looking in the window of the Real Estate Agent when all of a sudden I started crying. I was standing there in the main street with tears streaming down my cheeks. I couldn’t stop myself. And do you know what it was? It was this real grief because I wanted to be doing it with someone else. And there isn’t anyone else (64).

Maggie and Suzannah are both forced to admit that their altruistic reasons for exposing Miriam are masks for less generous motivations (66, 67). Brock *does* show some ideological commitment, but as it is in support of Miriam, it is also undercut by the knowledge that she has been misled. And while Brock is the only one of the three to whom finding a man is not a central driving concern, this is hardly revolutionary given the fact that she is married and pregnant.

*Falling from Grace* received mixed reviews, though tending toward a greater number of positive assessments. Kate Herbert reflected the praise of several reviewers in her recognition of the characters: “The characters are never predictable but, heck, are they familiar!”(39) Several reviewers found the male characters lacking in depth, with Pamela Payne, for instance, claiming that “Her simplistic feminism-- women are all good, men are invariable skunks or wimps-- falls well short of trenchant or persuasive debate”(7) Alison Cotes questioned the credibility of the medical plot. Few reviewers questioned the play’s feminist credentials. Andrea Baldwin went so far as to refer to Rayson as “politically-correct”, and claimed that the play displays “the kind of intensity that we associate with the 70s”(56). Stewart Hawkins questioned the women’s feminism to the extent that “it is hard to find any sympathy for the characters because in a way they are all victims of their own self-interest”(7), while Catherine Lambert wrote that “none of the women are presented as particularly self-assured, at ease or interesting [ . . . ] Dr Roth, too, is a determined careerist until her work is challenged, her husband offers renewed commitment and she suddenly becomes more content. All she wanted, it seems, was a bit of love”(39) Chris Boyd also recognised the play’s loaded nature, criticising “Rayson’s failure to give the two antagonists the same fleshly vitality that every other part gets. The radical feminist and the reactionary misogynist are ciphers in the Williamson style, as impenetrable to us as they are to Rayson”(“Duelling with the Devil” 18).

The values that *Falling from Grace* affirms, then, are private ones: family, love and friendship. In this regard, it cannot really be considered a “feminist” play at all, except perhaps in the very narrowest of terms. The three friends look out for each other, if not for anybody else: “Suzannah, I couldn’t give a damn if you were doing it with the Klu Klux Klan. I just thought you would have told me. That’s all. I thought

that's what we did" (22). While it is certainly far from the blunt-instrument polemic of *Wallflowering*, and does not lay its argument out in black and white terms, *Falling from Grace* is indicative of the early nineties in its dismissal of the ideological stridency of radical and Marxist feminisms, its questioning of the feminist emphasis on career progression as an alternative to traditional family values such as romantic love and childbirth, and its affirmation of intimate personal relationships and friendships as the primary site of human concern, rather than broader concerns encompassing humanity as a whole.

### **Love Child (1993)**

Joanna Murray-Smith's *Love Child* pits the philosophy of the sixties against the attitudes of the nineties in the form of its two protagonists. The younger Billie is the antithesis of sixties ideology: she is anti-intellectual, puts self-interest above principle, and is reliant on men. In Billie's terms, any concern with broader social issues is a sign of unrealistic detachment. She dismisses "rationality", and is unable to comprehend goodness in anything other than personal terms. Billie argues that her birth-mother Anna is an example of feminism's unrealistic ideological mask; that her interest in social justice is merely a protective barrier to distract her from the lack inside due to her lost child. Anna ultimately breaks down, confirming all of Billie's impressions, and thereby loading the play's argument firmly in favour of conservative anti-feminism.

*Love Child*, like *Falling from Grace* and *Wallflowering*, deals with the conflict between emancipation and family life, in this case childbirth. Anna is a well

off middle class former seventies radical: “I nearly got chucked out of Uni. We barricaded the doors leading out of the Dean’s office. He had to call security to get out” (*Love Child* 15) She is confronted by Billie, the daughter she once gave away. Anna represents sixties feminism’s challenging of the primacy of procreation: “He wanted a child, but he also wanted someone to do all the work [. . .] I’d read a lot of books. I didn’t want to be used as some kind of breeder” (23). Billie, on the other hand, represents her antithesis. She is scornful of university education: “The idea of sitting around discussing the pros and cons of grunge bands. That’s not me” (9), and indeed education in general: “Facts bore me” (8). There is room for parallel with nineties conservatism’s critique of intellectual “elites”. She acts on a soap called *Supermodels* and is considering a role in “*Taxidrivettes*—that’s the series about female taxi drivers who are undercover sex therapists. It’s got a nudity clause” (11). When Anna asks her “isn’t it demeaning” her reply is that “Unemployment’s demeaning” (11). Pragmatism, here, is clearly more important to Billie than morality. Her attitude towards men is in contradiction to the sixties ideal of independence:

Anna: It takes courage to live alone. Not to pander to anyone’s whims.

Billie: *He* pandered to *my* whims. I miss his pandering.

Anna: There is tremendous freedom in living alone.

Billie: I don’t find any freedom in it at all. (13)

In her anti-intellectualism, economically-based pragmatism over idealism, and rejection of the notion that women do not need men for fulfilment, she represents a blatant rejection of the ideological underpinnings of sixties feminism.

As the play goes on, the confrontation between the two characters' values becomes less abstract and more direct. Billie presents the personal in contrast to Anna's broader societal concerns:

Anna: I spent a lot of years fighting for a world that made women feel stronger.

Billie: I don't know that I feel so strong.

Anna: Compared to me, your place in society is very strong.

Billie: What about my place inside myself? (20)

For Billie, the place of "women" in society cannot be conceived in terms other than her own internal "feelings". Social context thus becomes irrelevant. She sees Anna's concern with the broader picture as obfuscation: "Enemies. Women. It's all so much safer if you write it big. What about us? You and me. Isn't that where the real stuff is happening? If we all looked into our hearts, the rhetoric would mean so much more" (25). Billie links the desire for societal good to intellectual aloofness and impracticality. She tells Anna "Your whole life is abstract. Your whole life is not about us. Do people have any role in this life of yours—or is it all lamps? All ideas? [. . .] What about Edward, the husband? Did you spend so much time working out what was fair and just, that you never had any time for love? In all the judging—what have you won for yourself?" (32). As in *Falling from Grace*, personal relationships are for Billie the ultimate validation of one's life, and "ideology" a diversion. Any ideology which does not accord with the personal domain is perceived as hypocrisy: "I'm interested that you never even thought about holding onto your child. I'm interested in your amazing generosity to society" (31). The character of Billie, then, conforms quite clearly to the promotion of selfish interiority as more honest than the supposedly self-delusory interest in social good.

At a basic level, Billie's arguments are a dismissal of rationality: "Do you seriously think this is a *rational* issue. Do you really think the *logical* response wins out here?" (34). Instead she posits a belief, as with Williamson in *Sanctuary* and *Dead White Males*, in a form of biological determinism:

You don't think it's natural, then, to feel a baby in your arms? [. . .]  
Sometimes I think—well, I think that one day women will look back on all this time and see the madness. The way we do about slavery. That a time so hell-bent on fighting nature could be so convinced of its own credibility [. . .] we could relax into something that isn't about choice or taking control, just about biological instinct. About being womanly. And all of us—acting in soaps, editing film, whatever—we are all trapped in some elaborate fight against instincts that would really free us? There's so much defensiveness, we've forgotten how to question ourselves. (25)

As with the new right adoption of the left's "radical" language, here "questioning ourselves" means not questioning the tradition of sexual oppression, but questioning the apparently dominant feminist left's denial of the supposedly biological instinct of motherhood. For Billie, typically of the early nineties, "rebellion" entails fighting the feminist consensus which she sees as dominant, in order to remove the imposed, "ideological" obstructions which prevent the continuance of the more "natural" way of life. Billie is a prime example of conservative anti-feminism.

In presenting the character of Billie as opposed to Anna's beliefs, it might be argued that the play is merely portraying the emerging beliefs of the nineties, in a site of generational and ideological conflict, rather than necessarily endorsing them. However, the argument, as is the case with many of the other plays of the period, is

loaded, and from midway through Anna's arguments begin to break down in the face of her "real" beliefs. She criticises the institution of marriage, but then admits: "I mean if you knew then what you know now, maybe everything would be different. We make certain choices because we are influenced by... by the icons and then well, the icons move on . They go back on what they once said. They admit they made mistakes. Which is fine for them. But for those of us who hung on their every word... Some of us might have lost something in all of that" (26-27). Anna recovers from this, but later breaks down completely ("*real feeling at last emerging*" read the stage directions) and validates Billie's arguments:

I didn't know what to do when Ed left. I wanted to be free [. . .] But it felt as if my head had moved faster than my heart. I've been so skilled in taking all the facts and weighing them and making the right decision [. . .] As if this thing inside me can be put in its place, this, this place where.. where the feelings are kept [. . .] Yes, I dreamt of you... I dreamt of a tiny baby crying in non-existent rooms. I climb out of bed and walk through corridors searching for you and this terrible... this terrible realisation that I have had a child that I haven't been caring for, I have left it somewhere and forgotten it. And the dread! The loss... (35)

The play thus validates Billie's belief that Anna's sixties feminism was in fact based on fashionable trends and not her real desires, and that the false rationality since has attempted but failed to disguise the "loss" inside felt as a result of this apparently unnatural decision. Lest this change of heart and admission from Anna be taken as the tale of one woman, rather than society as a whole, Billie is revealed not to be Anna's child at all, reinforcing the notion that this is a play about "mothers" giving



up “children” rather than a mother who gave up a child. This is further emphasised by Anna’s shift from singular to plural when she says “It’s not been easy for me either. We let go of a part of ourselves. And now the children are all coming back” (34).

*Love Child* received almost uniformly positive reviews, although there were some exceptions. John Larkin claimed the characters “are archetypes of their generations”, and that “It is about what tears at some women as they strive to be all things to all people”(“Love Links the Torn Pieces of Two Lives” 7), a reflection of anti-feminist criticism of feminists’ desire to “have it all”. Peter Weiniger, similarly, noted that “The play examines the ideological landscape that faces women as we approach the year 2000: changing needs and options and the contradictions emerging for women in the post-feminist environment”. Stewart Hawkins, in a glowing review, referred to Billie as “the most richly-textured stage portrait of a post baby boomer I can recall”(39) The conservative politics of the nineties are reflected in Carrie Kablean’s recognition of Anna’s “politically correct life”(40). Pamela Payne, in an otherwise positive review, noted the play’s loaded nature: “Her characters serve her argument-- very well. They’re well conceived and plausible mouthpieces; but mouthpieces they are”(“Plausible Mouth-Pieces for Author's Polemic” 131). Veronica Kelly, while positive, criticised the generational subtext, “whereby a cartoonish construct of the 60s is accused of original sin, philosophical heresies, crimes against nature and suchlike resentment fantasies”(“An Emotional Journey” 9), a theme taken up also by Helen Musa in a more mixed review: “Perhaps the play would be a lot stronger if the generational and 60s/90s thing wasn’t tub-thumped so much and they were simply seen as a product of their own experience [ . . . ] It is alienating to see the 60s reduced to a couple of cliches and the 90s diminished to a

cynical rejection of the very real societal struggles of the 60s”(Musa 29). James Griffin took up this critique, too, in one of the play’s only negative reviews: “we are supposedly witnessing a dialogue between the ‘60s and the ‘90s-- and this aspect is particularly unconvincing”. He cited the “loaded” breakdown of Ana as equally hard to believe: “Why should Ana feel guilty and unfulfilled because some TV star has been hanging around pretending to be her daughter? Would you? Would you then go and take a dipstick like Billie to the movies?”(37). In general, though, this view was a minority, and the positive comments on the performance pre-empt the many revivals of the play in the years to come.

*Love Child* is, then, a very conservative piece which feeds directly into the backlash against feminism occurring in the early nineties. Through the confrontation and eventual crumbling of Anna’s façade and the implicit validation of Billie’s beliefs, it critiques feminism’s denial of the “need” for women to have children, instead reinforcing the notion that choosing not to have children is a denial of natural urges, leading to a feeling of loss and unhappiness. In contrast to “nature”, feminism is portrayed as imposed, based on a false rationality and, along with all of the societal analysis it accompanies, doomed to crumble when faced with the “reality” of undeniable biological impulses and personal needs.

The plays discussed in this chapter: Peta Murray’s *Wallflowering*, Hannie Rayson’s *Falling from Grace* and Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Love Child*, together are indicative of the growing conservative swing in Australian society. They stereotype and critique the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, portraying it as narrowly single-minded, blind to complexities, and adhered to out of superficial conformity rather than genuine compassion or desire for social justice. Instead they reaffirm more

“traditional” female roles, such as insular, non-intellectual heterosexual relationships, reliance on men, and the biological desire for childbirth. Ultimately they reinforce many of the beliefs of the anti-feminist backlash in society at large.

## **Chapter Seven. Generational Conflict.**

The plays of the early nineties frequently deal with generational conflict, and not surprisingly, as in *Love Child*, this conflict often serves as a metaphor for the broader political conflicts between the left and right. In the plays discussed in this chapter, there is a tendency to portray the boomers, and most often by association the left, as dominant in society, and to portray the older generation, and implicitly any values outside of the left's "politically correct" frame, as dying or at least in danger. In these plays, the values of the boomers are often critiqued, depicted as shallow and as masks for deeper desires, such as the desire to compete, or the "natural" need for more traditional modes of existence. In contrast, the characters representing conservative thought are almost invariably portrayed positively, as more honest and caring, as besieged bastions amidst the left's bombardment, and as representing values which should not be given up so easily, but should rather be reconsidered or reclaimed. In this regard the generational tableau of these works is linked clearly to the emerging conservative backlash in Australian society at this time.

### ***It's My Party (And I'll Die If I Want To) (1993)***

Elizabeth Coleman's *It's My Party (And I'll Die If I Want To)* is indicative of the beginnings of a re-imagining of the Australian generational tableau. In contrast to the plays of the seventies, and eighties, which depicted the Boomers as a youthful generation rebelling against its powerful predecessors, *It's My Party* portrays the older generation as dying, with the Boomers now in control of society. Ron, the

father, represents many of the conservative ideals which the sixties generation sought to overthrow. While Ron is critiqued in the play, the elements of comedy, together with the knowledge of his impending demise, serve to undermine any sense of him as a serious threat. Further, the oppression suffered by the younger generation is also recast, at least in part, as the result of a “victim mentality”.

*It's My Party* reconfigures the generational tableau of the plays of the New Wave and the plays of the eighties, in line with changing attitudes towards the Boomer generation. The playwrights of the seventies had espoused generational change, with the young sweeping away the old, while the eighties had presented an older generation fighting back in the form of patriarchs like *Sunrise*'s Clarrie and *Hate*'s John; powerful forces from the right. In the nineties, the rise of the Boomers is portrayed as almost complete; the previous generation is now ailing and no longer the force it once was. As Davis argues in *Gangland*, it is the Boomers in these plays who now call the shots. The question raised is how they face the legacy of their upbringing.

The play's father, Ron has been told he has three months to live, and he calculates his remaining time down to the last minute, and invites his family to share his final hours. Ron represents the Boomers' parents' generation, brought up in hard times: “I was very busy for a lot of years of your lives, and maybe I didn't give you enough time and attention” (96). He is also representative of the attitudes the rebels of the seventies fought against, unable to comprehend homosexuality: “All you homosexual fellas can sing. And dance. And write poetry” (137), and unhappy that daughter Debbie has chosen to be pregnant without a husband, claiming “Maybe if she wore dresses a bit more often she wouldn't be alone in the first place” (104). Her lack of a husband is portrayed by Ron not just as a failure, but a failure resulting

explicitly from non-conformity. As the night progresses his children's resentments come out of the closet, and even his wife Dawn is honest with him: "You've had thirty-five years to be a half-hearted father. You've got thirty-five minutes to try and make up for it. And that might mean saying sorry. And listening. You're right. It's too hard. Go ahead. Kill yourself [. . .] You wanted them to pat you on the back and lie about how wonderful you are. But they didn't. And now you're sulking" (122). In this regard, the play represents an attitudinal changing of the guard.

As mentioned above, the chief difference which sets *It's My Party* apart from previous family reunion plays is that Ron is portrayed as past his prime. For all his bluster and outdated mindset, it is hard to imagine the comic figure portrayed here as having ever been a particularly potent force. This, along with the fact that Ron has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, cannot help but render Ron a less villainous figure than Clarrie or John, and lends a certain credence to his self-defence regarding the subplot involving Debbie, who blames her upbringing for her troubles with men (113). "Well, thank Christ for that," says Ron, "Now we know why the world's going wrong. It's *my* fault kids are starving in Somalia, it's *my* fault the Magpies didn't make the eight, it's *my* fault you're still single" (116). While the play in no way romanticises Ron as a father figure, Debbie does swing around to his opinion on this matter, saying "I'm sorry I blamed you for me being single. I'm an adult and I have to take responsibility for my own life" (124). It is hard not to see this swing as a reflection of arguments by conservatives in society at large that feminists, or minorities in general, need to stop blaming everything on the patriarchy, need to stop being "victims" and to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. The fact that Debbie's "oppressor" is at death's door adds credence to the notion that it is her "victim" mindset, rather than any real oppression, which is the problem. In terms of society,

there is room for parallel with conservative desires to recast the left as dominant and to deny the continuing power held by conservatives and conservative ideology.

Although there is not a total turnaround in the play, there is a sense that, as the older generation ails, its sins become a lot more forgivable, and a lot less serious, as evident in the fact that Coleman's play is able to deal with the issues through comedy rather than dramatic family saga. As with Williamson's portrayal of the older generation's sins in *Brilliant Lies*, the impression here is that the sins of Ron lie in the past (particularly following his death at the play's end), and that it is time to move on. Critique is now tempered with affection.

This is a move also evident in Hannie Rayson's successful play *Hotel Sorrento* (1990). When Rayson's Boomer sisters discuss their parents' relationship, for instance, Pippa says "She'd be here night after night on her own, wouldn't she? Always got the rough end of the stick, our Mum." Hil agrees: "He wouldn't get in till after midnight some nights. Remember? We'd hear him coming down the hall, banging against the walls. He'd throw a fish in the sink and crash into bed. Drunk as a skunk [. . .] he was a bastard to our mother. Hopeless father, all of that. But when it all boils down, he's the one that everyone loves" (*Hotel Sorrento* 10). There is a sense that time has diluted the older generation's crimes and that, in any case, the upcoming generation can afford to be generous, with the ideological struggle now won. There is no sense in these works of the older generation's conservative values still being a potent force. We can see, then, in these plays the beginnings of the generational re-envisioning taking place.

*It's My Party* received very positive reviews, though scarcely any comment on the politics of the piece, focusing chiefly on the comedy (admittedly the more obvious element). Doug Anderson was positive, though commenting that "It would

be easy to savage the play for its failure to portray reality in terms of consequence and reaction beyond the superficial [. . .] Its reluctance to give weight beyond the frivolous to generational issues and genial tyranny which can fester within apparently close-knit families is also disappointing”(“Farce Comes Alive on the Day Dad Dies” 20) Criticism such as this was a minority, though, and the play has been revived a number of times, including an unsuccessful New York production(Gill, “It's Not the New York Critics' Party” 4).

*It's My Party (and I'll Die If I Want to)* is perhaps the earliest example in mainstream drama of the penetration, through a conflation of generational and ideological shifts into a single teleological binary, of the myth that the boomer left now held control of society and that the conservative attitudes they fought against now belonged chiefly to the dying and the powerless. As with the rhetoric of anti-political-correctness in society as a whole, the mythology perpetuated is that of an unproblematic power-shift whereby victims of conservative oppression are merely unable, as is the case with Debbie, to recognise that it is they who hold the power, and that therefore their oppression is of their own making.

### **Dead White Males (1995)**

David Williamson's *Dead White Males* delivers a similar image of ideological generationalism, with a maligned older generation and confused younger generation flanking the left-leaning boomers who dominate the world. The play undermines the leftist beliefs of the boomer characters. Academic Swain's blend of Marxism and poststructuralism, presented primarily as a focus on social context and the notion that



society is constructed and therefore able to be changed, is undermined and shown to be a mask for his “instinctive” fears. Similarly, central character Angela’s “feminist” mother and aunts are all shown to betray the ideology they supposedly follow. In contrast, it is those who are attacked by “political correctness”, such as the “sexist” patriarch Col, and the essentialist Shakespeare, whose views are ultimately validated by the developments of the play.

*Dead White Males* depicts three generations of characters, and once again it is the Boomers who are now in control. Col, who represents the older generation the sixties radicals rebelled against, is again portrayed as an aging patriarch well past his prime. The Boomers in the play are represented by central character Angela’s parents and aunts, as well as her university lecturer Swain. These characters represent the gamut of leftist thought, in particularly feminism and Marxism. The third generation is represented by Angela and her friends, Melissa and Steve, who are all trying to work out where they fit within this framework. The play uses the generational conflict within to argue a re-evaluation of the ideological changes fought for by the Boomers in the seventies, and a re-establishment of former paradigms.

Swain presents the view that humans are socially constructed, claiming that there is no such thing as “reality”: “Conservative ideology constructs a ‘reality’ which includes the belief that most humans are inherently dishonest and lazy” (*Dead White Males* 2). He claims that “Liberal humanism, in naively depicting us as capable and free of rational choice, is in fact the ideological handmaiden of the patriarchal corporate state” (3). As the play progresses, these anti-conservative arguments are undermined as Swain’s character is revealed. Swain is something of a caricature; a straw dummy of “political correctness”. The extremism of his claims

that “Nothing is biological” (94), or that “Oppressed minorities are the site of the generation of all that’s vital and valuable in our culture” (75), for example, detract from any notion of him as a rigorous academic as opposed to a platitudinous ideologue, a detraction reinforced when his feminist arguments are juxtaposed with his attempted seduction of Angela. Swain’s academic beliefs are portrayed both as a fashionable façade, and, simultaneously, as extreme, that is, as both superficial and out of touch, indicative of early nineties conservative criticism of the left in general, and of academic “elites” in particular.

As with John in *Sanctuary*, Swain’s arguments for social context and change are further undone by the revelation of his own personal “demons”. His ranting of “Don’t you *dare* even suggest a biological basis! [. . .] Nothing is biological, nothing!” (94) is revealed to be a reaction to his wife’s leaving him, his personal demons taunting him with the accusation that “you’re a totally inadequate human being” (94, 96). This argument is loaded in that the link between personal insecurities and biology is “proven” by their temporal proximity in the scene rather than any evidence, insecurities surely being potentially constructed rather than necessarily biological. The net result is that Swain’s arguments for social context and his denial of “human nature” are portrayed, like John’s in *Sanctuary*, to be based on his own selfish needs, and thus the ideology he critiques is reified.

The second strand of the plot deals with Angela’s university assignment, which involves an analysis of her own family. This subplot is equally critical of the left. Angela’s mother and aunts are ardent feminists: “women certainly don’t need *men*”, her mother Sarah tells her (10). The first time we meet them they are berating Col for his patriarchal ways. Like Swain’s beliefs, their feminism is undercut as the play proceeds. Angela’s aunts’ reaction to Col’s death: “We always thought we’d at

least get *something* one day” (85), makes a mockery of any critique of the patriarchy or assertions of independence. Her father further emphasises the argument that relationships between the sexes are immutable rather than constructed and open to change, telling her “the women’s movement hasn’t altered the fact that men need women and women need men” (10), Sarah, her mother, admits that “You remember when we went to that production of *Taming of the Shrew* last year? [. . .] I looked at Petrucio and said *yes!* [. . .] OK, your father’s *lovely*. Everyone *likes* him, and I love him—but he’s a bloody wimp!” Again, attempts to undermine traditional gender roles are critiqued and the old order reasserted. She claims that despite her history as a feminist “if you want my honest advice, go find yourself someone with heaps of money, marry him and raise six kids!” (63-64). As with Murray-Smith’s Anna in *Love Child*, desire for traditional marriage and family is the “honest” desire, which the feminist “façade” tries to deny. While Sarah and Martin’s relationship is later reasserted (although Sarah still opines that “If there had been a Petruchio around when your father was courting me—”(89)), the fact is that by the end of the play *every single member* of the Boomer generation portrayed in the play has contradicted or openly disavowed their own ideological position.

By contrast, those under siege by the forces of “political correctness” are portrayed as much more genuine. Steve tells Angela that “Look, I don’t want to insult women, be unfair to women, patronise women, use women, or inhibit women, but every time I open my mouth I seem to do all five! I just want to know how to behave, because someday, believe it or not, I would like to live with a woman, maybe even—gasp—marry a woman” (25). Feminism in this schema is an ideological interpolator which misreads and therefore obstructs Steve’s honest, traditional intents. Col, meanwhile, echoes *It’s My Party* father Ron’s comments

about his daughters' critique of his patriarchal ways, claiming they have "all got to have someone to blame for the fact that their lives didn't pan out the way they'd dreamed and I'm it" (55). Again, the emphasis is on "blame" rather than "recognition", a symptom not of victimisation but of a "victim mentality". All Col wants, it emerges, is a little gratitude: "I'll tell you that for the majority of blokes in my generation life was anything but glamorous, it was sheer grinding bloody survival, and I'd just like the occasional woman somewhere, sometime to realise that and say 'thank you'" (58). Col's world-view is seemingly validated and the bitterness of his daughters undercut by the revelation that his lack of attention to his own family was due to his helping out the family of a mate. The plot of *Dead White Males*, then, is contrived to reinforce the argument that Col's daughters' anger is posturing based on "victim mentality" rather than any legitimate grievance.

Whereas one might suggest that Col's desire for recognition of his own difficulties emphasises the need for a combined analysis of gender and class considerations, in *Dead White Males* it is nothing more than a cry for recognition of feminism's flaws, and a reversal of the oppressor-victim dichotomy: "It's bloody duck hunting season and we're the ducks" (54), claims Col, while Steve asks Angela "Do you really think men are going to come surging out of a performance of *The Shrew*, bellowing, 'Back to the kitchen, bitch!' The ideology of feminism is beating the bard hands down. Everywhere I look I see the humourless, sexually repressed, dour young women it's 'constructed'" (34). The numerical distribution of characters, with five representatives of the Boomer generation and leftist thought compared to two of the older generation and three younger, helps to reinforce this notion of the left in ascendancy. The Boomer left is portrayed as culturally dominant and unquestioning of its own ideological facades. The apparently misunderstood, too-

easily-judged older generation and the less-ideologically-driven youth; in short, those in the play who espouse views which might be attached to the right, are portrayed as oppressed, surrounded and only with great difficulty able to assert an opinion which challenges the mainstream. The “radical” right and the “dominant” left are notions that are in this play given full reign.

In the background of all of this is the spectre of William Shakespeare, author of *Taming of the Shrew* and representative of everything that Swain so despises. Shakespeare comes down firmly on the side of Col: “Thy grandfather did not seem to hold much of that patriarchal power. To me it doth seem to me he held absolutely none” (59). He argues in favour of traditional gender roles, claiming that “Every man who is not Petruchio doth wish he was, and every woman who is a shrew doth wish she was not” (81), an accusation that seems validated by Swain’s revelations, as well as Sarah’s. He argues strongly for “human nature”, claiming that “lust for power is not ‘constructed’! It is a demon all men are born with [. . .] that demon in you is not so relentless. And are we not *all* born with the demons love, grief, guilt, anger, fear, scorn, loyalty, and hate! Do the ‘Hopi Indians’ laugh when their child is struck down? Did King Lear need an ‘ideology’ to ‘construct’ his grief” (83). The revelation of Swain’s “demons” seems to validate Shakespeare’s beliefs, just as it deconstructs his own. Similarly the “unmasking” of the ideological pretensions of the play’s Boomers adds weight to Shakespeare’s claim that there exists an underlying nature which cannot be defied. Angela eventually comes, at least in part, to agree with him:

The more I listened to the tapes of my family, the more convinced I became that there *is* a human nature and that it consists of more than just demons *or* ideology [. . .] Human nature *must* have *something* to

do with my Grandfather's compassion, my mother's courage, and with my parents' loyalty and love for each other [. . .] And it must have something to do with why the great writers like William Shakespeare can still speak to us across the ages. (96)

Again the argument relies on sleight of hand. There is no explanation of why examples of "kindness" or "compassion" in her family validate the notion that these traits are biological rather than social. However, this judgemental leap is masked by the fact that, throughout the play, every character who has posited a non-biological, socially based model of human behaviour has been systematically undercut, lending proponents of a biology-based nature victory by default. "Ideology" has been revealed as the cornerstone of the Boomer's beliefs. In *Dead White Males* the ideals of the seventies generation are rewritten as self-centred, pretentious denial, while the beliefs of the previous generations, critiqued so mercilessly by the New Wave, are re-established as the "reality" to which "ideology is opposed", the reality which the new generation must accept to move on.

*Dead White Males* provoked a flurry of debate in decidedly mixed reviews. Stewart Hawkins saw the play as well balanced: "Williamson answers no questions about the issue but he has presented a well argued treatise for both sides" (4). Samela Harris saw the piece as "a seriously entertaining ramble through the posturing and pretensions of specialist academia" (31), a sentiment reflected in Colin Rose's enjoyment of the piece wherein "The PC despot Swain is vanquished by the forces of good ol'-fashioned love and understanding" ("Revived White Males Keep Us Laughing" 16). Carrie Kablean wrote that "Dead White Males is relevant, provocative and dead funny [. . .] all the mature Judd females are seen as hectoring feminists who deserve the sexist barbs thrown their way" ("Deadly Accurate Satire"

5). Brian Hoad was particularly receptive to the play's critique of academia, claiming the play critiques "one of the latest little theories dreamt up in academe by feminists and African-Americans, and probably a few one-legged lesbian single mothers as well", as an "excuse to justify their fat salaries and their ivory towers" ("One in the Eye for the Old Academe" 5). Clearly, at least in this instance, Williamson was preaching to the choir.

The play attracted an equal amount of negative comment, however. Particularly critiqued was the play's loaded nature. Steven Carroll's comment is typical, claiming the play "is a bit like theatrical football. There are two sides; humanist orthodoxy and post-modernism. It's a tough assignment. The Humanists are playing at home, the supportive home town crowd loves having its orthodoxy reinforced and, besides, the game's rigged" ("The Good, the Bard and the Ugly Examine Human Nature" 7). Several reviewers saw Swain as a "straw man" style target (McCallum, "Correctness Satire Wounded by Williamson's Tyranny"; Rundle, "White Males Quite Dead on Arrival"; Bramwell). Pamela Payne commented that "The position espoused by Swain—and which, in this play, must serve as the post-structuralist position—can never be taken seriously. Because Swain can't be taken seriously. The debate is finished before it has begun" ("Big Bark, Little Bite" 123). That the attack on Swain was in some ways an attack on the ideology of the sixties is evident in remarks by several reviewers that Swain resembled more a seventies than a nineties academic (Rundle, "White Males Quite Dead on Arrival"; Bramwell, ; S. Carroll, "The Good, the Bard and the Ugly Examine Human Nature"). The loaded nature of the play's portrayal of the Judds was also noted, though less frequently: "The men are lovable fools or rogues who tried to do the right thing and whose heroic struggle has gone unrecognised in the oppressive world of modern feminism.

The women are mostly whiningly self-centred” (McCallum, “Correctness Satire Wounded by Williamson's Tyranny” 4). Murray Bramwell noted the play’s likely popularity in his critique: “It is easy to think that a crisis in liberal debate could be solved by firing all university post-structuralists and quitting the place to become something useful like a car mechanic. It is easy to say that, finally, Kate wants Petruchio not the wimp. It is also a very popular thing to say, judging by the first night cheers. But it isn’t very engaging or interesting” (Bramwell 32). Despite these critiques, the play proved very popular, to Williamson’s delight, as Gretchen Miller wrote: “Despite all the recriminations, the audience reaction has been strongly positive to *Dead White Males*. Williamson says he thinks they are sick of being called exploiters and bigots and are enjoying seeing a sendup of the excesses of the politically correct movement”(11).

*Dead White Males*, then, might stand as something of a standard-bearer for nineties drama’s adoption of the rhetoric of the emerging political conservatism. The play systematically sets up and undermines those characters who demonstrate leftist thought; chiefly those of the Boomer generation. Swain’s belief in social context and constructs is undermined by his own apparent biological drives, just as the play’s feminists are revealed to be utilising feminism to facilitate selfish greed, or to deny their “natural” desire for more traditional gender roles. In contrast, those outside of this “politically correct” generation’s frame are portrayed as more honest and selfless, and overwhelmed by their dominant opponents; a clear reversal of oppressor-victim dichotomies. Through the character of Shakespeare, the play argues that human nature is not constructed but rather biological, a notion validated by the play’s developments, again implicitly reinforcing traditional social roles and denying, at least to some extent, the potential for social change. In terms of its place



in the generational debate, *Dead White Males* explicitly buys into conservative notions of a dominant boomer left, and orchestrates a pincer-attack by older and younger generations which validates their ideals and undermines the boomers' own. It is clearly compatible with the political turn evident in society during the time.

### **The Garden of Granddaughters (1993)**

*The Garden of Granddaughters* also presents a generational picture which fits well with conservative ideology. As with the above plays, once again the boomers are represented as dominant, with a dying older generation present but well past its prime as a force. Once again, the boomer generation is represented primarily by daughters, all part of the rebellion of the early seventies. Of the three daughters, Michelle has since settled down with a family, denying her former radicalism. Fay's promiscuity, as the play progresses, is revealed to be a mere mask for her desire for the same. Lisa, the sister whose feminism is most overt and whose relationship conforms least to gender roles, ultimately comes, like her sisters, to reject her partner Daniel in favour of a more "traditional" male, with the end result that all sisters ultimately accept the dominant paradigm. Grandfather Max receives a sympathetic portrayal, and like Williamson's patriarch he argues against his daughters' perceived ingratitude for privilege, and places personal values over social conscience. As with the plays discussed previously, the older generation's passing is presented as something to be mourned, while the future, in the hands of the boomers, appears uncertain.

*The Garden of Granddaughters* depicts a family reunion, and once again the chief protagonists are the older parents and their Boomer daughters. Fay, Lisa and Michelle are the seventies' rebels: "They still don't know she got arrested at that New Year's Eve party in '68, do they?" (*The Garden of Granddaughters* 21), while their parents represent the more outdated attitudes of the previous generation, claiming for example that "I don't know why we ever started letting the Albanians emigrate" (6), and that "Marriage, children, they're the things that give meaning to a life" (32). Of the three daughters, Michelle has clearly changed her ways: Fay must remind her of "'68 [. . .] With you dancing naked outside the American Embassy and being carted off by the cops, for threatening to levitate the military-industrial complex three feet off the ground!" (73). Michelle is now happily married, and critical of her sisters' non-traditional lifestyles, asking them "When are the two of you going to grow up!" (72). Fay, meanwhile initially appears to represent the seventies' ideal of sexual liberation, defending her promiscuity against criticism, asking "Can I help it if I like men? I do, Lisa, read my lips: I LIKE MEN" (19). As the play progresses, however, it emerges that her actions are merely the result of her husband leaving her, and her ticking biological clock, and that any kind of sexual liberation is merely a cover: "he was chasing every skirt he could catch since the wedding day when he'd found time to pork one of the flower girls on the way to the reception [. . .] so if I seem a little desperate in getting a man, Lisa, that's the reason: I want kids; I desperately, passionately, want kids and my time's running out because that prick wasted my life!" (45). Both Fay and Michelle, then, seem to have come around to Max's thesis that marriage and children are the most important things in life.

Lisa, the third sister, is the play's most strident feminist. Her boyfriend is Sensitive New Age Guy Daniel, who Fay describes as "a wimp; boy, you've sure got him pussy-whipped" (17). Daniel's sensitivity and non-conformity to gender stereotypes is depicted as an "ideological" mask, rather than as genuine. For example, when Lisa asks Fay "What have you got against Daniel? Just because he's a sensitive, compassionate human being, why should that make him any less attractive as a man?", Fay replies "Because he's not, Lisa, because he's a fake who's just learnt the tricks about how to behave from you and all the other right-liners running around the place [ . . . ] give him five more years and he'll be running an advertising agency" (55-56). The reference to "all the other right-liners" is suggestive of the notion that feminism had become so broadly accepted as to be the dominant rule, again a recurring conservative argument. Over dinner, in any case, Lisa is introduced to Morty, an obnoxious Canberra press-man. She describes him as "one of the most objectionable men I've ever met with some of the most reactionary views I've ever heard" (55). By the end of the play the two of them are going out. Presumably Lisa doth prefer "Petruchio" after all. Again, feminist idealism is, it would seem, a charade, to be discarded when inconvenient, rather than a firmly-held and deep-seated belief, and again, non-traditional relationships appear doomed to crumble in the face of "natural" desires.

Grandfather Max is portrayed much more sympathetically than Sewell's earlier patriarch, John. Whereas John's life has led him to believe that "hate is the only constructive emotion", Max's hardships have led him to believe in "Love [ . . . ] In all the astonishing things in this world, what's more astonishing than love? Hate, fear, envy; they're commonplace—but love?" (53). But this difference does not necessarily render Max a non-conservative figure. His belief in "love" could be a

form of compassion, but in the light of his rejection of social conscience, it could more likely be a form of retreat into the “universal” virtues offered by Williamson’s Shakespeare, or Lewis in *Cosi*, which comes at the behest of a social conscience. Max defends Western civilisation against Lisa’s charges that “Everything we have is based on murder”, claiming that:

Everything we have is based on the confrontation and defeat of the bestiality within us: that’s what culture is, and that’s what the struggle for civilisation’s about [ . . . ] Yes, it is privileged! It’s a privilege not to have been in Dachau, Treblinka, Buchenwald! It’s a privilege not to live in the Sudan or be an Arab on the West Bank! It’s a privilege to have clothes to wear and food to eat and children who’ll grow up in front of you without being frightened they’ll be hacked to death [ . . . ] What did you want me to do? Tip you all in the dust so we could all, everyone, be equal in our misery? (69)

To an extent this speech reflects the right’s critique of “middle-class guilt”, linked with notions of “political correctness”. Lisa’s social conscience is transformed into a lack of gratitude. The implication is that she should count herself lucky and focus on the important things like “love” rather than worrying about the world’s wrongs. Her choice, in Max’s eyes, is between being privileged while others suffer, on the one hand, or suffering with them, “equal in our misery”, on the other. Tellingly, changing the world, improving the situation of the oppressed, is not an option. Again, this is linked with a cynical conservatism regarding human nature. Max sees humans not as compassionate but as having to battle to fight down the presumably innate “bestiality within us”. For all of his gentleness and kindness, then, at heart Max’s belief system differs little from that of Bob in *Sanctuary*. He sees other humans in a negative light,

and therefore cannot contemplate positive social change. All he can offer as a positive goal is a turn to self-centred interiority, a “love” based not on social conscience but, presumably, limited to those in his immediate family circle. The argument between Lisa and Max is not loaded here to the same degree as that in *Dead White Males*, nor is the result clear. However, the fact that Max’s critique of Lisa’s righteous misery precedes her decision to dump Daniel for Morty might be taken as something of an indication of a change of heart on her part, an acquiescence to “reality” in exchange for her former “ideology”.

It is clear in *The Garden of Granddaughters* that Max’s generation’s time is over. His wife Moriley’s monologue near the end of the play makes it clear that for wrong or right, the sixties generation is now society’s dominant force. She tells Max “you’re the father and ring-leader of three of the most quarrelsome girls who’ve ever been put on the face of this earth, but I’d like to remind you that no parent is responsible for their children forever, and one day you have to wake up and see that they’re adults” (75). This generational passing of the baton is tinged with a sadness, even nostalgic regret, evident in Max’s final “I’m gone” (78) which is absent in the generational change depicted in *Away, Sunrise or Hate*. While *The Garden of Granddaughters* does offer some arguments against conservatism, it is again the case that leftist ideals are, to a large extent, undermined in the play, and thus the ascent of the boomer generation which is aligned with them cannot help but be perceived in a less optimistic light. It would be fair to say that, at the very least, generational change is no longer necessarily a positive thing. At worst, the play functions as a reassertion of conservative ideology.

Reviews for *The Garden of Granddaughters* ranged from mixed to poor. Many critics commented negatively on the work in relation to Sewell’s more

ambitious earlier work. Helen Thomson claimed the piece was “predictable” in its populism: “*The Garden of Granddaughters* will please many members of the middle-class audiences for whom it has been tailored-- its fine acting performances would ensure this on their own-- but the authorial ‘let them eat cake’ attitude is disturbingly discernible in the play’s familiar patterns and concerns”(25). Leonard Radic, similarly, commented that “there is no real fire in the play’s belly: no sense that it arises out of a deep sense of conviction [. . .] Mellow drama the play may be, but compelling and original theatre as Sewell’s earlier plays were? I am afraid not”(“No Fire in the Belly of Sewell's New Play” 14). Critics also found the speeches and philosophy of Max, in particular, unconvincing. Guy Rundle lamented that “It is not a success in any respect. Everything is wrong with *Granddaughters* [. . .] The plot lacks compulsion: there seems nothing for this family to resolve [. . .] On top of all this, Sewell has given his characters a number of sententious, unnecessary and frequently embarrassing speeches about The Meaning of Life which serve to crush whatever subtlety the play might have possessed”(25). Fiona Scott-Norman agreed, claiming that “the two main moods of the play are mawkish, twee sentimentality and pedantic philosophy”(“More Like a Desert” 91). She also noted the play’s anti-feminism: “A positive aspect is that there are many roles for women but unfortunately they tend to fall into over-obvious categories such as the rebellious unmarried over-30, the good wife, the slut...”(“More Like a Desert” 92). Stewart Hawkins noted the play’s loaded nature, commenting “The characters are two-dimensional with the father figure, played by Ron Haddrick, too much the nice-guy”, and that “you must seriously wonder why you bothered leaving the TV”(7).

The portrayal of generational conflict in *The Garden of Granddaughters* is appropriate to the growing conservatism of the time. The boomer characters in the

play have either already betrayed their former leftist ideals, or do so as the play progresses. Feminism, particularly, is undercut as the characters all come to reject non-traditional relationships. Meanwhile, the more sympathetically portrayed older generation reinforces the notion of interiority and the rejection of social conscience as useless, contrary to mankind's "nature" and merely an affectation based on lack of gratitude. Given the sadness of the older generation's passing and the critical portrayal of the boomer children, the play functions on one level as a nostalgic critique of the changing social climate, and an affirmation of the conservative values of the early nineties.

### **Honour (1995)**

Joanna Murray-Smith's *Honour* deals with generational conflict and the feminist movement. Honor is representative of the attitudes of older, more traditional women in that she is focused on the internal world of a middle-class marriage, and uninterested in the wider world. Honor's traditional, non-feminist attitudes are upheld by the play, and the "feminism" of the younger characters is undercut. Claudia's supposed feminism is based on little more than hunger for power and competitiveness, while Sophie's feminism emerges as equally selfish. Again, feminism is just a cover-story; neither of them has any real interest in the plight of others. Honor is portrayed positively in the play, not for any social good she does, but due to her conformity to traditional values of maternal and wifely self-sacrifice. As the play progresses, Claudia comes to realise and acknowledge that marriage is an institution which should be respected, not out of respect for the feelings of others,

but out of a respect for marriage as an institution based on ownership, and for its attendant values of self-sacrifice and denial. The play reaffirms the values of an older generation and undermines the feminist ideals of the boomers.

*Honour* was one of the biggest success stories of the 1990s, at least financially, outside of the Williamson oeuvre, with productions on Broadway and West End. At first glance, the play seems quite different to Murray-Smith's earlier work. For one thing, the play's argument is more carefully crafted than her previous pieces, and certainly less didactic than Williamson's *Dead White Males* which appeared in the same year. Initially, it also appears to offer a feminist narrative. Honor is married to Gus. She has given up her life as a writer in order to raise children in order that his own career might be a success. She is criticised by the younger women in the play on feminist grounds:

Honor: It doesn't matter if it's the man or the woman who steps  
aside to let the other succeed—it's love.

Claudia: Ah yes, but it always *is* the woman, isn't it? (*Honour* 11)

There are references to Honor and Gus being part of the sixties. Claudia asks Sophie "Do we ever know our parents? Don't you look at those photographs of them in the sixties, when your mother had her hair long and looked so—so—ravishing—don't you look at them and think: My God. My God. She's Not Who She Pretends to Be" (45). However, it is clear that Honor has abandoned any more radical outlook she may have had. She claims that "I'm very happy to be middle aged and middle-class! Only the younger middle-class find that derogatory—as if ordinariness is the greatest terror" (9), and when asked about politics says "At this age, nothing much *is* political" (10). In this respect she resembles *Wallflowering's* Peg and Cliff. She has



rejected the political and embraced the “ordinariness” of a traditional, inward-looking relationship.

She also claims that age has mellowed her rage: “I always used to see the future as devastation and when it came, it melted into the ordinary present. I began to fear that my fear was just a campaign to camouflage my relentless good fortune” (56). For Honor, as for Max in *Granddaughters*, dissatisfaction with the world is seen as a wilful denial and ingratitude for one’s fortune, rather than genuine compassion. Unsurprisingly, then, despite Honor’s having lived through the sixties, her daughter clearly associates her with an older generation: “That’s so passive. That’s—that’s such a—You’re such a product of your generation” (28). Honor, as a character, represents a clear rejection of the feminist movement as a charade and an embracing of interiority and traditional relationships.

In one sense, it might appear that the play is supporting feminist ideals and that *Honour* is something of a morality play about the dangers of giving up one’s ideals for one’s husband. Honor’s interiority and lack of social engagement leaves her afloat when Gus leaves her. On a surface level, *Honour* is the story of Honor’s forced awakening from the protective shell of her marriage, and her subsequent recapturing of self-reliance. Such an interpretation, though, is contradicted by the depiction of the various characters within the play. The feminist-morality-play-lesson reading relies on a notion that Honor has learned from past mistakes; that her “awakening” is an acknowledgement of her former blindness. This is not the case. On the contrary, the entire play exists as a *justification* of Honor’s early way of thinking. By the final scene, Honor has been almost deified, while the rest of the characters are systematically stripped of their pretensions.

The portrayal of Gus and Claudia's relationship as cynical and based on flattery and sex rather than anything deeper reduces the potential of the audience to sympathise with their plight. As representatives of "feminism", Claudia and Sophie are notably poor role models. Claudia, despite her entreaties to Honor regarding her own career's overlooking, admits that "I'm not a compassionate person" (40). Rather, her "feminism" is based on her need to compete. She talks about "systems to keep us *unrealised*" but is chiefly concerned with popularity and self-gratification: "Didn't it wear away at you that lesser talents had their faces in the literary pages while you basted the racks of lamb and looked over Gus's work? That you never felt the—the warmth of—of being thought great by others?" (41). Similarly, she justifies her cruelty to Honor in feminist terms: "I'm rectifying your sacrifices" (41), but again, it emerges that her seduction of Gus is purely based on the desire for personal power:

Gus: That is what love is to you--?

Claudia: To know that—

Gus: Yes.

Claudia: I can undo you— (62)

Claudia, then, is hardly an upstanding example of feminist ideology. Furthermore, her motives emerge to have been based on the fact that "I longed for parents like you [. . .] My mother didn't read to me—[. . .] She wasn't a—a warm person" (56), a further reaffirmation of traditional mother-daughter relationships as primary. Like the feminists in *Wallflowering* and idealists in plays such as *Sanctuary*, *Love Child* or *Dead White Males*, her character is representative of an ideology which is little more than superficial window-dressing, attempting to mask selfish competitiveness and an absence of traditional, "natural" familial life.

Sophie's supposedly feminist concern for her mother is portrayed as equally insensitive. She blames her mother for the affair, criticising her for not noticing the "signs" earlier (26). She hints at social critique: "He's the one with the establishment behind him. He's the one with the real power" (29), but her analysis of the situation doesn't really move beyond ill-defined pop psychology: "Young women are used, manipulated by older men and then older women like you cut them down [. . .] Because they're easier to blame than men, who psychologically and physically are expert self-defenders" (29), and in any case, her "feminist" arguments are later shown, like Claudia's to be completely motivated by selfishness:

Jesus—don't you see? It's not *her* I'm defending. I think she's—she's pathetic. She brought this about through her own—She courted catastrophe and then she acts surprised when it wakes her up one morning [. . .] I'm not defending *her*. When I stand here telling you what—what a truly weak person you are—[. . .] I'm fighting for *my* life. I'm fighting for *my* future. I'm talking to you not as my father but as my husband. I'm telling you that in forty years I won't be standing in the wake of your weakness. I won't be weeping over you.

(33)

This speech makes it clear that Sophie's "feminism" is not concern for women, but concern for herself. It later emerges that even this level of purely self-motivated feminist critique is in fact based primarily on Sophie's feeling of loss following the decline of the parental support base on which she relied (47). It is a reactive rather than principled stance, and again, as with Claudia, based on the absence of traditional familial relations. Sophie's feminism, like Claudia's, is completely undermined in the play as self-centred and superficial, a mask for baser needs. The

result in *Honour* is that the younger generation's "feminism" is completely undercut. As in *Sanctuary*, broader politics is reduced to being a façade to hide over-simplified personal fears and desires.

The notion that Claudia and Sophie, as "feminists", care only for themselves and nothing for Honor reflects the author's public comments on feminism:

"Feminism has strived for equality and status for women... but still hasn't strived to designate value to the lives of older women" (qtd. in Cook 15). In this play, what is presented as having "value" (in contrast to the views of so-called feminists) is represented by Honor. Honor differs from Claudia and Sophie *not* in that she eventually comes to re-start her career, but in the fact that she was, for some time, willing to put her family ahead of it. Murray-Smith hints at this in her interview: "I don't think these women ever regretted mothering, but they would have liked a sense of justice, and some sense of value attached and respect paid to the work they did" (qtd. in Cook 15). Honor's "goodness" is never social; she has no interest in politics. It is either sacrificial, with regard to Gus, or it is "maternal", toward Sophie and even Claudia in the scene where she tries to forgive her: "I'm trying to see you as a baby, just a tiny baby with that sweet pulse in your soft skull, and clear naked skin—I'm trying so hard to see you there, loved, loving, new. And that makes me feel—that makes me feel—perhaps" (57). Tellingly, when Gus leaves, Honor asks "Who do I look after now?" (36). The values that Honor represents, in opposition to the feminists around her, are precisely those which the feminism of the seventies sought to offer an alternative to; the relegation of women's experiences primarily to those of marital duty and childbirth.

Similarly, when Claudia eventually comes to achieve enlightenment regarding the error of her ways, it occurs as a reaffirmation of the sanctity of the institution of marriage as a law and tradition, and a reaffirmation of sacrificial duty:

When we see a—a gold ring on someone’s hand and we want it, we don’t take it do we? We don’t mug them, do we? [. . .] We don’t take it because—It’s unlawful wanting, isn’t it? [. . .] But when we want someone, we call that—we call that loving—[. . .] Even when—even when others may be—may be—[. . .] That’s unlawful loving isn’t it? [. . .] But thousands don’t, do they? [. . .] They sit there inside secret lives, they nurse their untaken steps because—because—[. . .] what if the truth is that we do not know love because we do not know how to deny ourselves anything? (58, 59)

Claudia’s “lesson”, then; her development as a character, is to realise the value of Honor’s willing relinquishment of personal fulfilment in order to serve her husband and child, and to acknowledge that seducing another woman’s husband is wrong, not because of the pain it causes her, but because it is “unlawful”, that is, it is not commensurate with tradition and social stasis. This “development”, or realisation, then, is wholly an argument for conservatism.

There exists little if any sense of the outside world in *Honour*. Goodness, like selfishness and delusion, is ultimately defined by personal interaction within an intimate circle, primarily family and monogamous sex-based relationships. This exclusion of the world outside serves to further reinforce the play’s message of traditional familial values. What could be more traditional than a play about women which confines its reality exclusively to the domestic sphere? In terms of the reassigning of value which the play attempts, the value of the social with regard to

women's experience is clear. Despite initial appearances, *Honour* is not a feminist morality play in any sense, but functions as a reaffirmation of the ideology of an older, "overlooked" generation, a justification for the traditional notions of familial love and duty over more recent "feminist" preoccupations. It is a direct reversal of both New Wave critiques of family and sexual politics, and New Wave themes of generational overthrow, in what amounts to an effort directed at re-establishing the threatened status quo.

Reviews of *Honour* were mixed. Helen Thomson, in a positive review, claimed "Claudia, so arrogantly beautiful and certain of her direction in life, triumphs in her theft of Gus, but discovers that what she really wanted was the happy family she ruined" ("Dignity, Wisdom and a Fresh Focus on Love" 16). Caroline Chisholm referred to the play as a "wholly satisfying journey into lawful and unlawful passion"(41). Politics was not a focus in most reviews, although Veronica Kelly, in an otherwise positive review, commented on the "somewhat superficial wielding of psychobabble and pop-feminist clichés" ("When Desire Meets Duty" 19). There were criticisms of the characters' inarticulacy (McCallum, "Theatre Review" 9), and the conflict between the stylised dialogue and naturalistic playing style (McGillick, "Question of Honour" 15). Simon Hughes claimed that "these four people become archetypes, which suit her thesis that women die for love while men trade it like a second-hand car. I don't believe it and neither, I suspect, did most of the audience" ("Writers and Actors" 18). Despite the mixed reception, *Honour* was a great success for Murray-Smith, with productions on Broadway and West End.

*Honour* functions as a revision of the efforts of boomer feminism, and an attempt to reassert the previous priorities regarding gender relations. Through the characters of Claudia and Sophie, feminism is deconstructed and painted as a façade

which masks selfishness, competitiveness and a secret desire for more traditional relationships. In contrast, the play affirms the values of Honor: of self-sacrifice to one's relationship and child, and a lack of interest in the world outside. The play serves, like those discussed above, to rebut the attitudes of the boomer left and to re-establish the importance of the more conservative values of an earlier time.

The plays discussed in this chapter demonstrate the acceptance of the conservative trope that the boomer left was now in control of society, and that those holding alternative values were marginalised and to a large extent powerless. In these plays the boomers are frequently in control, with other ideologies frequently represented by the older generation, in situations in which they are dead or dying. Victims of oppression by conservative forces are therefore often recast as victims of nothing but their own "victim mentality". The boomer characters' leftist ideals are frequently deconstructed and portrayed as superficial, as a mere mask to hide baser motives such as competitiveness, selfishness and, frequently, a secret desire to return to more traditional ideals. In contrast, the more conservative ideals of the older generation are frequently portrayed as more honest, caring and fulfilling than those of their usurpers. In this regard, these plays portray the passing of the older generation and its ideals as a sad development, and function as implicit, if not explicit, calls for a halt, if not reversal, of the supposed leftist ideological dominance. In this regard they accord perfectly with the conservative rhetoric of the time.

The drama of the early nineties frequently demonstrates an acceptance by its authors of many of the tropes of conservatism common in the politics of the time. The plays examined in this section have frequently conformed to conservative ideology, in their acceptance of economic rationalism's pervasiveness and naturalisation, their rejection of social justice and compassion, their attacks on feminism, and their reversal of power relations, conceptualising the left as dominant and repressive. While these writers do not represent the entirety of Australian mainstage drama during the period, they do represent a significant selection of the more successful plays and more successful authors, and thus their ideological acquiescence might be taken as a sign of a conservative tendency in mainstream drama, in any attempt to come to grips with the ideological tendencies of playwriting within this period as a whole.



## **SECTION THREE**

### **1995-2004**

If the drama by the most successful mainstream authors of the early nineties can be seen as reflecting the growth of a conservatism in Australian society, in which elements of the ideology of the sixties were rejected in favour of the “truths” of economic rationalist pragmatism, then the late nineties can be seen as demonstrating a reversal, at least to some extent, of this trend. An examination of the works of authors such as David Williamson, Hannie Rayson, Joanna Murray-Smith and Stephen Sewell in this period reveals a reappraisal of these conservative ideals. They display a growing cynicism toward economic rationalism and a renewed focus on social justice, a reversal of the previous era’s trend away from social engagement toward an affirmation of traditional, insular, nuclear family, and a commitment to rediscovering and fostering a sense of community feeling and a desire for positive social change. While it would be an exaggeration to report a return to the values of the sixties, and indeed, many of these works are explicitly wary of nostalgia for that period, it is nonetheless accurate to suggest that the plays under question offer a rebuttal to the previous period’s re-vision of the sixties, and recover and reclaim many of that era’s ideals in order to look toward a non-conservative future for Australian society.

## Chapter Eight. David Williamson

David Williamson's work in the latter part of the 1990s reveals quite a contrast to his work of the early part of the decade. In works such as *Heretic*, *After the Ball*, *Corporate Vibes*, *Face to Face* and *The Great Man*, Williamson critiques the attitudes on display in the plays of the early nineties. *Heretic* questions the cynical notions of human nature, and reconsiders the validity and importance of sixties ideals. *After the Ball* re-establishes conservatism as a powerful force, undermining the cliché of the dominant left, and asserts the need for compassion and social engagement, rather than narrowly economic priorities. *Corporate Vibes* deals further with the latter theme, arguing against economic rationalism and positing the notion that the narrowly economic view is disastrous, both economically and socially. *Face to Face* makes a similar point, and also emphasises the need for social contextualisation and class analysis, as means to combat oppression. *The Great Man* examines the loss of ideals on the left, and attempts to recover some of the optimism of the sixties in order to combat the conservatism of the nineties. Taken as a whole, the plays discussed in this chapter represent a swing away from the early part of the decade, in that they are no longer sympathetic to, but rather blatantly critical of, the conservative ideology of Australian society as a whole.

## **Heretic (1996)**

In many ways, David Williamson's play *Heretic* operates as a continuation of the arguments raised in *Dead White Males* regarding human nature, heredity, environment, academic blinkeredness and feminism. However, while there are many similarities, there are also clear differences emerging which indicate a shift back towards more leftist ideals in the play's discourse. While there is a sense that the proponent of social context and human beings as constructed, Margaret, is driven by an agenda which clouds any objectivity, in this play, her opponent, Derek Freeman's biologically-based beliefs are also seen as being influenced by his social context. *Heretic* displays an awareness that biological arguments can play into the hands of conservatives, and attempts to undo this by arguing that humans may be biologically driven, but that they are still capable of choice. The play also revises the author's former attitudes toward feminism, constructing sixties feminism as in many ways necessary. While *Heretic* is by no means an entirely radical play, it certainly represents a significant (in terms of the politics of the time) re-envisioning of the argument of its predecessor.

*Heretic* deals with the famous dispute between researcher Derek Freeman and renowned and respected anthropologist Margaret Mead. The play itself begins with an argument between an aging Freeman and the ghost of Mead, along with her colleague and (mostly) supporter, Rick Cooper, and subsequently follows the two researchers on their travels, providing a context which serves both to reinforce and at times undermine the arguments they are making. The dispute between the two is couched in a wider debate which reflects the conflict of *Dead White Males*:

Margaret: You've been trying to prove I was wrong about Samoa for  
*fifty years*. If *I'm* not your obsession, what is?

Old Derek: To find the answer to the question that the philosopher  
David Hume once said was the *only* question of importance—  
'What is the ultimate nature of humankind?' (*Heretic* 17)

In *Heretic* Williamson digs once again into the notions of "human nature" and  
inherited traits which reflect the broader social debate about inherent  
competitiveness and social change.

The comparisons with *Dead White Males* are clear. Margaret represents  
similar views to Doctor Grant Swain, as well as those of some of that play's more  
"PC" characters, in her promotion of sexual liberation and promiscuity, her  
exaggerated "feminist" rhetoric: "Men are the enemy Ruth. Even when they think  
they're helping us they're not. My Grandmother told me that when I was four years  
old" (26), and more prominently in her assertion that "We don't *have* an ultimate  
nature. We *are* what our culture makes us *become* [ . . . ] Chickens have pecking  
orders, but we are human beings. All *human* behaviour is learnt" (17, 54), an  
assertion which is central to her research and its reception. Likewise, there is more  
than a little of Williamson's Shakespeare in Freeman's counter-claim:

Culture! Have you ever bothered to read the Greeks? Medea kills her  
own two sons in a mad rage to spite the husband who deserted her.  
Do you really think her "culture" taught her jealousy, hatred and  
revenge? They're all there in the limbic system of our brains waiting  
to go! And so are sympathy and compassion and love! That's why we  
can understand dramas written three thousand years old. We all have

the same emotions and emotional needs. We all share an essential human-ness. (76)

In the case of *Heretic*, the relationship of these ideas to cultural concepts of the “sixties”, implicit in *Dead White Males*, is made explicit through the fact that “social historians agree it [Margaret’s work] played a big part in the attitude shift that eventually became the Sixties. In fact some think the Sixties were Margaret’s most fabulous legacy” (19). The conflict between Freeman and Mead is paralleled directly with the conflict between the values of contemporary society and the sixties.

To an extent *Heretic* also mirrors *Dead White Males* in the way in which the argument is played out. Margaret’s research is revealed to be flawed, based on lies told to her by the young Samoan girls, lies which she believed because of her own inner desires: “She projected her own sexual liberation onto the young women of Samoa” (69). Her research is not rigorous, she finds what she wants to find to reinforce her ideology: “I’m afraid Margaret never let the facts stand in the way of a good story. She came here intent on finding a society she could beat America around the head with, and by God she found it” (67), and the ideology of those she is working for. Boas tells her, for example:

The Eugenicists have convinced the world there’s a *gene* that turns people into criminals. They totally dismiss the notion that poverty and degradation might have something to do with it [. . .] We must demonstrate that what we become is a result of what we are taught and has nothing to do with our genes [. . .] If we can just find *one* culture in which there is no adolescent turmoil, we will have demonstrated that biology has no hold over us. (29)

Consequently, Margaret writes when she submits her findings to him: “I understand that this is the sort of thing that you want. I hope you’ll be pleased” (93). Margaret, then, accords in many ways to the cliché of “politically correct” academia. She lets her own biases drive her so-called socially conscious research, and is more concerned with following the correct doctrine than with academic rigour.

The portrayal of academia is similarly conservative. Academics are expected to toe the ideological line, just as Swain’s students are. Derek is criticised by his boss on the grounds that “you’re discussing biological influences on behaviour and that biology has no place in anthropology” (42). Rick’s thesis is buried because “If you want to get on in anthropology you don’t criticise Saint Margaret” (66). Again, saying the “right” thing, the fashionable thing, is more important than truth. Derek’s unpopular book has a motion passed against it by leading academics, and this is used by the play both to discredit academia’s intellectual standards *and* to prop up claims for a competitive human “nature”:

The same motion was put that very evening and passed by an overwhelming majority [. . .] Most of those voting admitted they hadn’t read the book [. . .] This is the only case in the history of Science, to my knowledge, where the truth has been decided by popular vote [. . .] The irony was that the naked aggression of that anthropological tribe showed striking similarities to the behaviour of a band of chimpanzees evicting a renegade. But of course we aren’t animals. We don’t have instincts. (85)

In a sense, then, *Heretic* mirrors the ideological argument of *Dead White Males*; that the betrayal of “truth” by academia in favour of adhering to its ideologically imposed

doctrines has led to the false notion that human beings are socially constructed rather than biologically driven beings.

However, there are also significant differences. In *Heretic*, Williamson displays considerable sympathy for the arguments for this adherence to ideological norms, even while he critiques it:

Margaret: Derek, you've got to understand the damage genetic arguments did to the world. Racism—Genocide—

Old Derek: [*cutting in*] I hate racism. What I am saying is that our genes have given us a human nature common to all mankind!

We all share the same passions. We are all one! [. . .]

Rick Cooper: It mightn't have been the message you intended Derek, but it was certainly the message the Right Wing took from your book. You gave support to every bigot, every racist, every xenophobe—

Old Derek: Then they were guilty of *profoundly* misreading what I had to say. My book makes it clear that there is absolutely no evidence that any race or class is genetically superior to any other.

Rick Cooper: Anything that *hints* that our behaviour is even *partially* controlled by our genes has the conservatives bellowing, 'Cancel all social programs—they're poor and destitute because they've got bad genes. (82)

While the academics in *Heretic* are guilty of the same disregard for academic rigour in the face of ideological trends as Swain in *Dead White Males*, their motives in this play are considerably more sophisticated and sympathetic than Swain's desire to

escape his insecurities and bed his female students. Furthermore, Derek's arguments are themselves not presented unproblematically. His belief in the biological basis behind the notion that "men get edgy when their women are out of sight [. . .] Of course! Instinctive fear of bringing up another man's child [. . .] And is it a totally irrational fear? Haven't they all got a wandering eye?" (71) is contextualised in the light of his suspicion that his wife is having an affair. Thus his own arguments are portrayed as less than iron-clad, and notions of biological behaviour themselves depicted as subject to contextual influences. This is an acknowledgement not explored in *Dead White Males*, at least outside of the historically distant figure of Shakespeare. While *Heretic* deals with many of the same conservative arguments as its predecessor, it does so with less obvious bias. In this play, both sides are presented as well-intentioned but flawed.

Another significant difference is the critique of Derek's character when it comes to feminism. In contrast to the sixties' notion of sexual freedom, Derek propounds the fact that "I regard a loving and monogamous relationship as the best of human options" (36). Soon afterwards the play depicts the younger Derek being insensitive towards his young bride, and Margaret asks him "This is the loving monogamous relationship?" (36). As the play progresses the inequalities within Derek and Monica's relationship become more and more obvious, a fact which his opponents point out to him:

Rick Cooper: Face it Derek, you were an asshole.

Old Derek: I loved her desperately from the moment I saw her. If I could go back and change the past I would!

Margaret: You want to know why the Sixties had to happen? That's why the Sixties had to happen! As far as women were



concerned, it wasn't the past that needed changing. It was the future.

Old Derek: [*anguished*] It did change. It did.

Rick Cooper: This is your dream, Derek, but I have to say that happy, loving monogamous relationships are not lookin' good. (44)

In this sub-plot, Williamson sets up anti-feminist arguments, but then demolishes them. Similarly, as the plot develops, sexism is seen to colour Derek's antagonism towards Margaret. She asks him: "Why would you be scared that I'd ask you to bed Derek? [. . .] Because in your rigid little mindset any woman who achieves anything isn't really a woman, they're a man. Any bed I was in had a penis there already?" (57). As opposed to Col in *Dead White Males*, whose sexism is ultimately justified and forgiven, Derek must come to terms with and admit his mistakes, both with Monica: "Thank you Monica [. . .] For giving me much more time than I deserved to start making the right choices about *us*" (96), and with regard to his motives for attacking Margaret:

Margaret: A loose woman that had to be punished?

Old Derek: Yes, a little of that.

Margaret: because I humiliated you in Canberra?

Old Derek: Yes, a little of that.

Margaret: A woman you couldn't have so you would destroy?

Old Derek: Yes, a little of that.

Margaret: No woman could ever be as good a scientist as a man?

Old Derek: Yes, a little of that.

Margaret: Envy at my fame?

Old Derek: Yes, a little of that. (95)

*Heretic*, then, is a play much less antagonistic than its predecessor towards the feminist cause. Petruchio is no longer held up as the model of man that women desire. Sensitivity towards the cause of women's rights and questioning of traditional gender roles are portrayed in this play as valuable and important things.

Derek ultimately is forced to come to a compromise between his cynicism towards the sixties and Margaret's "ideology", and the importance of both with regard to both society at large and his own personal relationships. Just as he is forced to admit that the sexual advances of the sixties were, at least to some extent, necessary, so he is forced to incorporate the influence of sixties idealism and the belief in the potential for change into his own vision of mankind as driven by biological urges. He tells Monica:

Heretic [. . .] From the Greek *heretikos*—able to choose. We are creatures of choice [. . .] You chose me over the Governor of the Bahamas. Evolution has given you a brain which can model the future and estimate the consequences. If you were a gosling you'd be pre-wired to follow the first large moving object you saw [. . .] We are products of culture and biology. But ultimately we are creatures of choice. We can choose to be *moral*. We can choose to care. (88)

Despite the similarities with *Dead White Males*, *Heretic* offers an almost opposing view of the notions of nature and culture. In this play, "nature" remains a force, but it is portrayed as *able to be overcome* by human reason and agency. Where *Dead White Males* implicitly portrays a static society bound across the ages by the continuities of "human nature", *Heretic* offers hope that society can be changed: "I think it is slowly dawning on mankind that we share one planet and one future. Small signs, but in my heart, great hope" (88). There is both potential for change and

impetus for questioning and challenging the “natural” state of the world in the play’s final confrontation between Derek and his younger self:

Young Derek: What’s my life going to be about?

Old Derek: Chasing the answer to a very important question. Perhaps  
*the* most important question.

Young Derek: Do I find the answer?

Old Derek: Yes [. . .] But when you do you’ll realise that a much  
wiser man than you are worked it out four hundred years ago  
in just two lines—  
“I’ll never  
Be such a gosling as to obey instinct; but stand  
As if man were author of himself”. (97)

*Heretic* provoked mixed, mostly negative reviews. Many reviews focused on the highly publicised conflict between Wayne Harrison’s production and the text. James Waites provided one of the more positive reviews, noting that “It’s not really a play about Mead and Freeman, more to do with the 1960s and those shouts for social freedom that echoed around the world” (“Master Chef’s Latest Creation Is Messy but Playful” 7). Helen Thomson agreed, though her comments were more critical, asking whether the author “disliked the production because it evokes affectionate nostalgia for a time and set of values his play attacks?” and seeing the play as further evidence of Williamson’s conservative turn: “The play trips itself up on a very old and familiar contradiction. That which is being attacked [. . .] is derided as mere ideology. That which is being supported [. . .] is called ‘truth’ [. . .] There is surely a final irony in the swing to conservatism represented by David Williamson’s last two plays. Nurtured and given his start in the iconoclastic,

counter-cultural '60s, now accurately reflecting the meaner '90s, has he been culturally determined, or was he always genetically coded as an essential nay sayer?"

(8). Leonard Radic, though not entirely a fan of the production, argued against Thomson's interpretation: "It is not, as some have read it, a one-sided contest in which Freeman is the clear winner and Mead is left reeling on the ropes. On the contrary, Williamson's sympathies are equally divided between the two protagonists"(9).

*Heretic*, while still echoing some of the conservative anti-political-correctness rhetoric of its predecessors such as *Sanctuary* and *Dead White Males*, represents a significant turn in Williamson's playwriting, towards a view more critical of the nation's growing conservatism. While it critiques the notion of following the PC line, it also displays sympathy for the underlying cause. The play still critiques leftist proponents of notions of society as socially constructed, but it also critiques blind acceptance of biology and "nature". Both are portrayed as having good and bad elements. The play represents a more accepting view of sixties feminism, and of the need for it. Ultimately, it argues that human beings do have biological drives, but that these are able to be overcome, and that society is thus able to be changed. In this respect it is in many ways oppositional, rather than parallel to, the conservative political trends.

### **After the Ball (1997)**

Williamson's next play, *After the Ball* can also be seen as a move toward a more anti-conservative political line. It offers a similar generational picture to that of plays

such as *Dead White Males* or *The Garden of Granddaughters*, but in this play the older generation is more critically portrayed. Their attitudes of racism and militarism are made explicit, but are also portrayed at their prime, due to the play's temporal hopping, rather than simply as the dying attitudes of a generation whose time had passed. This contextualises the rise of alternative attitudes and renders conservatism as a less powerless force. The boomer generation is critiqued, at least to some extent, but in this play the criticism is largely directed not at its ideals, but at the loss of them. Stephen's character displays a turn from leftist social engagement to inward-looking capitalism. In this play, in contrast to the plays in Section Two, it is Stephen's monetarist ways which come across as the façade, while the ideals of compassion and social engagement lost since the sixties are portrayed as a possible solution.

If *Heretic* takes up some of the more theoretical battles presented in *Dead White Males*, Williamson's 1997 play *After the Ball* returns to the intimate family concerns of that play. Indeed, it is the first of Williamson's dramas to be centred purely in the domestic sphere since *The Perfectionist*. As such, it might be argued that this play is less concerned with politics than it is with relations and emotions within the family unit. Of course, the two are never completely separable, and *After the Ball* does comment strongly in places on Australian society, both over the last forty years, and in contemporary times.

Like *Dead White Males*, *After the Ball* could also be grouped with the number of plays presenting generational conflict, including plays still to come such as Hannie Rayson's *Life After George* and Williamson's own *The Great Man*. In its generational tableau, *After the Ball* is perhaps closer to *Dead White Males* or *The Garden of Granddaughters* than these later works, in that it presents the Boomer

generation still in their prime, in control of society while their predecessors fade from the scene. Like *Heretic*, though, *After the Ball* is not a static play temporally, but rather traces the evolution of this generational conflict through a number of years, and attempts to contextualise and to critique it to varying extents. It could be argued that this portrayal of the play's characters in a dynamic, changing state itself lends the play more of a sense of possibility than do the rather cemented generational tableaux of *Dead White Males* or *Garden of Granddaughters*. Ideologies are seen as situated in their broader context, and as transient and therefore changeable, dispelling, at least to some extent, the illusion that any system of beliefs can be considered inevitable or "natural".

The portrayal of the older generation is perhaps harsher here than in *Dead White Males*. The play's father Ron's racism is particularly prominent. He presents a Britain-centric view of Australia: "We'd be better off if we'd stuck to being British instead of importing the refuse of Europe [. . .] Bringing all their Neanderthal quarrels with them. And when I say Neanderthal I mean it. Take a close look at the shape of their heads next time you see them mangling the English tongue on television" (*After the Ball* 7). When Judy points out that his football team is in actual fact full of migrants, he simply alters the focus of his racism, replying "Be a long time before we see a blessed Vietnamese on our forward line. They just don't mix" (51) This is closer to the satire of racism depicted in plays such as *The Floating World* or *The Front Room Boys* than it is to the less pronounced prejudices of Col or Morty. While Ron is not demonised in the play, neither is he romanticised as Col is in *Dead White Males*. This is evident in Stephen's rejoinder to his mother's defence of his father, reminiscent of Col's justification of his own life:

Kate: Don't you ridicule people who raise families my boy. Your father held down a steady job all his life. Hated it. Hated every minute of it. Your father had capabilities far beyond adding up figures in a ledger, but he stuck at it, and why? I'll tell you why. To provide a decent home for you two. And look where it's got him.

Stephen: Exactly! (41)

The populist stereotype of the hard-working family man, embodied in Col, is here seen as less than idealised. Ron is seen as a racist tyrant, his life as unfulfilled. While there is affection for him in the play, it is tempered by the memories of his imperfections.

Mother Kate is similarly conservative. She unproblematically accepts the Liberal government lines: "Do you think the Government would send our soldiers to Vietnam if there wasn't a damn good reason? [. . .] The Government knows more than you do young man" (19). Again the accent is on structural stability. The fact that *After the Ball* traces the family through a prolonged period of time allows Williamson to portray the attitudes of these characters in their prime, and thus the racist attitudes of Ron and the conservative naïveté of Kate are displayed as attitudes of *those who hold the power*, rather than, as in *Dead White Males* or *The Garden of Granddaughters*, merely the remnants of a dead or dying attitude. This recognition of power contextualises the final forgiveness displayed by Stephen and Judy towards their parents. Ron and Kate are not completely reduced to the powerless figures of Col or Morty, and therefore the forgiving of their sins comes as an awareness of the shaping forces of social context: "The country changed too fast for him. He came from an era when everyone was called Smith, Macrae or O'Connor and lived behind

a picket fence in a sterile suburban wasteland” (63) ; “On the Richter scale of marital discord yours would have scored in the very high sevens, but I’ve finally realised that it wasn’t your fault and it wasn’t his. In another country your talent *would* have been spotted and you *wouldn’t* have spent your life angry and bored [. . .] I’m not condemning. I finally understand.” (70). This contextualising does not undo the sense of power and potency once held by their prejudices and beliefs. In short, forgiveness, in this play, stops short of re-assertion or validation.

Notions of Australian identity are explored in the play not just through Ron and Kate, but also to a large extent through Stephen. Stephen stands for the opposite attitude to his parents in many ways. His dissatisfaction with Menzies’ Australia: “This is the most inward looking, self centred, smug and *boring* country in the world [. . .] Can’t you *feel* the sterility? Can’t you feel all that repressed suburban ‘decency’?” (18), leads him to flee overseas, though he returns in time for the Whitlam era to make films about the counterculture and Vietnam protests (29). Stephen is in some ways the archetypal Boomer, but he too is not romanticised. Following the dismissal of Whitlam he heads overseas again in despair and sells out his ideals, making exploitative commercials for cigarette companies. In the following confrontation between Judy and Stephen, Williamson interweaves Stephen’s loss of idealism over Australia’s identity with his increasing support for globalisation:

Stephen: Why does anyone have to belong to any tribe? We’re just about to enter the twenty-first century and finally come to terms with the fact that we’re all citizens of one world.

Judy: Not everyone can be part of an international elite Stephen. We can’t all prostitute ourselves to the highest bidder like you! [. . .] Citizen of the world? You’re as tribal as any of us. You’re



frantically trying to reattach yourself to the European tribe  
your ancestors left four generations ago [. . .] for no good  
rational reason some of us love this country—its light, its  
landscape, its space, its tolerance—

Stephen: Tolerance? Pauline Hanson?

Judy: She's not going to win! She's like our father. Living in the past!

This country is on its way to becoming something new. Not  
European, not Asian, not anything other than itself and I want  
to be around to help make that happen!

Stephen: Good luck to you. I'll just continue to eke out a miserable  
existence looking down the Dordogne Valley drinking  
Chateau Latour. (64-65)

Clearly, here, rhetoric about a global community is problematised and portrayed as a pessimistic turn away from any idealistic ambitions for society, towards a more personal self-centred interiority. This is much more in line with critique of economic rationalism's globalist ideals than with its reinforcement. Stephen's attitude is reminiscent of the fatalistic turn from community to self demonstrated by Bob in *Sanctuary*.

Judy represents the alternative view, that "Most people are decent [. . .] decent, compassionate and kind. Show vulnerability and they'll embrace you, not torment you. You've wasted your whole life!" (66). In *After the Ball*, though, in contrast to *Sanctuary*, it is Stephen who is forced to see the error of his ways. "You were right," he tells Judy. "I asked myself who my real friends were, and came up with the answer, zero. I asked myself what I felt really strongly about, and came up with the same answer, nothing. I asked myself if there was anyone in the world who

loved me and came up with the answer, zilch [ . . . ] there's absolutely nothing I look forward to—nothing" (72). It is Stephen's life of economic rationalist self-centredness which is revealed as a façade, as a defence mechanism, and it is the possibility of turning back to a sense of community, by re-engaging with his abandoned artistic ideals, which provides the potential for positive change: "You'll be vulnerable, but you'll be alive" (72).

*After the Ball* received mixed reviews, though mostly positive. Most concentrated on the family drama's pathos rather than the politics of the play, although James Waites noted "its many pointed references to immigration and the so-called race debate" ("Williamson Picks the Mood Again" 9). Ron Banks claimed that "David Williamson seems to have had a check list of all the hot-button issues of our recent past in writing *After the Ball* [ . . . ] *After the Ball* offers plenty of insights and plenty of oft-repeated observations about the Australian psyche and culture, but never reaches in and tears out our heart like great drama does" ("Theatre" 5). Ken Longworth enjoyed the play but was critical of the more political aspects: "The play's most problematic characters are the children. They are often little more than talking mouthpieces for Williamson's attempt at social comment" ("Bittersweet Reflection of Playwright's Life" 10).

*After the Ball* continues Williamson's turn to a more critical engagement with conservative ideology. The play takes the generational conflict of earlier plays and contextualises it, both socially and temporally, endowing conservatism once more with the power absent from early nineties rhetoric, and undermining the sense of social systems as naturalised or inevitable. As well as offering a strong critique of the older generation's conservatism, it also portrays the boomer generation as less homogenous, and therefore destabilises the myth of leftist dominance. In terms of the

play's boomers, in this case it is the inward-looking, economic rationalist view which is portrayed as the illusion, the protective façade, and it is social engagement and compassion which is portrayed as the more genuine alternative. *After the Ball*, then, represents a significant revision of the previous conservative generational tableaux.

### **Corporate Vibes (1999)**

Williamson's *Corporate Vibes* deals specifically with economic rationalism. Centred in the workplace, it features a boss, Sam, who stands for many conservative attitudes. He is cynical about affirmative action, and about the capacity of society to combat disadvantage. He is cynical about human nature, and sees economics as more important than compassion; the "pragmatic" view over the "ideological". As the play progresses, this pragmatism is undermined, as Sam's view is proved to be impractical, even in purely economic terms, as the insecurity caused by downsizing undermines the functioning of his business. Furthermore, Sam's own personal capitalist ambitions are shown to be fantasy. The play further argues that compassion can add a valuable dimension to the workplace, whether or not it fits the economic-rationalist frame.

*Corporate Vibes* is Williamson's most direct engagement with the philosophy of economic rationalism. Sam has hired Deborah to fire his staff following a poor result in the sale of his latest block of apartments. Sam represents many of the attitudes of the nineties right, particularly with regard to business but also, necessarily, with regard to society at large. This is reflected in his attitude to

disadvantage. His hiring of Deborah (who is part Indigenous) is against his will: “The era of the Equal Opportunity bureaucrat telling us who we can hire and who we can’t [. . .] The universities have all got quotas for the ‘disadvantaged’ and as long as they turn up to a few classes they pass! [. . .] ‘Western suburbs? Victim of child abuse? Step this way’” (*Corporate Vibes* 16-17), an attitude which reflects the conservative right’s belief in the pervasiveness of “political correctness”. He is uninterested in providing housing for the poor: “Angela, I am not going back to housing the wretched of the earth. It’s all very romantic, but poor people are poor for one very good reason. They haven’t got money! And the thing it took me far too long to work out is that you can’t make money from people who haven’t got it!” (51). Practicalities, then, “realities”, come before ideals. Sam sees business as more important than compassion: “business can’t afford to be sentimental. The only line is the bottom line [. . .] Listen, the minute you get too close to your staff, that’s the end. You can’t make the tough decisions. Like the ones we’ve got to take right now” (21-22, 24). Compassion, then, is in this schema incompatible with practicality. Sam also shares the typical conservative cynicism towards human nature: “You know your problem? Deep down you think that everyone is nice. It’s just their nasty little six-year-olds that are the problem. Some people are just born bastards and I’m one of them and it’s helped me house hundreds and thousands of people. And I’m not going to apologise for it” (49). Sam, then, represents the “pragmatic” economic realities in opposition to the “ideology” of compassion, affirmative action, social equity and fellow-feeling.

At the end of Act One, Sam’s attitude seems justified, as Deborah’s attempt to marshal his staff into showing him the values of team input degenerates into bickering. Sam fires most of them, commenting: “I learned a lot of things today.

None of them of any use to Siddons Residential. I learned what happens when everyone acts on their feelings. Which is precisely why we keep feelings right out of the workplace. And I've learned what I've always suspected, that if you try and run things by committee, all you get is chaos" (37). In the second act, however, Deborah manages to reverse the tide with the aid of her inside connections to the board, and it is revealed that Sam's economic rationalist approach is *not* in fact rational, even in purely business terms. It emerges that Sam's own ideas are no more economically viable than those he has rejected, and he is forced to reconsider the "pragmatism" of his top-down approach. This is particularly necessary given the fact that the fear engendered by his downsizing is at least partly responsible for the lack of accurate market assessments as his staff are too afraid to be honest with him. Megan asks him "Why should I be the messenger that gets shot? [ . . . ] I'm not paid to be shouted at" (33). In this regard, it is strict adherence to economic rationalism, *not* compassion as Sam had thought, which is inimicable to a functional workplace. Sam is also forced into the realisation that not *every* capitalist can climb to the top of the ladder: "Sam, if we go with your gut instinct, Delgado is going to  *piss* on us and we're finished. He knows the top end of the market better than we do" (55). The simplistic economic rationalist creed of profit over people is shown to be a false binary which doesn't take into account the complexities of the work environment.

While arguing with economic rationalism on its own terms, *Corporate Vibes* also, perhaps more rebelliously, questions the terms themselves. Deborah tells Sam "Sam, whether you want to admit it or not, there's a little six-year-old somewhere inside you, who's way up on a ladder shouting at his mother and father, 'Look at me! I know everything and everyone does what I tell them. Aren't I terrific? Please love me now [ . . . ] Sam, life actually does get better when you admit that the rest of

humanity are worth connecting with” (49). The reinstated team’s design for new apartments (based on their own desires) does not prove to be profitable, and Williamson does not romanticise the consequences: “People being laid off left, right and centre” (60), but Sam gradually does come to the realisation that compassion and his relationships with others are not irrelevant: “Well, you didn’t do much for the bottom line but you did make losing money a much happier experience [. . .] You have changed me. I get in my lift to come up here and see people of limited means smiling. I scowl back to remind them that they made me next to no profit, but deep down I’m glad” (65). While *Corporate Vibes* does rebut the conservative argument that economic success and people are separable, it does not offer any real hope of overturning the social system. However, it does offer the suggestion that regaining the lost focus on compassion and fellow-feeling is not detrimental to business, and in any case is relevant to a more important area, quality of life. The ultimate impression is one of guarded hope; as Deborah says at the play’s end, “One step at a time” (66).

Reviews for *Corporate Vibes* were mostly positive, although positive comments were frequently mixed with comments on the piece’s slightness. Kate Herbert, for instance, enjoyed it but claimed, “The plot is thin, predictable and lacking in any depth or subtlety” (“Williamson's Good Vibes” 106). Carrie Kablean claimed “There are plenty of laughs and lacerating barbs” but that “it will also allow you to leave the Drama Theatre unsullied by provoking thoughts” (“Workplace Malpractice” 166). Several reviewers found the play’s upbeat ending unconvincing. Colin Rose claimed “Sam’s turnaround and redemption [. . .] are just too swift and incredible” (“Once More with Feeling” 9), while Paul McGillick claimed that in Act II, “Williamson’s writing lurches towards a kind of agit-prop theatre in Armani suits” (“Satire's Highs and Lows” 6). While most reviewers sympathised with

Williamson's critique of big business, some such as Bryce Hallett found this critique too obvious: "The comedy is topical and of the moment, particularly if you live in the shimmering harbour city, but it fails to take an intrinsically funny subject and extend its horizons beyond ridicule or that which we already know. Where is the insight, the disturbance, the revelation?" ("Satiric Vibes Fails Closer Inspection" 11). It is interesting to compare these comments to those on *Dead White Males*; it seems Williamson was accused of preaching to the converted for his conservatism while under a Labor government, and for his radicalism while the Liberals were in power, a seemingly contradictory shift. Other critiques, such as that of Alison Cotes, found the farce style worked against the play's aims: "The theme of the play, that the heart of a corporation can be opened only if the individuals within it are allowed to open theirs, is flatly contradicted by the soulless, plastic caricatures that Williamson and [director Robyn] Nevin have devised" ("Heart Bypassed for Commercial Success").

*Corporate Vibes*, then, bucks the trend of early nineties conservative ideology by offering an alternative to the naturalisation of economic rationalisation as the only social system. Sam's narrow economically-based view is in this play shown to be unrealistic, rather than pragmatic, and to work against him financially. The play portrays a world in which compassion is not irrelevant, where profit and people cannot comfortably be divorced and where quality of life is returned to the agenda. Essentially it is a rebuttal of the false "pragmatism" which nineties political rhetoric had introduced into the mainstream discourse of society as a whole.

## **Face to Face (1999)**

*Face to Face* deals with community conferencing following an assault by an employee on his employer. The play rebuts the blame the victim mentality of conservatism in the nineties by contextualising the crime socially. In doing so it offers a critique of the workplace conditions under economic rationalism, offering the argument that workers, in contrast to the claims of economists, do in fact require protection from the global economy. Again, blinkered economic rationalism is seen as counterproductive, as the employer's greed is revealed to have created poor social conditions *and* poor profitability in the workplace. Once again, too, capitalist dreams are critiqued and the need for human beings to treat each other with dignity and compassion asserted as a primary goal.

Initially, *Face to Face* seems a quite different play to *Corporate Vibes*. Its plot deals primarily with a case of community conferencing. This is a device whereby victims of crime confront the perpetrators with the aim of achieving an agreement which is equitable to all concerned. The aim in this case is to achieve a solution which will keep Glen out of jail following his assault on Greg, an aim which is in itself an anathema to much conservative thought. *Redemption*'s Edie would no doubt be horrified. *Face to Face* also bucks the right-wing blame-the-disadvantaged mentality in its portrayal of the causes of Glen's attack. While Glen is certainly portrayed as something of a loose cannon, this is contextualised socially, both in terms of his upbringing: "When I first met this guy he used to come to school with black eyes and bruises. Any of you ever met his dad? [. . .] Then you're lucky [. . .] Every time he made a mistake at anything he got bashed" (*Face to Face* 111), and in terms of his treatment at the hands of his workmates: "They used to set him up for



their own bloody amusement [. . .] Poor kid. No defences. Trust anyone” (91).

Glen’s actions are thus given a social context which would no doubt be unfashionable amongst conservative commentators anxious to lay all responsibility at the individual’s feet. Glen’s bullying, furthermore, is itself contextualised in terms of cycles of workplace culture; Luka (one of the bullies) asks “Who do you bloody think was taking it before he came along? [. . .] I been in this country since I was eight. And they call me a fucking killer cause my dad’s a Serb. ‘All your Serb mates are good for is raping women.’ That’s what they said” (94). The complexities of context supplied here are a significant advance from the simplistic one-faceted motivation supplied for John’s violence in *Sanctuary*, and a rebuttal of the disdain for social context in plays such as *Redemption*.

*Face to Face* goes a step further in bucking the trends of the nineties by locating these events within the socioeconomic scheme of capitalist existence. Luka blames the attitude of the workers at least in part on their awareness of their place in the economic pecking order:

You talk about Glen getting a rough time. Sometimes I go home from work and I’m so angry inside I just wanna kill someone [. . .] The whole place. The whole life. The whole stinkin’ hopelessness of it all. [. . .] You erect the same bloody scaffolds. Time after time. You take ’em down and put ’em up again somewhere else. It’s the pits, man. For anyone with half a brain it’s the pits. We’re the dregs. And we know it. And if we don’t bloody behave like girl guides—if we do spend all our bloody day giving shit to anyone who’ll let it get to them—the reason is that we all know we’re the dregs. (95)

Here class oppression is reinstated as an important contextual referent in diagnosing the causes of human beings' actions. Greg, conversely, like Sam in *Corporate Vibes*, reflects the attitudes of economic rationalism in his belief in workers' "choice" and his ignorance of the power dynamics of global market: "I've got a mate setting up a business in China, Luka, and there are millions there who'd be happy to do what you do for a dollar and two bowls of rice a day [. . .] Why should you be getting fifty times as much for the same work? This is an international bloody economy. Why should a union be giving you guys special protection?" (97). This argument represents a typical nineties response to the question of workers' rights in its recourse to notions of global competitiveness and in the suggestion that empowerment resides in individual rather than union based contract negotiations.

Luka negates these arguments:

Greg: Unions are a thing of the past.

Luka: Who else is going to protect us from people like you?

Greg: The market protects you. If you've got skills and I don't pay you enough for them, you go somewhere else.

Luka: I got skills. I'm a trained fitter and turner. But suddenly we've got no manufacturing industry anymore. Because companies can go to China and pay one dollar a day and two bowls of rice. (99)

This is a reassertion of the need for collective action, and a rebuttal of the notion that individual contracts rather than union-based bargaining can empower the exploited. The conservative myth of the greedy workers who hold all the power is exploded. The workers in the play have abandoned their union representation at the behest of Richard, who, it emerges, is taking a sly deal on the side. *Face to Face* reinstates the

belief in the exploitation of workers that the right wing rhetoric of the nineties worked so hard to deny.

The poor deal for the workers, which is the root cause of the conflict, is revealed to be the result of Greg's greed, as accountant Therese admits: "Greg pays himself twice as much as he should in my opinion [ . . . ] It's made me angry for a long while. Not just the salary. The perks. The travel. It's just made me so angry. I have to break the law to get the accounts through the auditor" (107). Beyond the illegality and selfishness involved, it is furthermore revealed that Greg's methods are responsible to some extent for the poor workplace conditions and productivity. When Jack suggests he raise wages Greg protests: "Fine in theory, but how much would it really solve? Give them two dollars an hour more and they're going to flog their guts out for me? Dream on", to which Richard replies: "Eight weeks in Europe? Italian cooking lessons? They're not going to flog their guts out for you ever, mate. But pay 'em what they should be paid and at least they wouldn't sabotage you" (108). As with *Corporate Vibes*, economic rationalism is revealed to be at times incompatible with running a successful business. Again, a sense of community is shown to be important: "if you combined that with letting us in on what the hell is going on round the place, then we might really be getting somewhere [ . . . ] I might feel like I was actually part of the place" (110). Like Sam, Greg is forced to realise that sometimes the economic rationalist way isn't the most productive way, in economic or in personal terms, and that the economic and personal are not easily separated. Like Sam, Greg is forced, too, to recognise that perhaps his capitalist dreams are a façade. His wife Claire comments regarding his yacht, "You're trying to compete against *real* money and they laugh" (109). This is a rebuttal of capitalist mythology, a reminder that not everybody who competes can make it to the top.

Williamson avoids any sense of easy solutions, and *Face to Face* could hardly be called utopian. However, there is a continuation in this play of the optimism towards humanity displayed in *Heretic*, *After the Ball* and *Corporate Vibes*. There is a sense that fellow-feeling and community may yet triumph over economic rationalist greed. Jack comments: “After a good one like this you go away thinking there’s a huge reservoir of decency in the human species. We just somehow manage to stuff up most of the time” (125). Compared to the attitudes of plays such as *Money and Friends*, *Dead White Males* and *Sanctuary*, this is a significant step.

Reviews of *Face to Face* were positive, with many reviewers comparing it favourably to *Corporate Vibes*, playing concurrently in Sydney. A couple of the reviews found the play’s optimism a little unrealistic. Carrie Kablean commented that “Face to Face is powerful stuff, even though there’s a whiff of fairytale ending” (“Alternative Justice” 191), while Andrew Stevenson claimed the “glass-clinking resolution” was unrealistic (68), and Leonard Radic commented that “The play ends on a happy note, with the mediator observing—without a hint of irony—that the session is proof ‘that there’s a huge reservoir of decency in the human species’. Really?” (“The New Face at Work” 96). Despite this, these reviews were all positive. Colin Rose found the ending more convincing (“The Power of 10” 15). Ron Banks claimed the play contained a “brutally funny dissection of workplace politics, labour relations, personal relationships and the nature of work itself” (“Motives Unmasked” 7), while Bryce Hallett argued that “Face to Face is a raw, compassionate and timely play. It searches for resolutions or at least some degree of hope and healing in a society and, in this case study, an industrial culture which cultivates, even trades on, ignorance and fear” (“Facing up to Culture of Ignorance and Fear” 15). The play was a great success, with Ken Longworth noting that “The season was extended twice

and the production eventually played for 10 sold-out weeks”. Actor Geoff Cartwright claimed “audiences also find themselves affected by the possibility of change the community conferencing system offers”(“Emotion Charged” 29).

*Face to Face* rebuts many of the trends of nineties conservative rhetoric. In its dealing with Glen’s crime, it rejects the blame-the-victim, individual-choice ethos, emphasising the importance of contextualising his crime socially, both in terms of his class status and the immediate power relations of the workplace. It critiques the capitalist workplace ethos, arguing that the poor workplace conditions which lead to Glen’s crime are the result of an unequal power dynamic, and argues that workers, in contrast to conservative rhetoric, do need protection from the “natural” global economy. The greed of Sam is shown to be not merely the cause of social ill, but also low productivity, dispelling the myth that the economic can be separated from the personal or communal. Despite this critique of capitalism, the play is ultimately an optimistic one, which asserts that humanity is good at heart, and that therefore, problems are able to be overcome. This belief in the possibility of positive change further marks the play as distinct from previous, more conservative-leaning works.

### **The Great Man (2000)**

*The Great Man* is Williamson’s most direct engagement with the ideas and legacy of the sixties. In this play, friends and relatives of Labor Party “great” Jack Barclay gather before his funeral to discuss his life. This analysis functions as a retrospective reconsideration of the life not just of Jack Barclay, but of the changes caused by the

sixties in general. There is a renegotiation of the generational picture, but in this play it is significantly different in that it is the Boomers who are dying. The sixties in *The Great Man* are presented with fondness, idealism as something valuable. There is a critique, conversely, of the nineties and its “pragmatism”, its pessimistic conception of human nature, its belief in the inevitability of globalisation, rejection of feminism, community and compassion and the blaming of the disadvantaged for their plight. While on the one hand, Jack’s ideals are undermined by his corruption, this does not entail a wholesale rejection of sixties ideology, but clarifies the necessity of assessing the Boomers’ legacy in all its complexity. The other characters reject Jack’s corruption, but they also reject nineties economic rationalist ideology as a “solution”. Instead they take the good parts of Jack’s legacy and resolve to forge a better future.

There is an element in the play of Sixties nostalgia, from those who were fond of Jack and that era itself. Jack’s friend Terry claims that “Our sixties didn’t happen till the seventies. But when they did happen it was the best sixties in the whole fucking world [. . .] For one brief moment in the history of Western world consumerism, materialism, and sexual repression were all blown out of the water. For one brief moment we lived right on the edge of our possibilities and potentials” (*The Great Man* 33). Jack is remembered with similar fondness. Young journalist Tegan claims that “What Jack had, and it’s quite rare in politicians, was an ability to genuinely empathise with other people’s pain” (41), while ex-wife Eileen comments that Jack “didn’t suck up to the rich and powerful like this generation of Labor sell-outs. His happiest hours were spent in pubs yarning to the real Australians—the battlers, the marginals—these were the Australians he was elected to represent and he never forgot it” (30). Jack, then, is linked with the sixties, and valued for similar

reasons; his empathy and compassion and his concern for the disadvantaged rather than capitulation to the power of wealth and privilege.

In opposition to this legacy stand the re-visioned attitudes of the nineties, personified primarily by young journalist Tegan and Jack's colleague Rhys. When Jack's widow, Fleur, says to Rhys "All you get in the Labor Party these days are glint-eyed young opportunists on a career path. Don't you ever mourn the loss of idealism?" Rhys replies that "Idealism is another name for well-intentioned idiocy", and claims that his own earlier ideals were "Momentary delusions. I'd forgotten my early lessons in human nature" (12). Rhys, then, represents the privileging of practical "reality" over ideals, and bases his beliefs on a cynicism about others. In this regard he reflects the attitudes of Bob in *Sanctuary*. In arguing that "Globalisation is inevitable" (43), Rhys is indicative of the shift among many Boomers (and by the ALP at the time) away from their earlier ideals, towards an acceptance of economic rationalist concerns.

Tegan, meanwhile, represents a younger generation brought up in an age where the old ideals have to a large extent become seen as outdated relics. She claims that "Any kind of feminism has missed the boat" (29), and also accepts the rhetoric of globalisation: "Unlike the Whitlam Government, which was under the delusion that it ran the show, Hawke and Keating, and Rhys, were smart enough to realise that our Government is just one tiny power vector in a world of much larger power vectors, and that to stay in power they had to make smart alliances with the big players and change those alliances instantly if the power balance changed", and its concurrent rejection of ideals: "Nothing's good or bad per se [ . . . ] Ultimately, all there is is power [ . . . ] It's simply accepting reality" (49). Tegan, too, then, rejects the sixties' idealism in favour of a conservative notion of "reality". In a similar manner

she rejects any sense of community: “‘Community’ is just another name for locality fascism. A group who accidentally happens to share some geography imposing their demands on everyone [. . .] ‘Community’ is a cage we’re finally breaking free of and not a moment too soon. I’m going to live exactly where I want to live in the world and be exactly what I want to be” (69). Community is thus seen as oppressive, rather than as a means of combating oppression. Individualism is seen as the means to combat oppression, in this schema, while the potential for community to provide a sense of strength and solidarity is rejected.

This is accompanied, as in much right-wing rhetoric, by a loss of any sense in compassion for the disadvantaged. Tegan claims that “Regret it though we may, fairness is off the agenda forever”, and echoes the conservative argument that “Sorry, but I’m not going to weep crocodile tears and blood for the disadvantaged because it’s their own bloody fault” (68). This is implicitly linked to her views on community and individuality. For if emancipation is only conceivable in individual terms (“I’m going to live exactly where I want in the world”) rather than in terms of compassion for others, then it follows that such emancipation can never be the result of co-operation or solidarity, but must always emerge from inside the individual. If one accepts that emancipation can only come from internal rather than external impetus, it is impossible to imagine any oppression as externally rather than internally caused, that is, as anything other than the oppressed individual’s “own fault”. Tegan, then, is indicative of the cynicism toward the sixties among younger generations, and the degree to which conservative ideals have become naturalised and unquestioned as “realistic”.

The case against Tegan and Rhys, and for the Sixties, for Jack and his idealism, appears to suffer something of a body-blow in the play by the revelations



firstly of Jack's womanising, and, more damagingly, of his corruption. Fleur is distraught: "To me he was a man of huge integrity who'd been shafted by minnows. And now I suddenly find out he dumped his seventies ideals for the big-end-of-town corruption of the eighties, and I realise I should have been out there living *my* life" (63). This disillusionment with Jack's betrayal of his ideals bears obvious parallels within the play to the discussion of the changes to the ALP under Hawke and Keating in the eighties. Fleur comments on the Labor Party during that period: "You stole from the middle to give a little bit more to the bottom ten percent, and a hell of a lot more to the top twenty percent", and comments on the help given to business, claiming that "the only thing business did with their extra profits was to grossly inflate their own salary packages. At the same time they were hectoring their workers to 'stop being greedy'" (42). These disillusionments with the failures and betrayals of the left appear to serve to reinforce the beliefs of conservatives: "So rampant individualism reigns supreme, in a dog-eat-dog world where community is dead, social obligation is dead, fellow feeling is dead, and all that's left are isolated individuals whose only function is to consume, consume and consume" (42). At this point the play appears to reinforce the ideology of Williamson's early nineties plays; that efforts at idealism and social justice are merely masks and that selfishness and competitiveness are doomed to win out.

However, *The Great Man* differs in that this disillusionment is not portrayed as inevitable, and the play culminates with the rejection by Fleur and son Adam of Jack's corrupt money, and implicitly the doctrine of economic rationalism and greed. There is hope in the fact that their decision spurs Rhys to reconsider his own ideology, admitting the betrayal of Labor ideals and concurrently deconstructing his own rhetoric of globalised competition:

the ‘market forces’ we’re all supposed to worship are a sham [. . .]  
Sure we payed lip service to ‘market forces’. In fact we were smart  
enough to know that the last thing the *real* rulers of this planet wanted  
was a ‘real’ free market [. . .] What they wanted was a free go to  
increase their monopolies and oligopolies without any regulatory  
bodies stopping them [. . .] We did everything we could to let our rich  
get richer and our poor get poorer. (66)

Subsequently, he forces himself to question the supposed “inevitability” of these beliefs: “Wouldn’t some voters *like* to see the mega-corporations *finally* pay the taxes they should, *finally* stop exploiting the third world workforce, *finally* stop pumping shit into the oceans and sky?”(67). This recognition that there *is*, after all, a choice in whether one accepts economic rationalism is an important step. While Williamson, once again, stops short of depicting a rosy, equitable future, *The Great Man* ultimately offers hope that despite Tegan’s protests to the contrary, there is still hope for idealism and social equity, not because of any romanticism of the Sixties, or any glossing over of the betrayal by many Boomers of their former ideals, but rather because of the potential for the positive aspects of the Sixties to be recovered and utilised by those that are still alive. This is evident in Fleur’s final words to Jack: “I still don’t think you were a hypocrite, but by God you were just about everything else. I’ll edit your diary. I can’t let Tegan have the last word of the future, but, Jack—it *is* the last thing I am going to do for you. I don’t know what the hell I’ll do after that, but it’ll be something that tries to make this world a little better”(73). In terms of the conservative ideology of the nineties, this is a significant rebellion.

*The Great Man* received mostly positive reviews. Most commented on the play’s critique of the ALP, with Carrie Kablean claiming “Williamson puts the

spotlight firmly on Australia's new Labor and the direction it's taking"("A Study of Politics to Initiate Great Debate" 114), and Doug Anderson referring to it as "a lacerating condemnation of the Labor Party's betrayal of its traditional principles"("Timely, Yes. Great? Time Will Tell" 14). Some reviewers commented on the broader social issues. Carmel Dwyer claimed the piece was "about the very large and fundamental shift in focus from social good to financial gain"(10), while John McCallum wrote that "Williamson's achievement is to imply that it shouldn't be just a game. Ideals should matter, and some individuals really do live by them, even in a time when most public figures have abandoned all but the rhetoric"("Idealism for New True Believers" 18). There were a couple of negative reviews, mostly centring on a perceived lack of depth to the characters. Ken Longworth claimed "There's no depth, with Williamson trotting out all the clichés about political idealism and corruption and pandering to popular conceptions and misconceptions about politicians" ("Party Politics but Not Don's Party" 40). Susan Mitchell criticised the play for its *lack* of idealism in a critical review (13) which Williamson took issue with in a public reply: "Susan Mitchell, in dismissing Fleur, who is the moral core of the play as a 'stupidly naïve second wife', reveals herself to be a cynic at a far deeper level than I have ever been guilty of. I retain the belief that people like Fleur and Adam can and do continue to behave morally in a national ethos that increasingly puts self-interest and expediency first, and a Labor Party that has forgotten that it was created to protect the interests of the less fortunate in our society"("The Great Man's Less Cynical View" 12).

*The Great Man* depicts a significantly different generational tableau to that of previous plays. In this play, it is the idealist Boomers of the sixties who are dying, and their former leftist ideals have been all but abandoned. It is clearly the recent

conservative ideology which dominates. The play critiques the selling out of many former leftists, the abandonment by them of their ideals and their bowing before the economic rationalist agenda. Rather than seeing this as more evidence of economic rationalism's "natural" inevitability, however, in this play these ideals are portrayed as important and recoverable. The play's culmination operates as a vindication of sixties idealism, of the need to rediscover lost ideals amidst the conservative greed of the nineties, to appropriate and learn from the sixties' rebellion in order to create a more compassionate future.

The plays discussed in this chapter, written by Williamson in the late nineties, indicate a revision of the conservative aspects of the plays of the early part of that decade. In *Heretic* there is a significant rebuttal of notions of biological inevitability, and a recognition of the sixties as important. *After the Ball* revises the generational tableau of earlier plays, portraying conservatism as a dominant force, and asserting the need for compassion and engagement rather than greed and interiority. *Corporate Vibes* and *Face to Face* both critique the effect of economic rationalism on the workplace. They offer the argument that narrow subservience to economic concerns can be counter-productive, and assert the need for kindness and community. *Face to Face* also rejects much blame-the-victim ideology, arguing for the necessity of social context and social justice in trying to deal with crimes. *The Great Man* delivers a reconsideration of the sixties and the ideology attached to it, again arguing firmly against the economic rationalist view, and attempting to recoup the idealism of the former period, asserting that compassion and social justice are still elements of value. These plays take on an engagement with the conservative rhetoric in Australian society which is almost diametrically opposed to the plays of the early

part of the decade, both by Williamson and others, and form a clear rebuttal of its guiding principles.

## Chapter Nine. Hannie Rayson

Hannie Rayson's work of the late nineties displays a similar turn to that of Williamson, away from the conservative elements of early nineties drama, and toward a more critical engagement with the politics of the time. In *Scenes from a Separation* she critiques the attempt to divide the personal from the political, the "ideological" from the "realistic" and the reliance on tradition and fear of change. *Competitive Tenderness* satirises economic rationalism and its contradictions, while arguing the need for resistance. *Life After George* offers a re-envisioning of the sixties which, while avoiding nostalgic tendencies and critiquing the betrayal of ideals, argues for the need to recapture belief in compassion and the need for class-based rebellion, and to incorporate these ideas into positive future movements. *Inheritance* critiques many of the conservative elements of division and blame-casting, and argues for the need for the oppressed to unite rather than divide, to recognise the similarities between their oppression and that of others, and to find a sense of community from which to resist. Rayson's output in the latter part of the nineties and early twenty-first century is a significant rejection of the conservative political climate and a central part of mainstream drama's recovery of political rebellion.

## Scenes from a Separation (1995)

Hannie Rayson's next work after *Falling from Grace* was her 1995 collaboration with Andrew Bovell, entitled *Scenes from a Separation*<sup>7</sup>. This is primarily a play dealing with the decay and eventual divorce of a marriage. While the focus is on the romantic relationship between the two protagonists, the public world is also represented in the play, and plays an important role in the interweaving of the play's politics. Mathew's attempt to separate "ideology" from the "reality" of his life is deconstructed and shown as impossible. Mathew's cynicism about change and human nature seeps from the political into the personal, harming his relationship. In contrast, Nina comes to believe that change is a positive thing, and that a relationship is not something simply to be preserved for the sake of stasis or tradition.

Nina and Mathew represent differing political views. Mathew is portrayed as somebody whose views have grown more conservative as he has aged, and whose former radicalism is attributed to "fashion" rather than genuine commitment. Nina comments: "He used to be so different when he was younger. But maybe it was just fashionable then to have a social conscience" (76). Mathew now resents the intrusion of the ideological, or political, upon his world. He claims that "Affirmative action [. . .] in publishing is a waste of time" (3), "the result is the promotion of mediocrity in the name of ideology" (7). Mathew, then, sees himself as having moved from "fashionable" ideology toward "realistic" pragmatism, a typical conservative theme. Like the conservative right, too, he attempts to deny the power dynamic inherent in maintaining the status quo:

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<sup>7</sup> *Scenes from a Separation* is a collaboration in which Bovell and Rayson wrote half the play each. As such, it may be argued that Bovell's half does not belong in this chapter. However, as this dissertation deals primarily with textual tendencies rather than authorial intent, it seemed more appropriate to deal with the text as a whole. In any case, writing about one half of the play without reference to the context of the other half would be impractical.

Siobhan: [. . .] Mathew, I don't want to do anything different to what your own parents did. They chose to foster a particular group of writers in the early seventies.

Mathew: Yeah but—

Siobhan: Because they recognised they had something to say.

Mathew: Yeah.

Siobhan: And they nurtured that desire so that now they're among the best novelists in the country.

Mathew: Yeah, but their sexuality wasn't an issue.

Siobhan: Of course not. They were all heterosexual men. (8)

This can be linked to his rejection of “ideology”, in that the “ideology”/“reality” binary can only successfully perpetuate itself if the “reality” side of the equation denies its own ideology, that is, if it portrays itself as apolitical. Mathew complains to Siobhan that “You want to politicise literature” (10), as though it were possible to remove politics from the artistic domain.

In the same way, Mathew is unable to see the intersection between the public and personal life, or the political implications of denying this intrusion. When Nina accuses him of a lack of loyalty to her at work, he replies:

Mathew: Loyalty's only possible when the demarcation between the private and the professional is clear.

Nina: You mean the demarcation between work and home. And if I stay home I have your loyalty. (21)

Again, it is clear that what Mathew sees as a “natural” division is, in fact, a highly politically-charged act. The play makes it clear that Mathew's demarcations are



false, and furthermore, it details the destructive effect that his conservative beliefs have on his home life.

Nina is attracted to Lawrence, the subject of the biography she is writing, largely due to his philanthropy. However, Mathew is unable to conceive of Lawrence's actions in anything other than selfish terms, telling him: "it's all the same thing: self interest [ . . . ] That's what drives you. That's what has always driven you. Your son does himself in and you spend a lot of money trying to atone for it" (26). As in nineties conservative rhetoric, desire for social justice is portrayed as just another form of selfishness, and, again typically of conservative beliefs, this is shown to be the result of a cynicism toward the generosity of humanity:

Mathew: [ . . . ] I'm telling you that your obsession with his saintliness merely serves to reveal your naïveté.

Nina: You say this, Mathew, because you don't believe that human beings can be motivated by anything other than greed and fear.

Mathew: Oh come off it.

Nina: If someone ventures to suggest that there might be other motives at work, like kindness or compassion... then they must be truly naïve. You know, I think that says more about you than anyone else. (73)

This inability to see humans in positive, altruistic terms extends to the way he sees his wife and himself:

Nina: It's not guilt. It's about wanting to make a difference. Wanting to help out somehow.

Mathew: To make ourselves feel better. More virtuous. (76)

This relates to Mathew's belief that ideology and reality are separable, and that "reality" equates with competitiveness and selfishness, while any kind of altruism is only conceivable as a façade, designed to mask those intrinsic, "natural" motivations.

Ultimately, in terms of this play, Mathew's cynicism toward humanity, ironically, serves to undermine his belief in the separability of life and politics. Firstly, it damages his relationship with Nina and sends her into the arms of the more idealistic Lawrence, and secondly, it leaves him without any support network when they split up. Nina comments that "his generosity extends to his family and that's it" (76), and hence after the break-up "Mathew doesn't have anybody. Apart from his family. All our friends have sided with me, apparently. But it's not true. He just doesn't make the effort"(75). In this way there is a clear link between Mathew's lack of fellow-feeling and belief in the worth of human beings and the fact that he is left alone after the split, a clear contradiction of his desire to keep politics and personal life separate.

Similar, and perhaps more directly harmful to his marriage, is the fact that Mathew is cynical about change. Siobhan comments that "If you say, 'Oh there's nothing new under the sun', you may as well curl up and die [. . .] [Mathew's] in there getting an ulcer because his cynicism's burning a hole in his gut [. . .] I'd rather have a go and fail than die from pessimism and irritable-bowel syndrome" (54).

Mathew is sceptical about Lawrence's

massive transformation from this greedy self obsessed bastard—[. . .]

Who'd do his own mother in for one more percent of the Big

Australian—[. . .] To this maverick philanthropist who declares

economic rationalism dead and starts throwing his money at good

causes like getting young people jobs and funding drug rehab. I mean, shit, that is one hell of a turn-around. Why?(25)

He is unable to conceive of kindness and compassion as anything other than facades. His belief in “reality” over “ideology” lends itself to the view that, in true conservative fashion, there can only be one “natural” mode of existence, that of selfishness and competitiveness, and that therefore any supposed “change” in character amounts to nothing more than the adoption of a convenient disguise. This is further emphasised by Margaret’s question to him: “But isn’t that Nina’s point? Clifford proves the human capacity for change and therefore redemption?”, to which he replies “I don’t buy that” (15). Mathew’s cynicism about human nature, together with his belief in the separation of “ideology” and “reality”, lead him to construct a static version of others as unchangeable, and therefore a static version of himself, not as socially contextualised, contingent and changeable, but as set.

This aspect of Mathew’s belief system intrudes directly on his personal life, not only distancing him from Nina, but effectively preventing them from reconciling:

Nina: [. . .] it’s not me that you want. It’s not me that you’re missing.

It’s being married. It’s being safe. Being known.

Mathew: I just want to tell you, that all the things you’re seeking, I think are possible within our marriage.

Nina: How do you know what I’m seeking? How can you be so sure that you know who I am and what I want?

Mathew: Because I know you. And there were never two people who are better suited.

Nina: Matt, you talk about changing. But I never get the feeling that you’re actively doing anything about it.

*Long pause*

Mathew: I suppose I don't really believe in it.

Nina: No. (93-94)

Mathew and Nina's break-up is indivisible from their differing world-views; for Mathew the marriage is indivisible from stasis. It is valuable for what it "is", and change is a threat, whereas for Nina, change is already occurring, and the potential for change within Mathew represents the only hope of reconciliation. In a very real way Mathew's politics have intruded upon his personal life. It is precisely his desire to separate "ideology" from "reality", and his inability to conceive of "reality" as alterable, which undoes his desire in the personal realm, thus rendering ideology and reality intrinsically linked, the personal and political inseparable. The play, then, at one level, functions as a rebuttal of Mathew's conservative belief in the primacy of "reality" over "ideological" concerns.

*Scenes from a Separation* also presents a much more pro-feminist message than Rayson's last play, *Falling from Grace*. In this play, Nina is able to move beyond the need for a man and to find a life outside of Mathew. She critiques the perception that marriage is the "natural" state for people to be in, and the implicit validation of her life that was attached to it:

'How come your marriage failed?' It's such an odd concept. Failure. I think that's how Mathew perceives it. He failed, or at least, 'we failed'. It implies of course that marriage itself is an achievement. And maybe it *is*, for some people, like working for the one insurance company for fifty years is an achievement. But you don't hear those people saying, 'I stayed with this company all my working life because it was the most rewarding, challenging, and exciting job I

could imagine myself doing.’ It’s actually about complacency and fear and habit. Lack of imagination. Masquerading as loyalty. (43)

Nina’s leaving of Mathew is the reverse of his wanting to stay. It is an embracing of change, an acknowledgement that “We’re actually selfish and mean-spirited”(77), but a belief, inspired partly by Lawrence, that life can be otherwise. She also rejects Sarah’s attempts to reunite her with Mathew: “I tell you how I’m feeling and you proceed to tell me that you know what’s best. The assumption being that what I’m feeling is not *legitimate*” (85). She fights the assumptions, based on stereotype, that she is leaving to be with Lawrence: “How many times can I say it? I’m not leaving one man for another. No-one, not even Lawrence, could believe I was making a choice for myself” (92). Nina represents a rejection of the privileging of the nuclear family and traditional heterosexual relationship evident in plays such as *Wallflowering*, *Falling from Grace* and *Honour*, arguing that life outside of these structures can be more fulfilling than that within: “I’m making a new life, Matt. I’m just beginning but it’s starting to find a shape. If we tried to begin again—if you moved back—it’d be about cowardice. On my part. It wouldn’t be an act of love” (94). Nina, in this play, is the character more able to see human behaviour as contingent and contextual, and thus able to adapt to change, and able to see that change or stasis are not goals in and of themselves, that every situation must be assessed on its merits, and that conformist, traditionalist notions of “the way life is” or “reality” can only limit and constrain such analysis.

*Scenes from a Separation* received positive reviews, and although most concentrated on the piece as a relationship drama, some reviewers touched on the broader themes. Chris Boyd claimed that “*Scenes from a Separation* is about so much more than this one triangle [. . .] It’s about generational changes, the sins of the

fathers, about class and education and social responsibility”(18). Helen Thomson also recognised the call for social engagement, writing of “Nina’s yearning for tenderness, idealism and altruism” and comparing the play to Murray-Smith’s play: “Where Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Honour* is intensely inward, searching for psychological patterns that might be called archetypal, Andrew Bovell and Hannie Rayson’s analysis of the same subject is more socially contextualised, defining the problem in terms of the present moment”(“Stylish Break-Up” 16). Similarly, the play’s recuperation of feminism was noted by Kate Herbert, who commented that “Even love is a victim of gravity. People stay through fear, not fidelity. How has it transpired that emotional cowardice is hailed as a virtue?” (19). Jack Hibberd linked this emancipation to previous eras’ values, writing of Nina “finding and defining her true precious self in the style of the 1970s”(19). In one of few slightly more negative reviews, Simon Hughes felt that the play didn’t go far enough: “Why is it not enough to simply prosper? Why are relationships doomed in a society that puts material things and the self before ideas and compassion? Why must art be more than simple representation? *Scenes from a Separation* is a beautifully devised and performed dissection of the chattering classes but I still hanker for that further dimension”(“Missing a Dimension” 18).

*Scenes from a Separation*, then, sees Hannie Rayson moving away from the conservative philosophies which permeate the mainstream drama of the early nineties. In this play, the binary between “ideology” and “reality”, and between “politics” and the personal, is deconstructed. Mathew’s cynicism about unselfishness, human nature and change are all shown to be debilitating with regard to his own relationship. In contrast, Nina comes to the realisation that change can be

a positive thing, and that relationships are not intrinsically valuable, but only as positive as a particular situation entails.

### **Competitive Tenderness (1996)**

Rayson's *Competitive Tenderness* satirises the rhetoric of economic rationalism and privatisation. In this play, downsizing is compared to weight loss in order to demonstrate its problematic nature. The play deconstructs the rhetoric of privatisation, and the conservative attitudes of the nineties regarding economics, and attacks on those who resist it are pushed into the realm of the ridiculous. There is also a sense of the need for rebellion, an attempt to change the system and to recover a sense of community. Ultimately, the play argues that economic rationalism, far from being "natural" or inevitable, is likely to create the context for its own downfall.

*Competitive Tenderness* is predominantly a farce, satirising the implementation of economic rationalist policy at a local council level. It sets up two types of characters: those who believe that council should serve and reinforce notions of community, and those who believe it must be tailored to follow the economic rationalist line. Local politician Farkley manages to manipulate Dawn into a senior management position at the suggestion of Rocko:

Rocko: [. . .] you can bet your bottom dollar she'll be a damn side better than any of those other bleeding heart dickheads they've put forward.

Farkley: What was Roly McKinnon like?

Rocko: He was a complete fucking idiot. You know one of those wet Lefties, droning on about ‘giving a voice to the community’.

Farkley: Oh Jesus. You wonder when these fuckwits are going to wake up.

Rocko: Well precisely. The thing is there isn’t a single person on their list, apart from her, who’s had any experience in the private sector.

Farkley: Well that’s hopeless. I mean what do they think government is? (*Competitive Tenderness* 13)

This passage critiques the conservative acceptance of privatisation by simultaneously juxtaposing the beliefs that privatisation is inherently at odds with concern for the community, and yet also that it is an intrinsic part of good government (itself a satiric notion in its playing with the private/public sector divide).

Brian, the mayor, immediately swallows this logic of privatisation, perhaps because of his infatuation with Dawn: “if I wasn’t a happily married man” (42), and accepts the need for downsizing: “The world of business has a lot to teach us about streamlining operations [. . .] About cost effectiveness [. . .] And competition, which is a reality in today’s world” (21). This link between Brian’s acceptance of the logic of economic rationalism and his attraction for Dawn reverses the conservative staple. Here it is economic rationalism that is accepted for superficial reasons. Ironically, Dawn’s experience in the “private” business world was in weight loss, an area at once divorced from the responsibilities of local council and eerily appropriate to her downsizing mission:

Now as you probably know, my management background is of course obesity. Obesity management. And when I sold my business empire



some months ago I thought, Dawn, after ten years in the business, you are not going to have to worry any more about weight control. But the funny thing is, as I've thought about Greater Burke and our quest to make this a greater city, I think there are issues here that we'd be wise to address. And like it or not, they are issues concerning organisational fat [. . .] in my experience when organisations run [inefficiently], you're not talking about belt tightening, you're talking stomach stapling. (22)

There is an interesting parallel here with Bob Ellis's book *First Abolish the Customer*, in which Ellis compares the logic of economic rationalism to the logic of an anorexic: "Less and less flesh on the bones, until only dead bones are left" (39).

The play goes on to point out some of the failings of this attitude, such as the circularity of cost-cutting as revenue is outsourced:

Delia: We sold our Parks and Gardens contract to New Zealand [. . .] they were much cheaper see. It's the Multi Nationals. They've got the game sewn up. 'Specially since they've moved into local government services.

Customer Two: And I s'ppose all the revenue that could have been fed back into Greater Burke—

Delia: Mmm. On a boat across the Tasman. Good isn't it? (19)

The "logic" of capitalism here touches on the absurd. The play also questions the myth of private source superiority:

Trev: Do they have to know how to do it?

Delia: No. They just have to be cheaper [. . .]

Trev: So it's like a big competition.

Kel: That's right.

Delia: Where the best person doesn't always win. (31)

This scenario questions the linking of economic rationalism with Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest, and the supposition that competition will necessarily lead to the best deal for the customer. Rather, Rayson suggests that the internal logic of economic competition has become so self-referential as to exclude the question of quality of service to the community at large. Similarly, the incestuous nature of "deals" between, for example, Dawn and Dragi (54) completely deconstructs the myth of the level playing field, revealing it as superficial rhetoric to mask baser motives, a reversal in many ways of the façade/reality binary of earlier, conservative plays.

In some ways, *Competitive Tenderness* echoes the plays of the early nineties which suggest that economic rationalism is a train that there is no stopping. However, the play is much more extreme in its farce than the comedy of *Money and Friends* or even *The John Wayne Principle*. In *Competitive Tenderness*, economic rationalism is pushed into the realm of the ridiculous, rendering it perhaps more akin to the satire of *The Front Room Boys* than any more recent works. The same might be said of the play's anti-leftist attitudes, such as Dawn's abuse of the protesters: "Repulsive scum! That's what you are. Human filth! [. . .] If I had my way, I'd firebomb the lot of them" (72-73) or the machinations of Farkley and Rocko, which transcend the more "realistic" characterisations of *Money and Friends* or (apart perhaps from Stafford) *The John Wayne Principle*, pushing instead into the form of caricature utilised by playwrights such as Hibberd and Romeril. If there is a sense of momentum behind the march of economic rationalism in the play, then, it is less the march of "natural" evolution, and more the downhill careening of a cartoon bus.

*Competitive Tenderness* also differs from the early nineties Economic Rationalism plays in that there is a more tangible sense of resistance, which, while not romanticised with regard to its effectiveness, is nevertheless shown to have quite concrete, tangible effects upon the right. This resistance is primarily represented in the play by Merle, who believes in the community values the new regime is so keen to ignore:

We want Greater Burke to be a great place to live. A place where people are cared for and helped [ . . . ] This is not just a stepping stone to moving on into some swankier suburb. They see themselves as Burke people. [ . . . ] Dawn Snow wants to institute a program that will destroy everything we've set up, just so she can prove she's capable of delivering up the savings. Which is the only thing Farkley's interested in. (84)

Protests and resistance by the public do force Farkley to modify his stance slightly in order to save his own hide: "now confidence has been restored, we are in a position to turn our attention to the social fabric" (74), although this only leads to further administrative and rhetorical sleight-of-hand. Eventually, the circumstances lead those who resist; Merle, Delia and Piggy, to revolutionary extremes. Merle claims:

You and I have always played by the rules. We have always acted with integrity and great humanity. We have always worked within the system because of an unshakeable belief that democracy and justice always triumph. But, my friends, last night my faith was shattered. Piggy. Delia. The terrible truth is that there are no longer rules. We find ourselves at the end of the millennium living and working in a

fascist dictatorship and there is no other option but to choose...

terrorism. (126)

Of course, given that the play is a farce, their rebellion is portrayed to a large extent in comic terms. However, the very fact that a number of the play's most sympathetic characters attempt to overthrow the system and, to a limited degree, meet with success distinguishes it from the critical portrayals of systemic rebellion in the drama since the New Wave. The play's final image is somewhat ambiguous:

*[Suddenly we hear barking. And Kenny [Dawn's dog] races onto the stage, barking excitedly at DAWN. TREV races back onto the stage, closes his eyes and points a gun.]*

[Dawn]: Kenny! Kenny!

*[A loud gun shot rings out. Blackout.]* (130)

There is at the very least a suggestion that Dawn has been shot. It is worth noting that throughout the play, Trev, the dog-catcher, has struggled with his previous practice of releasing the dogs he has caught, due to his moral struggle with killing them, in the light of the new economic rationalist regime, which is incompatible with such an economically unsound practice. Trev's eventual capitulation intersects with the direct effect of this discourse on Dawn's personal life via the one creature she cares for in Kenny, her dog. That this (potentially) leads to her death while at the point of ascendancy (she is about to be appointed Lord Mayor) is, in true farcical style, a satiric physicalisation of the political argument that capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction. Resistance in this play, then, is portrayed as necessary, as positive and potentially as inevitable. In this regard one might suggest that *Competitive Tenderness* contains within it those radical political arguments that

Australian mainstream drama appeared to have rejected ever since the end of the heyday of the New Wave.

*Competitive Tenderness* received critical reviews, with even positive reviews such as Stephen Rhys's commenting that the play was "Silly but highly entertaining"(8). Bryce Hallett commented critically that "*Competitive Tenderness* is a superficial and confused attempt at farce; a laboured work with more seams than the menswear department at Myer and more stereotypes than the shop floor of television's *Are You Being Served?*"(9). Dina Ross commented similarly that "Rayson has simply penned a gaggle of stereotypes", and wondered if "To capture the full impact of local government change, maybe what is needed is not a comedy-- but a tragedy"(9). Helen Thomson asked similarly: "Where is the fury? Where is the anger-- the clenched fists raised to the heavens-- the debate, the dissent? I suspect Hannie Rayson is dismayed, if not enraged by the state of local government in Victoria, but her farce invites us to comfortably laugh along, not leap into action"("Rayson's Faculty Farce Fails to Engage" 7) Despite this, the play did quite well at the box office, being Playbox's second-most successful play of the season("Just to Clarify That Point").

*Competitive Tenderness*, like Williamson's work of the late nineties, takes economic rationalism head on and questions its assumptions of its own "rationality". The discourse and logic of privatisation and competition are pushed into the realm of the absurd, displaying their farcical nature as well as undermining the sense of them as a "natural" development and therefore unalterable. The play also provides a sense that resistance to these developments is not merely desirable, but is necessary and, in the long term, perhaps inevitable, as the practices of economic rationalism contain both the potential for inciting those with a less conservative view of community, or,

more darkly, the potential to set the dominant system, through its actions, on a course for self-destruction.

### **Life After George (2000)**

Like David Williamson's *The Great Man*, Hannie Rayson's *Life After George* deals with the legacy of a member of the Boomer generation, in particular on his family. Like Jack in the former play, Rayson's George is an archetypal Boomer, who believes in class revolution. Like Jack, too, he is portrayed as imperfect and the play critiques any romanticising of the sixties. However, again, also, his ideals are portrayed as something valuable which has since been lost. George fights against the economic pragmatism model of universities, and believes in changing the system rather than working within it. During the course of the play his daughter Ana overcomes her cynicism toward the ideals of the sixties and comes to recognise the need for class-based resistance and the necessity of appropriating George's ideals and hope to form a better future. Ultimately *Life After George* serves as a call to recover the idealism spurned by the nineties' conservatism.

George is portrayed as a product of the sixties, and is a proponent of ideals of class revolution which abounded at the time:

Thirty thousand workers were in the street on Friday night [. . .]  
These are men whose work in factories sentences them to a life of  
mind-numbing, body-mutilating enslavement to a machine that will  
render them cripples by the time they're fifty. They were seeing—  
glimpsing, for the first time—the possibility that with boldness and

imagination they could just possibly defy their destinies. (*Life after George* 10)

George's social conscience is problematised as the play moves on, much the same as Jack's is in *The Great Man*. His first wife Beatrix claims that "When my marriage to George was in its death throes, it came as a very deep shock to me that Lefties could be as indifferent to other people's suffering as any bull-necked capitalist" (11).

Similarly, she claims that he deserted his dying mother, whereas even "your average corporate warrior" would have made an effort (11). The romanticising of the sixties is critiqued. Ana says "You know, people say 'It is so easy to be cynical about the sixties', but I think it's easier still to be romantic" (7), while Poppy is writing her thesis on "'Social nostalgia'. Basically she's critiquing people like us for our nostalgia for the seventies" (26). This critique of sixties and seventies nostalgia appears to be justified by the actions of the characters, such as George's above.

Poppy comments similarly on Lindsay's selling-out to corporate interests and the economic rationalist approach to education: "This is why baby boomers suck. For all the misty-eyed reminiscence about demos and crusades and sit-ins—they were just dance parties without the dancing. I mean, let's face it. You could believe it meant something, if that generation were setting a different agenda now. But they're not [ . . . ] I bet Lindsay thinks her rise up the career ladder is a blow for feminism" (47). In this respect, *Life After George* reflects many of the arguments against the Boomer generation which emerged in the early nineties, where ideals for social change are seen as hypocritical or doomed facades which have since crumbled in the wake of "reality", and the concurrent loss of idealism with regard to social change in an economic rationalist world.

A telling difference in the portrayal of old leftists in this play, as in *The Great Man*, is that they are represented not as dominant forces, but as besieged bastions amid a changed world, relics, indeed, even amongst the majority of their own generations, who no longer adhere to the leftist world-view. While early nineties discourse depicts the Boomer leftists as a monolith of power, in these plays they emerge as dying ideologies, more similar in function to characters such as Sewell's Morty or Williamson's Col, though of different ideological stripes. And ultimately, for all of their faults, the idealism of George, like that of Jack, is portrayed not as a faded "unrealistic" ideology, but as something valuable which has slipped by the wayside. George comments that we need to "think hard about how we write about the sixties and seventies [ . . . ] because we need to understand what we've lost. We need to understand that, at the dawn of the new millennium, the most precious and profound human capacity is being spoiled. And smothered. And strangled. Do you know what I'm talking about? I'm talking about the human capacity for idealism" (13).

The depiction of the changes within the university system illustrate this. Lindsay represents the loss of ideals in favour of the "reality" of economics in the education sector, her defence of the introduction of full fee paying places at the new Institute of Global Studies mirroring the defence which the Howard government would mount in favour of full-fee paying university places in the years to come: "George, this is not denying an opportunity to a single person, you realise. This is an addition to the University", and claiming that scholarships will be available. George says:

You'll let a handful of poor kids over the drawbridge? Is that it? And when those kids make it, the conservative elite say, 'See?! Regardless



of class, anyone in this country is able to achieve success if they sweat at it.' And if some kid from the western suburbs can do well, why can't all of them? And there follows the great conservative lie: 'It must be because all the others are lazy and unmotivated. They don't know the meaning of hard work. (45)

This speech critiques the inadequacy of scholarships as a compensation for the inequalities produced by linking education to socio-economic status, as well as the nineties' blame-the-victim rhetoric.

George also criticises the increasingly vocational focus of universities, another result of the economic rationalist agenda, as he points out: "You've stopped thinking about them as students [. . .] They're all customers to you" (59). Lindsay again echoes the conservative discourse, telling him "Your elitism doesn't wash anymore" (58). She defends herself by reverting to the necessity of recognising the economic "reality" of supply and demand over "ideological" concerns, claiming of her students: "Her demands are fairly straightforward, George. She wants a job at the end of it [. . .] Within twelve months, I would say, it is highly likely that your Department will close. What are your strategies, George?" He replies: "That's the wrong question, Professor. You ask, 'How do we implement the corporate agenda?' The real question is: 'How do we fight it?'" (59) Change is reinstated as a valid goal; economic "reality" is not beyond challenge. While the conservative plays of the early nineties progressively deconstruct the Boomers' idealism, this play, like *The Great Man*, starts from a position of disillusionment and then progressively reveals these "dying" ideals' continued currency, however much they may be minority voices, in contemporary society. George represents the last remnants of idealism in an increasingly economic rationalist world.

That these ideals are relevant to contemporary society, and not an anachronism, is depicted through the character of Ana, George's daughter. Ana starts off cynical about the Sixties. At one point, she relates her encounter with a man reading a book by her father: "I said, 'What are you reading that crap for?' And he said, 'Moral courage'. He was reading your book for moral courage". George admits he hoped she'd adopt his morality. She asks "Why would I want to do that? When it didn't extend to taking proper care of the people you love and who loved you?" (77). As the play progresses, though, she emerges as the play's representative of his legacy in the face of the various revisions by his former wives. She is cynical about the politics of all three, commenting of mother Beatrix "she's got no politics" (54), while claiming of the liberal corporate or individualist "postmodern cyber-chick" feminism of Lindsay and Poppy: "You [Poppy] and Lindsay. You're just the same. You use politics to cover for you. You take the moral high ground, but really you're just being manipulative" (72). Here she clearly links the less leftist politics of the others with superficiality, whilst propounding the need for a class-based politics instead: "There comes a time to organise. I thought at the very least you would have learnt that from Dad. Mobilise your supporters. Don't just indulge yourself in the solitary gesture" (73). Ana, then, comes to realise the value of George's politics and the politics of the sixties over more recent, conservative beliefs.

As with *The Great Man*, it is in the legacy of the Sixties that the play's hope lies; not in the deceased Boomer characters, but in the impact of their idealism on those still alive. By the time of George's funeral, Ana has accepted both George's faults and his "moral courage", and is committed to carrying the torch of his idealism into the future:

My father taught us to marvel at the power of ideas. But he was committed to the principle that ideas and knowledge belong to everyone. To all of us. To honour humanity. In everything he wrote there is one recurring truth: that the people have the capacity to be the authors of their own history and their own destiny. I loved him. We all loved him [. . .] But we can no longer be defined by being his wives, his children or his friends. Nor do we find definition by endless self-scrutiny. That way lies the very loneliness that defines our age; the very selfish individualism which George fought to expose. We are defined by our shared humanity. And we are inspired by the qualities which Peter George embodied—hopefulness and moral courage. This is my first letter to the future. (80)

*Life After George*, then, like *The Great Man*, explicitly critiques the conservative politics of the nineties and attempts to recoup the values of the sixties, not in a nostalgic sense, but in an attempt to forge a better future.

*Life After George* was an enormous success, and this is reflected in its reviews. Bryce Hallett claimed that:

The play is relevant, argumentative, truthful, sardonic and ultimately tender. It prizes a free and liberal education, and rails against the corporatisation of universities, not in dogmatic terms, but in the sweep of constantly sweeping perspectives and the toll the corporate warrior culture and economic rationalism are taking [. . .] As it darts between the '70s and '90s, *Life After George* captures a sense of the fluorescent glow of idealism and the intellectual, spiritual value of

free expression up against fizzing losses and burnout. (“A Great Man, George Stands Tall” 15)

Colin Rose agreed, claiming “Spiky social commentary on the outside, a witty and compassionate take on love’s complications on the inside: it’s this combination which makes *Life After George* so special” (“Three Ages of Man” 13), while Carrie Kablean praised the play for “exposing without haranguing the shifts and difficulties in feminist attitudes” (“Action Swivels Smoothly” 133). The play inspired standing ovations (Brown 5) and broke box-office records (Coslovich 4). Rayson was understandably pleased by the reaction, claiming “I really think the response to this play is about an appetite to hear a call for moral courage” (Coslovich 4).

Hannie Rayson’s *Life After George* functions as an examination of the sixties’ legacy, and in contrast to earlier plays, it offers a positive view. Though George is portrayed as not perfect, and the Boomers as having to some extent sold out their ideals, there is nevertheless a sense that the idealism of the sixties represents something valuable lost, in contrast to the superficial economic focus of nineties conservatism. Through the character of Ana, the play recognises that, while avoiding nostalgia for the past, elements of the sixties, such as compassion and class-based analysis, can be recovered and incorporated into positive forward-looking ideals.

### **Inheritance (2003)**

Hannie Rayson’s most recent play, *Inheritance*, again deals with a dying patriarch, but uses this to examine a variety of issues regarding prejudice in contemporary rural

Australia. The play deals with the debate following an aging farmer's death, as to what will happen to his family's farm. The conflict brings to the surface deep-seated family tensions, as well as tensions within the community. Rayson critiques a number of conservative prejudices, such as homophobia, racism, anti-feminism, attacks on "political correctness", blame-the-victim rhetoric, the rejection of compassion and the desire to preserve "traditional" family ideals. She portrays the way in which these attitudes are passed on to younger generations. Ultimately, almost all of the characters are portrayed as in some way oppressed in this play, but most of them are unable or unwilling to recognise that others are oppressed beside themselves. The play's ultimate critique, then, is not of any particular group, but of the lack of community, compassion and solidarity amongst the oppressed, and the need for these people to band together rather than turn on one another. In this regard it is more attuned to sixties notions of class revolt and a critical comment on the nineties' turn toward competitive individualism.

In *Inheritance*, Rayson moves from the inner city middle class characters of her previous dramas to tackle the life of rural Australia. *Inheritance* deals again with the death of a family patriarch, but this time his legacy is more literally the play's concern, as his wife and her sister and their families debate the way in which the property is to be passed on. Rayson uses the central dilemma of inheritance and its implications to touch on issues of broader significance to Australia in the early twenty-first century.

*Inheritance's* characters represent a number of different examples of city and country life and thought. The play draws out a number of the ideological divides and unquestioned prejudices which are broadly accepted in rural life. William, Farley and Dibs's gay son comments that "Gay men are not welcome in Rushton. Trust me

on this” (*Inheritance* 10), a belief which is reinforced by comments by Maureen: “Oh, Christ. It’s the Pansy Boy”( 31), and by his own parents’ inability to see beyond his sexuality: “As if you ever showed yourself to be anything—[. . .] Anything. Anything at all but a—[. . .] Obviously there are people in this world who can’t overcome their own... weakness” (23), as well as reactions to Julia’s son Felix (46). Feminism fares little better with Julia’s divorce being blamed in true conservative fashion on her unwillingness to work at it: “I don’t think Julia tried hard enough. That’s the thing with young women: too selfish by half” (5). This attitude, similar to that critiqued by Nina in *Scenes from a Separation*; that marriage should be preserved and honoured no matter what its problems, echoes the rhetoric of Liberal Party minister Tony Abbott concerning divorce; that it is based on a selfish refusal to work at problems, an attitude rendered particularly ridiculous by Julia’s revelation of the reason for the break-up:

Dibs: I wish you’d stayed married to Hamish.

Julia: Mum, Hamish is a homosexual.

Dibs: People do cope with all sorts of difficulties in marriage.

Julia: He has sex with men.

Dibs: Maybe you didn’t try hard enough. (69)

In this regard the rural attitudes portrayed reflect the return to “traditional” structures of family life and sexuality which were part of the early nineties’ reaction against the “politically correct” attempts to critique these institutions.

By far the most prominent critique though is reserved for the play’s rural characters’ attitudes towards race. The play is quite savage in its portrayal of unthinking racism: “I still can’t believe we call him *Nugget* [. . .] It’s like calling him Coon” (19); “You’ll never guess what she’s done [. . .] She’s gone and asked the

wogs” (13), and the ease with which these attitudes are passed on, for example when Ashleigh asks her parents for information:

Ashleigh: What do coons mean when they say the land is ‘my mother’?

Brianna: Don’t call them that!

Ashleigh: What?

Lyle: It’s like us saying we believe in the Easter Bunny.

Maureen: Except the Easter Bunny doesn’t qualify you to get millions of acres of crown land.

Brianna: That’s just racist. You are so racist.

Maureen: Look. Aboriginal people themselves, don’t believe all that stuff. It’s your university types and do-gooders from the city, they’re the ones who keep peddling this tribal oogy-boogy.

(38-39)

Maureen eventually emerges as a Pauline Hanson-style independent political figure, arguing for the rights of country people, but echoing the conservative early nineties rhetoric in her argument that fighting the effects of economic rationalism is not to occur through considerations of social justice, but rather by the victims picking themselves up by the bootstraps in an oversimplified depiction of change that relies at least partly on simplistic labelling of targets of blame and use of a divisive rhetoric that rejects compassion, all evident in her speech:

Do you know why some of us can’t get the phone to work? Why we drive every second day on roads that are not safe? Why our children are being educated in second-rate schools? Do you? I’ll tell you why. We’re too bloody nice. That’s why. [. . .] Let me tell you a true story.

One night, a gang of bikies come hooning into Rushton. Stirring up trouble, making a helluva racket. I had this young fella working with me in the pub and he says to me, “Maureen,” he says, “they’re gonna trash this place”. And I thought, “Bugger that. I am not going to be intimidated by a band of thugs.” So I march over to this big hairy bloke in a leather vest with tats all over him and I say, “Out!” I say, “You heard me. On yer bike. Now!” He stares at me long and hard, this creep and then he says, “Yes, Ma’am” [ . . . ] My friends, we made this country. And we’re not about to be bullied by foreign interests who are no different to those bikies. I’m talking about the multinationals. I’m talking about those foreign-owned banks. And I’m talking about every Asian, Moslem and Hottentot who come here and refuse to sign up to the Australian Way of Life. There are women who come to this country who are not prepared to show their faces. Well I say, “Don’t show your face around here”. My friends, this is Australia, where people say g’day to each other in the street and lend a hand when they see a mate in trouble [ . . . ] You know me. I’m Maureen Delaney. (61)

This speech combines racist diatribe with clichés of personal empowerment, tantamount to blame-the-victim rhetoric, and anti-communal sentiment. As well as satirising some of the typical rhetorical devices of conservative discourse, it also teases out one of the key themes of the play, the ability of many of the characters to recognise their own oppression and yet to ignore or downplay the oppression of others. The key distinction is hinted at by Felix in his debate with Maureen: “It’s



either racism or self-interest. Which one is it?" (85). Maureen's desire for change is not motivated by a desire for social equity, but by self-interest.

This critique is not reserved for rural characters: Dibs' son William acts in just as self-centred a manner in his desire to sell the farm to help his own relationship, and his collusion with Dibs to deny Aboriginal half-brother Nugget's legitimate claim to inheritance. Conversely, the rural characters are not demonised. The plight of Lyle's family evokes sympathy: "Dad could tell you every tree, every hill. Every creek. We belong here too [. . .] It's like whatever decision Dad makes, it doesn't work out. But it's not his fault. Yesterday I saw him in the pigeon loft and he was crying" (91). Rayson makes clear the link between Lyle's plight and economic rationalism in the form of his swallowing its rhetoric: "'Get big or get out.' Get big, fat and hard [. . .] big car, big ideas, big mortgage" (88-89), and its poor fit, as pointed out by his daughter Brianna's seemingly innocent application of Lyle's pigeon-training rhetoric to her grandfather's suicide: "Maybe he put in the work and didn't get the rewards" (30).

This recognition, however, is reserved for the audience rather than the play's characters. The play's characters remain predominantly unable to sympathise with those who are different to themselves. Girlie's family expects recognition of the fact that their grandparents "broke their backs clearing this country" (55), but are unable to recognise the claims of the land's traditional owners (39). Maureen's political rhetoric echoes mainstream political rhetoric criticising refugees, yet her family finds itself in a comparable position, as is recognised (inadvertently or otherwise) by both Felix: "Now the asylum seekers have moved in" (84), and Lyle, who refers to himself as "A fucking refugee" (89). Dibs and Girlie's decision to deny Nugget his

rights to the land ultimately leads not to the farm's continuing in the family's name, but to its sale to finance Maureen's political ambitions. The message is clear: unless both rural and city dwellers are willing to recognise all forms of oppression, not just those which co-incide with their immediate self-interest, positive change will not occur and the future will continue to be owned by those who wield power and use it to divide the oppressed. At heart, *Inheritance* is a call for compassion and for solidarity.

*Inheritance* was another success for Rayson, with reviewers mostly positive, focusing on the play's engagement with racism and the Hanson phenomenon. Helen Thomson wrote that "The fraught question of who gets the farm is embedded as a subtext that goes back to terra nullius and forward to Mabo" ("Inheriting the Politics of Fear and Envy" 4), while Narelle Harris commented that "The issue of inheritance isn't restricted to the passing of property from one generation to the next. It also deals with the situations, attitudes and baggage we inherit from the personalities of our forebears" ("*Inheritance*"). Thomson commented on the play's scope: "If the play has a fault, it is that it tackles too much, raises too many issues; but what a forgivable lapse this is in a contemporary theatre culture that is so often disappointingly minimalist" ("Inheriting the Politics of Fear and Envy" 4). Michael Bodey, for one, was starting to tire of "inheritance" plays: "Thematically, a whole raft of Australian plays-- including Rayson's *Life After George* and Williamson's *Up for Grabs*-- have focussed upon legacies and asset carve-ups. Baby Boomers are so self-absorbed" ("Inheritance Pays Off" 65)

*Inheritance* confronts a number of the hallmarks of conservatism, such as homophobia, racism, sexism, anti-feminism, anti-"political-correctness", blaming-the-victim, the rejection of compassion and the emphasis on traditional relationships,

and critiques them. The play argues ultimately for the need for cooperation rather than division, as each of the play's oppressed characters is unable to recognise the similarities between their plight and the oppression of others. As a result, the oppressed succeed only in blaming each other, a clear point of comparison to nineties conservatism. *Inheritance* is thus a call for a return to idealism, once again, for compassion toward others and sense of community to improve the lives of all.

Hannie Rayson's output in the late nineties displays a similar attack on conservatism to that of Williamson. In *Scenes from a Separation* (with Andrew Bovell), *Competitive Tenderness*, *Life After George* and *Inheritance*, Rayson critiques the reliance on tradition, acceptance of economic rationalist rhetoric, and rejection of compassion, idealism and community which form the staples of nineties conservatism. Instead she offers arguments for belief in change, resistance, kindness, fighting for equity, and solidarity between the oppressed. In this regard her work in this period signals a firm move away from Australian drama's conservatism of the early decade, toward a more critical outlook.

## **Chapter Ten. Joanna Murray-Smith, Stephen Sewell.**

Similar tendencies can be discerned in the work of both Joanna Murray-Smith and Stephen Sewell. In these works, portrayals of “traditional”, insular families and relationships are subverted. In each of these plays, it is the conservatives, those who espouse the turning away from social engagement toward competitive acquisition, who are portrayed as living a lie. Economic rationalist ideology is critiqued and seen as both unfulfilling and, at times, dangerous in its blindness. In contrast, these plays depict social engagement and compassion as valuable and change as a necessary and positive thing.

### **Nightfall (1999)**

Joanna Murray-Smith's *Nightfall* deals with the return of a long-lost child, just as *Love Child* did. However, it is a very different play ideologically. In this play, it is the parents, Edward and Emily, who represent conservative attitudes: the traditional family unit, the cynicism toward optimism and ideals, the belief that their child's unhappiness is merely “fashionable” pique. As the play progresses, though, these beliefs are torn down. In contrast to *Love Child*, in this play it is the conservatives who are hiding behind the façade. It emerges that Cora's suffering *is* real, and that the traditional nuclear family is far from the idealised unit it pretends to be. The father, Edward, is shown as abusive, and this is linked to his attempt to conform to economic rationalism and its philosophy of competitive acquisition, as well as his

inability to accept the value of compassion. In contrast, the play posits Cora's friend Kate, who fights for a morality based on the need to acknowledge and combat injustice in order to move on and survive. *Nightfall* is thus a far more radical play than the author's earlier work.

*Nightfall* deals with some of the themes of Murray-Smith's earlier work, such as passion, hypocrisy, and façades, but offers a very different view of them. The plot deals with parents Edward and Emily, whose child Cora has, many years ago, simply disappeared with no explanation. They have received a call from her, asking to meet with them. Instead of Cora, though, her apparent friend, Kate, turns up, and the play deals with the ensuing discussion between the three.

At the beginning of the play there is very little revealed regarding Cora's reasons for leaving. Edward and Emily conform to some of the conservative notions evident in Murray-Smith's earlier work. They believe that life centres around the nuclear family. Emily comments that after giving birth: "It seemed to me I had finally found some groove in the universe [. . .] I suddenly knew how it was that great problems were solved, great poetry written—they were simply expressions of what it was to experience life as something compelling and intense" (*Nightfall* 7). They believe also that faith in humanity is doomed to be disillusioned, as evident in Emily's comment that:

she never seemed safe there [. . .] But was it a premonition? To be so suspicious of happiness? [. . .] The end of—innocence. That's the only word I can—That somehow our life was dependent on the unspoken assumption that goodness prevails. That one's destiny has a moral compass. But that eventually something would happen. And from then on, we would become cynical. (10)

Unlike *Honour* or *Redemption*, however, the nuclear ideal and the suspicion of the goodness of the world is not presented as “genuine” in contrast to the ideological facades of others. On the contrary, in *Nightfall*, it is the characters of Edward and Emily who represent the façade. They constantly resort to pretence in order to deal with the loss of their daughter: “A little pretence. Sometimes one rises to one’s own charade and there’s nothing wrong with that! [. . .] People scoff at ritual. The repetition of things is deemed . . . tame. As if all our little rules and conventions are simply protection against . . . a brutal world. Well, perhaps they are. And so what? Shouldn’t we comfort ourselves?” (17-18). This awareness that their life is a charade renders conservative attitudes, in this play, as unstable and reliant on deception, just as radical attitudes were portrayed in *Love Child*.

Initially, too, there seem to be echoes of the conservative nature of early nineties discourse in the characters’ descriptions of Cora. Just as conservative critics paint the left as wilfully miserable, seeking out elements of Western society to criticise due to their “moral superiority complex” rather than any true problems, so Cora is portrayed as wilfully unhappy. Kate comments that “It’s important for Cora to be righteous” (21), and her parents see her as fashionably dissatisfied with their idyllic existence, commenting that: “She resisted feeling blessed—Why do fortunate children fear their good fortune? They worry that it makes them uninteresting” (8), and that: “perhaps she was too—loved [. . .] Felt compromised by—the sweetness [. . .] You see, we were so ‘right’. So *right*. And she was attracted to—what we were not” (24). They claim that “Cora considered happiness . . . insipid. She chose otherwise” (18). Cora is portrayed by her parents as “unnaturally” unhappy, abandoning the happiness provided by an insular nuclear family not due to any real

grievance, but due to fashionable posturing, a resistance to the happiness that such a traditional family would no doubt supply.

As the play progresses it becomes clear that the façade of Edward and Emily is more than just a barrier to protect them from the emotional effects of their daughter's leaving. It is revealed that Cora's reasons for leaving were far from those cited by her parents. Hence their desire to believe in their own normalcy:

Emily: My husband is not a—he is not a—He is not the kind of  
man—I've been married to him for twenty-nine years [. . .]  
He's the kindest and gentlest of—[. . .] And thoroughly  
normal.

Kate: Is 'normal' a defence. You tell me, is it good to be normal? [. . .]  
.] *This is normal*. What I'm talking about. (38)

*Nightfall* questions the notion that adherence to the norm is necessarily a positive thing. In this case the insinuation is that abuse is part of the norm, part of "tradition" and the system, and therefore these institutions are not any kind of comfort or shelter. Edward and Emily's blame-the-victim rhetoric is slowly torn away as the truth emerges. The truth that Cora *is* a victim, and that the assignation of her unhappiness to fashionable pique is merely their attempt to mask the attempt they make to reassert their "happy" normal charade. *Nightfall*, then, presents a very different attitude to *Honour* or *Redemption*, despite the similarities of topic matter. In *Nightfall* the nuclear family is deconstructed rather than reified, and the reality/illusion dichotomy the reverse of that in *Redemption*. Here it is the conservative parents who are portrayed as living a lie, while daughter Cora and her friend Kate, with their recognition of injustice and attempts to deal with life's

unhappier problems rather than hiding behind conformity and tradition, represent “truth”.

The change from *Redemption*'s insular apolitical attitude toward a recognition of the need for social justice is also evident in the character of Edward, who is portrayed as a victim of the ethos of economic rationalism:

Kate: Edward Kingsley. An Ivy League MBA at twenty-three. A man certain of his destiny, comfortable in an Italian suit, perfectly pitched in the working arena between a responsible conservatism and a youthful openness to reform. Youngest Managing Director in the history of the company. Suddenly stranded [. . .]

Edward: Some little, jumped-up nitwit in a double-breasted suit is using phrases like ‘multi-skilling’, brochures of new-model Saabs on his desk, and you’re out the door, thank you very much! (33)

Like Williamson’s Sam and Greg, Edward has tried to live his life according to economic rationalist ideals, but has failed to make the top of the ladder. His competitive ideals, furthermore, will not allow him to accept the potential comfort offered by the compassion or solidarity of others: “That’s very nice of you, Ms Saskell, but to tell you the truth I abhor the camaraderie of the aggrieved” (26). It is not merely Edward’s distress at being dismissed that leads to his actions, however. It is the fact that the attitudes of economic rationalism continue to pervade his life. Kate points out Edward’s rhetoric of acquisition: “This is *my* house and *my* child’. Do you listen to your husband?” (39). This attitude is evident in Edward’s eventual admission of his abuse of Cora: “Cora is such a beauty—Yes, yes that’s right—And



it wasn't possible—it simply wasn't possible to resist... to resist the chance of—*owning—her*” (48). Edward's abuse of power is explicitly linked to the ethos of economic rationalism.

In the face of these attitudes Kate offers a reaffirmation of the leftist attitudes previously disowned by so many authors. In sharp contrast to the undermining of John in *Sanctuary*, Kate's moral ferocity is here upheld:

Edward: Sometimes I think to understand a thing is simply to understand that it is always in motion. Tell me this [. . .] Do you ever stop? Do you sometimes, in a strange, unruly moment, ask yourself: What if? What if—When all is said and done—What if I'm wrong?

*Silence.*

Kate: No. (40)

The fact that it is Kate, and not Cora, who confronts Edward and Emily, reinforces the notion of social justice, of a sense of responsibility to the world beyond oneself, rather than rebellion through simple self-interest. This is where the play offers the hope missing from *Redemption*:

Emily: [. . .] You cannot see the world so bleakly! What do you have left?

Kate: Truth.

Emily: What do you have to believe in if you see the world that way?

Kate: You believe in righting it. (38)

The play's final lines offer hope for the future in the search for truth, the recognition of past wrongs. Following his admission, Edward comments that “if something is never said—it begins to—it starts to appear to you—as a ‘figment’—as something

one might have imagined once. Yes. [*Beat.*] And now—?”, immediately after which the doorbell rings (48). The message is clear; as a society we must confront our mistakes and our failings if we are to move on. In the climate of the late nineties under the Howard government, with its blame-the-victim mentality and its refusal to deal with past wrongs such as the Stolen Generations, *Nightfall* offers a message that is far from conservative fodder.

*Nightfall* received mostly positive reviews, although the “truth” or otherwise of Kate’s accusation was treated as ambiguous. Carrie Kablean asked “Is what emerges the truth? Make up your own mind. You can’t argue with a memory, declares Kate [. . .] But why not? What about all these repressed-memory stories?” (“Unquiet Nightfall of Restless Souls” 127). Catherine Lambert, while noting that the play “unsettles the foundations of family life”, claimed that “this play remains, gratefully, free of judgement and no one is condemned” (“Shaking the Family Tree” 93). Colin Rose, while liking the play, clearly sided with Emily and Edward, noting “the perverse pleasure Kate takes in torturing them-- a pleasure she hides behind a front of indignation and self-righteousness” (“No Bard Feelings” 13). Clearly, then, the play’s critique of conservatism was, at least in this production, less than obvious. Murray-Smith remained tight-lipped in interviews about her intent regarding the “truth” of the play’s accusations. However, her comment that “it’s a play about how love becomes corrupted through a long period of time in terms of making allowances for each other’s frailties” (Rose, “Painful Memories” 11) might suggest an acknowledgement of the reality of Edward’s crime and his and Emily’s denial. In any case, reviewers seemed to focus on the play as a mystery, rather than its political implications. Of the unfavourable reviews, Michael Bodey’s is most strident: “Its

stagey, unrealistic dialogue, limited theatricality and bourgeois intent conspire to make this a night of theatre for the over-45s only” (“Played Out” 109).

*Nightfall* portrays a vision of domestic harmony, of “traditional” values in a nuclear family, cynical and inward-looking, opposed to “morally righteous” resistance to privilege, depicted as a fashionable choice rather than as the result of any wrong-doing. As the play progresses, though, these conservative notions are overturned, as it is revealed that Edward’s abuse of Cora is in fact real, that the “traditional” family unit does not equate with safety or happiness, that it is the conservatives who hide behind a “façade” to mask their crimes, and that “truth” lies in recognising the abuses of power that result from such attitudes as economic rationalism, and attempting to right them. In this way, *Nightfall* is a significantly different play ideologically to Murray-Smith’s earlier work in the nineties.

### **Rapture (2002)**

*Rapture*, similarly, deals with an insular couple, Tom and Eve, who are cynical about engaging with the world. They prioritise the ideal of the nuclear family, tradition and resistance to change. They are in favour of capitalism and competition. Tom, in particular, is unable to understand their friends, Henny and Harry, who throw in their successful careers. Tom is unable to accept their compassion, believing helping others to be a façade in contrast to the capitalist “reality”. As the play progresses, first Henny and Harry, and then Tom’s wife Eve, come to question his attitude, and ultimately it is Tom’s attitude, not theirs, which is critiqued as a fashionable mask, while compassion and social justice are portrayed not as false but as antidotes to the

superficiality of economic consumerism. The play promotes engagement with the world and the need for social change.

*Rapture*, like several of the plays above, deals with notions of reality and mask, of superficiality and what lies beneath. At the play's beginning, Eve and Tom's relationship appears to embody the notion of the insular, capitalist lifestyle. They epitomise Henny's opening catchcry: "Style. What else is there?" (*Rapture* 2). Eve comments that she previously "thought that anything was possible"(5) but that "the things one once thought of as attractive possibilities aren't that attractive anymore [. . .] Every aspect of character was forced to explain itself. Socialism. Buddhism. Environmentalism. [*Beat.*] Now I'm perfectly certain there is no ideology on Earth more gripping than fashion" (6). Eve and Tom, then, represent the conservative cynicism toward positive social change. Their relationship is defined by the comfort of rituals of domesticity and consumerism. When Dan asks after her marriage, Eve replies: "I suppose it's... what it ought to be. Two people deciding whether the new door handles should be chrome or matt. 'Chrome is sharper', says he. 'Matt is subtler', says I. 'Tim and Alison have matt', says he. 'Then so must we', says I, 'since we must all have the same. Everyone of us. In our houses. We must all have the same or What Might Happen?'" (8). Despite the edge of critique, it is clear that Eve to at least some extent takes comfort in these consumerist actions. She is afraid to venture beyond the insularity of their relationship and its comforting rituals: "All this fuss about paedophiles on every street corner, when what every mother fears the most is in nearly every room of every house of every street. These little boxes. These mad little boxes full of stories they can't wait to spill. Mayhem. Disaster. Misery. Is there anything more terrifying than the sound of a telephone?"

(9). Insularity, then, is a protection against the danger of outside. As in *Sweet Phoebe*, Eve sees that no good can come from social engagement, only harm.

Tom too believes that happiness lies in looking inward rather than looking out: “I like the TV. I like it in here. It’s better than out there” (42), and approves of the capitalist lifestyle: “Equality’s drastically overrated. I *like* the fact that there are fat cats smoking cigars in penthouses while low-lifes clean windcreens at intersections beneath them [ . . . ] Hate, envy, malice... these are the things that make life interesting [ . . . ] Life’s unfair and that’s a good thing” (13). For Tom, cynicism toward social engagement is taken to the conservative extreme, to a justification of selfish greed and competition.

Into the setting are introduced old friends Harry and Henny, who, it emerges, have undergone something of a conversion from their earlier lives as a real estate agent and celebrity cook. Henny reveals that following a near-death experience she came to question the worth of their consumerist existence. They decide that they need to find a “point” to their lives (19). They have thrown in their careers and have decided to do something more satisfying.

While Eve is sympathetic towards their decision, Tom is unable to fathom it, resorting to the conservative dichotomy of reality and ideology in his cynicism towards their decision: “So what *are* you going to do? Go to Africa [ . . . ] Of course you are! Don’t tell me! To work with little children! [ . . . ] The world isn’t going to turn into a lovely caring place because two middle-aged yuppies frequent-fly to Addis Ababa [ . . . ] The truth should be comforting. The *truth* is beautiful” (34-36). The desire to help others is equated with foolish delusion, with “ideology”, as opposed to rational reality. Also in common with conservative ideology, this attitude is linked to Tom’s cynicism regarding the goodness of others: “Some people are

fucked up and they like burning down houses, so some people's houses burn down. There is no point. There is no justice" (28), and toward the possibility of positive change: "All this bullshit about change being for the better, how great it is when people 'grow and change'. Have you noticed how change is invariably for the worse? Invariable!" (29). Tom, then, represents the nineties attitude of economic rationalist "reality" representing the "truth" about life, while the unrealistic left ignores "human nature" in its "ideological" drive to change the world for the good and its belief in fellow-feeling.

In *Rapture*, however, this belief is gradually subverted as the play progresses. Harry relates the way in which he became disillusioned with his consumerist lifestyle:

For a long time I thought it was a reason for living and then I realised it was a real estate agency [. . .] I'd watch the news or read the paper and instead of feeling badly about what I saw and moving on, moving on and getting on, I'd stay with it [. . .] I'd think to myself: Something simply must be done. I must *do* something. But the next day I'd find myself driving around the inner-suburbs showing young lawyers apartments with European appliances as if nothing had happened. (29, 43-44)

The emphasis here is on social change rather than turning away as the answer to, rather than the cause, of lack of fulfilment. For Henny and Harry, it is Tom's consumerism (and previously their own) which is the illusion, which tries but cannot mask the yearning for more. As the play progresses Eve begins to reveal her sympathies for Henny and Harry's attitude, questioning Tom's certainty regarding his own beliefs, and the "natural" dismissal of compassion:

You're the one who's so smug! Why shouldn't they go to Africa?  
Why shouldn't they help little children? [. . .] That's all I want to  
know! Why shouldn't they help little children? What? [*Incredulous*]  
It offends your sense of originality? [. . .] Think about exactly what it  
is that you make ridiculous. (35)

The implication in Eve's comments is that it is Tom, rather than Henny and Harry, who is unable to see the "reality", due to his "ideology". It is his cynicism, rather than the compassion he is cynical towards, that is portrayed as the façade.

This reconfiguring of Tom as the one hiding behind an ideological "mask", implied by the comment on originality, continues through the play. Tom admits that "facades are greatly under-rated" (41), while Harry tells him

You know, Tom, a while ago I got it that really what you were all about was delivery. For you, delivery is always more important than content, [. . .] Cynicism. This is really your faith. And so addicted are you to the tone, you forget to concern yourself with the substance. It would never occur to you to ponder the merits of a life dedicated to others. Because you prefer the cheap thrill of your own tinkling, cynical dismay—the performance, the whole performance [. . .] I mean, we honour you with the truth (48)

*Rapture*, then, sets up the conservative reality/ideology binary and then subverts it, ultimately reinforcing the notion that it is consumerism which is the mask. Tom's life is revealed to be a façade which falls apart piece by piece, as his charades are rejected by both friends: "after a while, when you wake up to the day and think: What? What? This *again*? This *again*, with its silences and little jokes to defend us against the absence of feeling... You start to ask, surely, surely, there *has* to be

something more” (53), and his wife, who reveals that she is in love with Dan, describing her marriage to Tom as “two people prepared to live a life without— finally, without due care—a careless life—a life of all surfaces, gorgeous surfaces” (55). Tom’s economic rationalist lifestyle, then, ultimately undermines his relationships with others. As with *Scenes from a Separation*, the personal is revealed as inseparable from the political, as Tom’s wilful blindness to anything beyond his conservative mythology also blinds him to the true feelings of those close to him.

*Rapture* argues that compassion and fellow-feeling are not a façade, an attitude, but rather a necessary antidote to the void left in the wake of the ideology of economic rationalism: “And then along come Henny and Harry, through the flames that lick at houses, who say, finally: ‘We want to make a point.’ Henny’s ‘inventory of significant losses’—in the end—isn’t that what a life amounts to? And who could blame them for searching for an antidote to that?” (55). It is also portrayed as a reaction to, and hopeful solution for, this hollow existence’s expression in the insular inward-looking marriage:

Is there anything stranger than locking your life into another’s?  
Closing the door to the world and retreating, the two of you, into one  
another, [. . .] another day of unquestioned journeys [. . .] and there  
we are, over the coffee pot... Sometimes I want to scream with fright  
that there we are again, again and again, in our dressing gowns  
pretending that it’s normal and all we really want to say is: ‘Who the  
Hell are You?’ If that’s not—grounds—If that’s not—for seeking...  
*faith*... If that’s not compelling as a means to something, something  
longer and larger than a lifetime, than ordinary heartbeats... I see  
now—Yes. Yes. What a fire might do. ( 56)



The rapture of the play's title, then, is not a religious awakening, but an awakening to the superficiality of economic rationalism, and the traditional insular relationship, and the desire to exceed these conformist boundaries, to discover the engagement which might make life seem worth living.

With this renewed sense of the efficacy of compassion and fellow-feeling comes a renewed belief in the possibility of positive social change: "Those people in the homeless shelters. They're not just a problem. They're actually people [. . .] We need to be thinking about the power we have to turn things around. And the duty we have to exercise that power" (44-45) *Rapture* revives such long dismissed notions as "goodness" and "rightness" not out of a naïve nostalgia for terminology of "universality", but because it is a specific rebuttal of the rhetoric of economic rationalism and its attendant values, which consigned these notions to the trash-can containing "Marxism", "social justice" and all other terms outside the normalising discourse of competition naturalisation. *Rapture* is an attempt to reinstate these concepts as positive, to recapture their meaning before the naturalisation of conservative rhetoric in the early nineties rendered them unfashionable and "unrealistic". It is a rebuttal of conservative assumptions.

Reviews of *Rapture* indicate a greater clarity regarding the play's message than responses to *Nightfall*. The almost uniformly positive responses almost all follow a similar line. Martin Ball referred to a "deeper truth to life" ("The Best of Enemies" 20), while Narelle Harris was more specific, claiming: "*Rapture* is not about religion versus atheism", but "about meaning versus materialism, of intrinsic values versus extrinsic ones" ("Rapture"). Catherine Lambert referred to the hollow aspect of the "normal" values promoted by economic rationalist existence: "These people have dedicated their lives to achievement of the most tangible kind-- work,

house, children-- and, now in their 40s, face an abyss where emotions are barren, relationships are stale and there is a sense of frustration”(“No Banquet but a Treat” 98). Helen Thomson recognised both the play’s challenge to the prevailing expectations: “Henny and Harry have found not God, but, goodness, an even more challenging proposition”. She also saw the play’s call for action: “Murray-Smith has deepened her range, writing a play that dares to break down educated rationalisations, to advocate radical commitment to change as an answer to our much ‘chattered’ about moral malaise”(“A Courageous Leap of Faith” 4). Kate Herbert provided a rare voice of criticism, claiming that the characters “become ciphers for particular messages”, and that “Although it challenges the shallowness of these lives, it remains superficial in its delivery”(“Taking up a Heap of Faith” 84).

*Rapture*, like *Nightfall*, differs significantly from Murray-Smith’s earlier work. It portrays an insular, traditional relationship opposed to social engagement and change, and accepting of the economic rationalist agenda. In this play, however, this is presented as a negative thing. It is the consumerism of Tom which is portrayed as the façade, which masks greater desire and is unfulfilling. Compassion and social justice, conversely, are recovered as valuable antidotes to this shallow existence, as meaningful and important steps toward making a more fulfilling life for all.

### **The Sick Room (1999)**

Stephen Sewell’s 1999 play *The Sick Room* is similar in many ways to Murray-Smith’s *Rapture*. Again, we see a conservative nuclear family unit, cynical about

social justice and compassion, who champion economic rationalism and competition, “pragmatism” over idealism, and insularity over social engagement. The illness of their daughter causes them to question their priorities, with the result that they begin to see the need for something more in life beyond financial success and insularity. In this play, compassion and the desire to change society are seen as positive things, while economic rationalism is portrayed as a façade, as wilful blindness which prevents them from recognising the necessity of other views.

*The Sick Room* deals with the recurring theme of relationships under threat. This time, though, the threat comes not from outsiders, such as Kate in *Nightfall* or Henny and Harry in *Rapture*, but in the form of death, a more inevitable threat than either of the above. *The Sick Room* bears many similarities to *Rapture*, and Sewell’s play also deals with the reality/ideology dichotomy, continuing the exploration of reality and illusion begun by Sewell in his previous play, *Dust* (1994). Like Murray-Smith’s play, *The Sick Room* deals with a “respectably married couple” (Sewell, *The Sick Room* 3), who are also quite conservative in their politics; they think nothing of donating to the Liberal Party (46), while David, Meg’s father, is a former friend of President Suharto (14) and was involved in covering up the reasons behind the deaths of journalists in Balibo (56). David sees himself as a pragmatist rather than an idealist. Meg’s husband Paul echoes the rhetoric of economic rationalism in his business dealings: “This was going to be the centrepiece of the whole privatisation campaign! This was going to show what you could do when you didn’t have Government regulators and bureaucrats on your back” (37). He sees competitiveness as inevitable: “everyone’s got an eye to their own advantage, haven’t they?—You’re not in the game to make other people rich” (59), and he displays a cynicism very similar to Tom’s at the thought of any contrary world-view: “You’d like to join

Community Aid Abroad, perhaps? Treat lepers in the Central African Republic? [. . .] you wish to do good in the world—Become a missionary or something—What exactly will you do? [. . .] It might be a bit hard to explain to the boys down the club—‘What’s your wife up to nowadays?’—‘Oh, tending the poor somewhere’—‘Apart from its amusement value, I’m not sure what you intend to achieve’ (47, 68). To Paul, any desire to do social good is unrealistic and thus a cause of laughter.

Megan, too, initially, accepts these beliefs:

Kate: I wasn’t talking about the afterlife: I was talking about peace on earth.

Megan: Well, you know—All those fairy tales...( 12)

Their relationship, then, is clearly one in which “reality” is separated from “ideology”, in which looking inward is seen as more practical than the attempt to help others.

Like Tom and Eve, too, Megan and Paul’s relationship is based on formality rather than genuine warmth: “Both he and I have obligations, to you and your brother [. . .] It’s not just a question of splitting and going our separate ways” (13). As in *Rapture*, this formality is linked to a certain extent to wilful ignorance, and acceptance of the status quo: “Megan, people build a life together—They try to give it solidity and reality—Every now and then, something happens, and fissures open up inside it, so you’re not exactly sure anymore what’s firm, and what might give way—[. . .] And what you should know also is that questions aren’t always productive—And that sometimes, answers aren’t what’s wanted” (20). For Megan and Paul, then, it is better to go through the motions of life “as it is” rather than questioning it. Conformity here is a protective shell, and stepping outside it, as in *Sweet Phoebe*, can only cause harm.

As the play progresses, however, this fantasy becomes increasingly untenable, especially for Megan: “I pricked my finger on a needle earlier, like in a fairytale; but in fairytales, if you prick your finger you don’t wake up, do you; you just go to sleep—Have we all gone to sleep, Paul?” (18). Kate’s illness is the catalyst which causes Megan to challenge the inevitability of their way of life: “the nature of our lives together—The validity—[. . .] Yes, the validity of our concerns and pursuits—[. . .] Where you can stand in my presence and discuss contributing a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to a political party while our child is upstairs dying” (47). Megan is forced to look beyond the insularity of the nuclear family and inward-looking relationship: “our love for one another is not enough to stop this pain, and this anguish, and these feelings of desperate helplessness; and it’s not enough to answer the questions I now have”(46). Insularity, here, is portrayed as an unsatisfactory response to disillusionment. In contrast to the plays of the early nineties, the inward-looking, traditional relationship is presented here as limited and unable, on its own, to provide fulfilment. The same could be said of the traditional family. Megan rejects Paul’s argument that: “you’re raising your children—Surely that’s a worthy pursuit” (62) The answers that early nineties conservatism provides as solutions to life’s difficulties are in this play rejected.

Like Henny and Harry, Megan seeks out something beyond the “rationalism” of consumerism: “I want to know the truth [. . .] Look at this hell of deception we’ve built for each other here--- [. . .] This is it, Paul; these lies are Hell [. . .] It is a strange house! All life is a strange house, and what we want to do is send ourselves to sleep! We are asleep, Paul—Spiritually asleep—But now I want to wake up!” (65-66). Like Henny and Harry, too, she seeks to reawaken concepts of goodness and

compassion, of values that transcend self-interest. And again, “goodness” is linked not merely with interior values but with positive social change:

Paul: What do you want to do?

Megan: I don’t know—When you made that joke before—That cruel, horrible joke about Community Aid Abroad—I thought, ‘Well, why not? What’s more stupid than the way we live now? Why not join Community Aid Abroad and try to do a bit of good in the world?’

Paul: Is this really what you want to talk about?

Megan: Rather than what? What Telstra’s doing today? How we must invite the Eliots over?

Paul: Can’t we do good where we are, Megan.

Megan: No, I can’t—Trapped in these relationships we don’t want—All of us stuck in this kind of social amber immobilising everybody—A hundred and fifty thousand for the Liberal Party? Well, why not, it’s good for business—Another cup of tea, Mr Minister? Another cover-up of innocent lives destroyed? I can’t, Paul—Maybe you can, but I can’t.

Paul: All right, all right—But isn’t—being good—about what you are?

Megan: No—It’s about what you do, and I’m doing nothing. (62)

Being “good” is, for Megan, something which cannot exist without action. Working for change, then, is intrinsic to goodness. Like *Rapture*, *The Sick Room* validates compassion and social change over interiority and the values of economic rationalism.

In *The Sick Room*, the fact that Megan's "spiritual" search for meaning is not a traditionally religious one is emphasised by Kate's concurrent debate with the Priest regarding her own search for meaning in life: "you're trying to put me to sleep [. . .] I want the truth!" (65). As with Henny and Harry, the "spiritual" awakening offered by the play is not one of conventional religion, but an earthly one, an awakening to the awareness that compassion and fellow-feeling are the only things that can hope to provide a life with any "meaning" in the void left by the collapse of belief in the traditional facades:

Kate: [. . .] Pray that he might forgive you! All your filthy lies!

Telling me it's all right, and that sooner or later I'll understand when nobody understands—That's the truth, isn't it: nobody understands—[. . .] And there's not even anyone to hear our confessions because nobody believes anything, and I don't know how to behave anymore!

Cecelia: With love, sweetheart, that's the only way any of us should behave!

Kate: I'm sorry, Patricia, I'm so sorry for everything I've done; for all the bad things I've ever done; all the nasty, cruel things—I'm ugly, I'm so ugly.

Cecelia: You're not, my darling, you're beautiful. (67-68)

The search for meaning in the play, then, is a wholly secular one. What Kate seeks for her "redemption" is a confession based not on the priest's perceived façade but based on "truth", that is, an engagement with earthly morality. The irony is that it is Patricia, who the economic rationalists fail to recognise even under her own name:

David: Patricia? I thought it was Cecelia.

Cecelia: No, that's what you called me. It was always Patricia (73) who ultimately takes Kate's confession and comforts her following the Priest's callous treatment, is a pertinent comment. The blindness of David to Patricia demonstrates the inability of the proponents of economic rationalist rhetoric to see beyond the facades of their own ideology to recognise the antidote necessary to provide the answers missing from their own lives and the lives of those they love.

*The Sick Room* received poor reviews, with the play's split focus, between the death of Kate and the political arguments, seemingly failing to gel for reviewers. This could be linked to their criticism of Megan's character, central to the intersection of the two. Lee Christofis, for instance, wrote that "Megan seemed to ricochet from hysteria to fractiousness to anguish without ever becoming a substantial dramatic persona" ("Houseful of Family Skeletons Spells Bad Medicine" 11), while Helen Thomson claimed "She moves from maternal anguish to despair at the state of her marriage, to a political conversion that views the Alexanders' privileged but corrupt way of life with contempt, but the process is never convincing, nor satisfactorily accounted for" ("Off-Target Play on the Critical List" 19). Kate Herbert claimed that "The intention may have been to raise political issues about the ignorance and selfishness of the moneyed class or the inability of the family to communicate when most needed, but Sewell fails to penetrate any issue" ("Slow Death in the Sick Room" 78). Catherine Lambert found that the play's critical portrayal of the family "does not make for imaginative, gripping theatre despite the fine acting performances" ("Grim Prognosis Leaves No Room for Hope" 84).

*The Sick Room* functions as a critique of conservative lifestyle. It presents the conservative, inward-looking, traditional family as a hollow shell. The cynicism of characters such as Paul and David toward social justice and compassion is revealed



as a shallow façade when faced with the questions which spring from the death of Kate. In contrast, the play emphasises the necessity of finding meaning beyond these superficialities, and suggests that this meaning is most likely to be found in a practical engagement with the world, in helping others. The play suggests that the traditional sources of “meaning” for lives are merely distractions, charades which prevent people from seeing what it is that will truly make their lives worthwhile. In this regard, *The Sick Room* serves to critique many aspects of nineties conservatism.

**Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America  
(2003)**

In *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*, Stephen Sewell portrays a society dominated by conservatism. He serves up many of the typical attitudes of the nineties: Marxism is seen as outdated, economics is placed over academic value amidst anti-intellectual attitudes, there is a blame-the-victim mentality, and any alternative suggested is linked to competitive envy, rather than taken seriously. The leftist characters, in this play, are the besieged minority. The conservative characters are portrayed as living a façade, but it is a pervasive one which extends into the physical world, as Talbot’s assault and torture are denied and unseen by the characters who are blind to his reality. There is a clear warning against being caught up in mythology to the point of missing any danger signals. Against this wilful blindness Talbot progressively grows to recapture his belief in human reason and the capacity for change. Rebellion and compassion are portrayed as the only genuine alternatives in a world of superficial lies.

*Myth* deals even more explicitly than plays such as *The Sick Room* or *Rapture* with the ability of the rhetoric of conservatism to blind members of society to the reality behind it. It deals with Professor Talbot, who teaches at a U.S. university, and whose left-leaning ideas come under fire in the post-September 11 climate. As the play progresses Talbot is progressively ostracised by his colleagues, and comes under attack from an unnamed man, who nobody else can see, and whose agenda is unclear. Talbot, an Australian, finds his views on justice and compassion are increasingly unwelcome in the context of the times and the increasing aggressiveness and paranoia:

Talbot: The CIA is torturing people in Jordan [. . .] We are torturing people in Jordan, but sitting here in New York watching *Seinfeld* and imagining ourselves to be the guardians of freedom and democracy in the world. That is the kind of delusional myth that is endangering democracy in this country [. . .]

Amy: I'm glad they're being tortured, and I hope that as they're being tortured, they think of every single one of those two thousand, eight hundred and nineteen people they sent plummeting to their deaths [. . .] And I can tell you, if I was there in Jordan now, I'd buy my popcorn and I'd line up to pay my ten dollars to watch. (*Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* 8)

The impact of this statement, and others like it, is that retribution, even against those who are not personally responsible for the crime in question, has become seen as a justifiable and non-controversial goal, whereas the suggestion of kindness and justice

raise the ire of mainstream society. Sewell portrays a world where the suggestion of a dominant left is absurd.

The characters who surround Talbot echo various aspects of conservative rhetoric. The Man's comment on Talbot's book collection when he assaults him in his flat: "Who are these deadshits? Adorno—Hegel—Fuck—throw them all out. The next time I come here, I want to see nothing but Jackie Collins—*Deadly Embrace* is a good one" (19), demonstrates both the cynicism towards Marxism and the attachment of value to economic success typical of the nineties ethos. Jack, Talbot's boss, also exemplifies the writing-off of Marxism as "outdated" in his advice to Talbot: "Parsons is an important thinker, Talbot. Rawls is an important thinker. That's why we have them in the course. Fukuyama is an important thinker. Marx is a discredited thinker. We don't teach discredited thinkers in our Department" (59). The inclusion of Fukuyama in this list explicitly binds the conservatism of these characters to the abandonment of Marxism in the "end of ideology" rhetoric of the early nineties and the deployment of the fall of the Soviet Union and the GDR in service of economic rationalist greed, as Talbot notes: "You know, when the Cold War finished and the Soviet Union fell, everyone thought 'great, now we can just get on with making it a better world', but instead of that it's like the dogs of capitalism have just been unleashed and are running wild across the globe" (15). In the world of *Myth*, then, the conservative rejection of Marxism as self-evidently defunct is accepted by most of the characters with little thought, indicating the breadth of conservative ideology's dominance.

The rejection of Marxism is again linked to beliefs about "human nature": "You know what the difference between communists and capitalists is? Communists expect us to be angels, but capitalists know we're devils" (71). Again, cynicism

toward human nature is implicitly the “realistic” view, whereas the positive outlook is seen by these characters as wilful. The “pragmatic” outlook is also evident in the dominance within the university of economic over academic value. This is evident in Max’s attitude towards his book: “Oh, you know, security, intelligence, that sort of thing [. . .] Sort of—sort of a postmodern—[. . .] You know—does the state exist—that sort of thing—something for the CV [. . .] it’s Jackie Collins’ publisher, so I know I’ll get good distribution” (30, 86). Content is clearly secondary here to the economic credentials of the publisher. The “reality” of selling books is more important than the book’s “ideology”. The similarity between Max’s comment and the Man’s earlier mention of Jackie Collins clearly links Max’s belief with the Man’s thuggish anti-intellectualism.

Max also spouts the conservative line that all other societies are angry at America not because they dislike capitalism but because they secretly desire it too: “It’s *envy*, isn’t it? Everyone looks at what they’ve got and wants it, only they don’t want to put the hard work into it, do they? They don’t want to dismantle their own fucked up societies and build new ones” (32). Again the assumption is that economic rationalism and capitalism are the inescapable “reality” and any belief in an alternative can only be a mask to hide darker desires, such as envy. The suggestion that people might prefer a different way of life is unable even to be conceived.

There is also room for comparison with conservative ideology in Jack’s increasing rationalisation of his betrayal of Talbot, which is based on a fear of Talbot suing and Jack being held culpable, and a subsequent reversion to blame-the-victim rhetoric: “It’s just what Robert Hughes said: a culture of complaint—a litigious society... Well, I’m sick of it, Stan; I’m goddamn sick of people marching in and taking advantage... That’s right: it’s about time people started to be responsible for

their own lives. It's about time people grew up" (40). Blame-the-victim rhetoric is here satirised and shown to be nothing more than self-centred fear of financial inconvenience; Talbot has no intention of suing but Jack fabricates his critique of Talbot's personality in order to pre-justify any future rejection of potential claims. His betrayal of Talbot is also linked to the fear of the latter being discovered to be a terrorist: "What if he's a terrorist, Stan? [. . .] You've heard the way he talks—what if he's recruiting people?" (49). Again there is no evidence to support this fear. His paranoia leads to Jack reporting Talbot as a potential terrorist; a spurious linking of leftist thought and terrorism which is paralleled and made explicit by the Man: "You're an Arab, aren't you? [. . .] An Arab of the mind" (67). This juxtaposition of official views with those of mindless violence makes clear the connection between the demonisation of those who offer critique of society with anti-intellectualism and bullying; in short, of the use of power to stifle reason.

The play's conservative rhetoric bombards the play's few non-conservative characters constantly, and is given more visceral form in the Man, who uses torture to put across his views. Sewell again plays with the reality/ideology binary, as the "reality" that conservative ideology constructs serves to blind many of the characters to the "reality" beyond it. This is implicit in the play's title, also the title of Talbot's book, and its central argument: "My point is that every nation is constituted by a set of myths about who we are and where we're going, and those myths can blind us from the reality of what we're doing and impel us toward our own destruction" (7). Talbot parallels Nazi Germany and contemporary America and suggests that both utilised a false rationality which masked the fundamental irrationality underlying their beliefs: "In the end, the madness that had only been implicit at the outset, and that no one believed anyone in their right mind could possibly mean, consumed

everything, and the rational was revealed as nothing more than the handmaiden of the completely insane” (1). The parallel here is that the dressing of economic rationalism in the discourse of reality and rationality attempts to disguise its facades and its reliance on faith, but that the pervasiveness of this mythology ultimately perpetuates the view amongst the characters to such an extent that they lose all touch with any reality beyond that created by their own rhetoric.

This hypothesis appears to be borne out as the play progresses, as Talbot’s increasingly violent assaults by the Man are met with an unwillingness on the part of others to believe his predicament. His wife Eve claims, for instance: “You did it yourself! This doesn’t happen, Talbot!” (74). The willing blindness of the characters is literalised by their inability to see the Man on security videotape, the inability of characters other than the radical Margurite to see or read Talbot’s book (60), and Max’s unwillingness to recognise Talbot’s surroundings. Clearly the characters’ ability to see has been subsumed by their mythology.

This physicalisation of subjectivity is more than a recognition of the power of different versions of “reality”, however. Sewell makes a clear case for “truth” against “relativism”, in particular taking a shot at academic relativism in the form of postmodernism. Margurite tells Talbot regarding the course: “don’t you think that postmodernism has had its day? [. . .] It’s good to see no Baudrillard there—I couldn’t stand him telling me one more time that the war in Iraq is only happening in the simulacrum, could you?” (12). The final moments of the play juxtapose Talbot’s torture at the hands of the Man with the other academics’ oblivious appreciation of art at the Guggenheim. Their Tour Guide proclaims that “‘How do we know what is true?’ was the question that finally liberated art from representation [. . .] finally dissolving the barrier between art and reality completely [. . .] Finally, art did not

have to be about anything at all; finally art could just *be*” (82). Meanwhile the Man tells Talbot regarding “truth” that: “What makes Plato smarter is that he knew all truth is relative and only an arrogant autocrat like Socrates would deny it, and that’s what Socrates was, an autocrat, an aristocrat, a member of the privileged elite” (84). Sewell here makes explicit the connection, already hinted at through the character of Max, between the postmodern turn from truth to relativism, and the desires of the powerful in masking the realities of oppression and power relations and feeding the right-wing portrayal as those who seek to make genuine change as a “privileged elite”. Talbot comes to recognise his own complicity, and wilful blindness, too late:

I’ll tell you why I’m here: I’m here because even though I knew exactly what was happening, even though I could plot it through step by step, intellectually, I never believed it really; I never believed it really was happening—[. . .] Because I believed the myth that everything turns out right in the end [. . .] And even though I could see it with my own eyes, even though my brain could understand it, my heart said, “No, this isn’t happening”—[. . .] But it is; it is, Max, and it’s killing us. This is the end of the American Republic and the beginning of the American Empire. (87)

*Myth*, then, is not a retreat from politics into subjectivity and relativism. Rather it emphasises the need to recognise a “truth” that is based not on rhetorical sleight of hand, but on research, reason and experience.

*Myth*, though, unlike Sewell’s earlier work, is, despite its bleak subject matter, a hopeful play. Initially the play’s optimism comes from the youthful Margurite, whose assertion that “I want to change things” (14) leads Talbot to analyse his own life. He says to Eve, regarding the rebellion of their own generation:

For all the froth and noise, for all the chanting and singing, nothing changed. A bit more personal freedom, a public acknowledgement of racism; a couple of seasons of flares and clunky shoes, and then slowly, almost imperceptibly being pulled back into the same groove, the same channel, like some current we were unaware of was moving us all in the same direction the whole time, but instead of resisting it now, all I feel is a bitter, kind of cynical detachment from the whole thing [. . .] And that's what shocked me listening to that kid. "I want to be the voice of my generation." It was so clear, so pure. And it made me realise how dirty I'd become. (16)

Margurite challenges him to act rather than simply worrying: "Now's the time to say it, while we've still got the time!" (63), a lesson Talbot learns too late. Eve, similarly, tries to persuade him to be optimistic: "We are America! This is America! We are making America now! And if it's betrayed, we're the ones betraying it!" (54). Talbot has difficulties finding this optimism within himself, and again, this is linked to his difficulty in seeing change as possible on both the societal and individual level:

Talbot: [. . .] An MBA undergraduate on her way to inheriting her father's money, and you expect me to believe you're going to give it all away to the poor people! You're pathetic, Margurite, if you expect me to believe that, and you're even more pathetic if you believe it yourself!

Margurite: Why, Professor? Because there's no one in your worldview who's any good? Is that what you mean? Because no one can change?



Talbot: Change? Who can change?

Margurite: Anyone can change! [. . .] I've heard you say [. . .] that everyone lives this kind of dream-life [. . .] I thought a person who could say that must have a special insight; must somehow be able to escape the dream themselves and wake up, but that's not true, is it, because *you* can't, you're still inside the dream just like everyone else. (64)

Without the belief in the capacity of humans to do good and to change things, Talbot cannot help but be part of the system, even while he critiques it.

By the end of the play, though, Talbot's eyes have been opened, and he comes to believe in change and in the ability of humanity to improve and reassert rationality, rejecting the fear which made him formerly close his eyes, telling the Man: "For while Reason has stood and guided us in the right direction, I have cowardly averted my eyes [. . .] I have joined the throng leaping to destruction and fear—For fear of what? For fear of you?!" He is able to believe that, that no matter what his future as an individual, the future will prove him right: "for fear of you and your guns and your madness [. . .] Reason still stands unsullied, and Reason will be there in a thousand years time when this new dark age will itself be no more than a footnote in history" (91). In *Myth* Sewell reverses the inevitability of conservative discourse, propounding the inevitability instead of its downfall.

Talbot's rebellion is given form through Eve, who progresses from disbelieving to being able to see the reality for herself. Eve confronts Amy regarding her philosophy and learns the deep unhappiness behind the "successful capitalist" façade (71). Amy's cynicism undermines her monetary success and reinforcing Eve's belief in human compassion: "Maybe I would be someone like you just

looking to lay down in my own shit and rub myself around in it for a while, but I'm not, Amy, because I believe in human beings and I believe human beings *can* change" (74). Although Eve is disappointed in her attempts to change Jack, her idealism lends the play its hopeful ending, as she is able to stand up and see through Max's anti-terrorist rhetoric, calling out "Liar!" during his speech (94). While Eve's death in an explosion which is subsequently blamed on terrorists dissuades from any complacency regarding the difficulty of rebellion against the conservative climate the play portrays, it does, ultimately, offer an affirmation of the values of fellow-feeling and compassion, and of positive social change.

*Myth* received mostly positive reviews. Lenny Ann Low claimed "Sewell has produced a powerful and robust analysis of the current conservative politics of the US and a warning to Australia. *Myth* is not a solution to the state of the world. It is a penetrating and beautifully crafted missive to us all"(13). Thuy On claimed that the play "should be commended for being the first play in Australia to tackle the frisson of fear arising directly from the aftermath of the twin towers attack" ("When Patriot Games Turn Nasty" 7), while Melanie Sheridan wrote that "it's an important play, making an even more important point. If it suffers, it is from a lack of subtlety and the probability that it'll be preaching to the converted". This would seem to have been a theme of the more critical reviews, with Tim Richards claiming the play "preaches to the converted [. . .] with the subtlety of a sledgehammer", and Jessica Coleman commenting that "I can't help thinking that I've heard it all before" (26). Most reviews, though, were positive and Sewell noted that the piece was one of the two most commercially successful pieces to play in Sydney when it toured there (Roberts 9).

*Myth*, then, is perhaps the most blatant of the plays discussed in its attacks on the conservatism evident in early nineties drama. It portrays a world where conservatism dominates; where Marxism is seen as “proven” wrong, where economic rationalism is the unspoken arbiter of value, where human nature is viewed pessimistically, the oppressed are blamed for their oppression, and where compassion and kindness, and the desire for change are portrayed as merely a futile attempt to mask more “real” desires. The play reveals these attitudes, however, to be themselves a façade, as the characters demonstrate wilful blindness to the suffering of others. It argues for the need to recognise oppression, and to work to create positive social change, lest the mythology of the dominant conservative ideology render all unable to recognise the developments occurring around them.

Each of the plays discussed in this chapter functions similarly. Each reverses the tendency of early nineties drama, by setting up versions of “reality” which accord with conservative beliefs, only to have them torn down, and revealed to be a façade. In these plays, it is such values as competition, greed, acquisition, the “traditional”, nuclear family or insular relationship, and cynicism which are shown to be fashionable but unfulfilling. It is the more radical, previously discounted values of kindness, social justice, engagement with the world and enacting social change which are portrayed as the path to both personal happiness and a better world. In this respect the recent work of both playwrights operate as a direct critique of the values contained in early nineties drama and the politics of the decade.

## **Chapter Eleven. Ben Ellis.**

Ben Ellis is discussed here as an example of a younger author who takes up some of the themes discussed above. Without wishing to enter into any generalised generational comparison, it is perhaps worth noting that Ellis's work is perhaps more darkly comic than the authors described above. Ellis, like Murray-Smith and Sewell, sets up worlds which conform to the dictates of conservative ideology: economically rationalist, lacking in compassion, and divisive. As with Williamson and Rayson, Ellis depicts a world where ideals have not so much failed as been betrayed by the Boomer generation, which creates the illusion of inevitability. Whereas the other authors tend to subvert these conservative ideals through plot or character development, however, Ellis's work subverts primarily through satire, by establishing the self-destructiveness and cruelty of the "normal" way of life.

### **Post Felicity (2002)**

Ben Ellis's *Post Felicity* represents a younger author's view on both conservatism and generational conflict. The older, Boomer generation is depicted as incapable of perceiving daughter Felicity's suicide in anything other than economic rationalist terms. Despite evidence to the contrary, they rewrite her suicide note, replacing Felicity's voice with stereotypical clichés of "victim mentality". Madeleine and James, Felicity's parents, are portrayed as former rebels who have sold out their ideals to economic rationalism. As the play progresses, James attempts to recover

some of his former idealism, but is thwarted by the other characters who exclude him from the house. The play, then, presents a critical portrayal of the Boomers as having sold out their ideals, and then forced their betrayal onto their children. The play is a critique of the acceptance of economic rationalism, but it is questionable whether any hope is offered.

*Post Felicity* deals with the reactions of parents Robert and Madeleine James, as well as James's boss Aarons, to the suicide death of their daughter, Felicity. They are initially unable to comprehend the suicide in anything but economic rationalist terms. James comments that suicide: "Builds the economy up. A bit of unexpected employment here and there. A couple of blokes digging holes. It's sort of good" (*Post Felicity* 64), a comment wilfully closed-eyed in its ignoring of the context of his daughter's death. Aarons, who has no reticence about turning up at his employee's home, is impatient with James's grieving: "Get over it. Two days."(64). Similarly, he is unable to look beyond the rhetoric of economic rationalism, claiming: "I think suicide is inappropriate. It's an inappropriate waste of human resources. That's what we should be telling kids. Don't waste yourself as a resource" (67). James asks Madeleine: "are we still classified as parents now? [. . .] For taxation purposes", and she replies: "What's our daughter going off and killing herself got to do with us being parents?" (72). Even parenthood, then, exists for them as a state-of-taxation, rather than in relation to Felicity. Madeleine is more concerned with the potential to up the price of her daughter's art post-death (73-74). The extremity of the characters' coldness marks the play clearly as satire. Their complete immersion in the discourse of economic rationalism has rendered them unable to function beyond its terms of reference. When an occasion, such as the death of their

daughter, calls for them to deal with an occurrence beyond the movement of capital, their reactions are rendered absurd.

The characters' acceptance of economic rationalist rhetoric not only blinds them to the implications of Felicity's death beyond the purely economic, but also leads to the retrospective silencing of her voice. There is perhaps a comment here on the potential for the Boomer generation's media domination to silence the voice of rising generations, as Mark Davis argues in *Gangland*. Madeleine "presumed" that Felicity was a talented writer (83), and she and Aarons set about creating some of her daughter's art to sell, in the absence of the real thing. In the initial absence of a suicide note, and in place of the genuine note which is discovered, and described by Aarons as "Self-loathing melodramatic victim crap. Even managed to blame the Prime Minister"(97), they set about constructing her suicide note for her. In doing so they resort to many of the conservative clichés about both the young and the underprivileged:

My life has been a series of tragedies for which I have refused to take any responsibility [. . .] Instead, at every turn, I have demanded welfare receipts from the government. I refuse to look for ten jobs a fortnight. I would rather die [. . .] I, like most of my generation, do not have the moral or constitutional fibre to make it [. . .] I am a metaphor for the evils of dependency in all its forms [. . .] There is little difference between the government giving me single mother benefits and pimps giving me gear to support my habit [. . .] stripped of independence by too much government and not enough tough love [. . .] Art is just an excuse to become more and more of a victim. (93-94)

Felicity's suicide is thus robbed of any ability to comment on the society which created it. The message is clear. The dominant powers who control the dissemination of expression have the ability to rewrite the rebellion of the underprivileged (including the youth) in whatever way they see fit in order to reinforce their prior beliefs and prejudices.

The generational tableau also resembles Davis's depiction of Boomer dominance in that James and Madeleine are both former '68ers who have traded in their ideals. James remembers: "In the sixties, the ideas we had, we had ideas about peace, kindness, sharing. Beautiful ideas, about a loving world" (69). But James has sold out to the economic rationalist philosophy, and in doing so cast doubt on his former idealism, as Aarons points out to him: "What about that bombing of the headache pill factory in Sudan, just to take Americans' minds off the president's dick? I didn't see you out on the streets shouting down with imperialism. Hypocrite [. . .] You only protested against Vietnam because you didn't want to go—not because you hate war. You don't remember the sixties" (68). The implication is that James, in betraying his former ideals, has not only decreased their currency in current society, but has also enabled the rewriting of these ideals in terms of the way they are remembered.

Afterwards, James goes in search of a piece of graffiti he wrote in the sixties, in order to prove to himself that the sixties had a lasting effect, but it has been painted over. He tries to spur Madeleine to remember: "staring down the fascists [. . .] so many changes we made". She replies: "Mini-skirts" (85). James discovers that all of the places he remembers have changed, and asks: "What happened to the generation of '68?" (88). The notion of the Boomer dominance being conflated with leftist dominance, evident in early nineties plays such as *Dead White Males* or *The*

*Garden of Granddaughters* is here discredited. The Boomers, in their ascension, have removed all traces of their rebellious past.

There is a kind of rebellion posited in the play, as James comes to realise the betrayal of his ideals. As the play progresses James stands up to the attitudes of his wife and employer. Finally, when Aaron comments on “the sixties you don’t remember”, James bursts out “I remember!” (98). However, it is too late. James is undone by the legislation he himself implemented, and is ultimately left standing outside the house, staring in. There is a bleakness to Madeleine’s final line: “Do you think the sun will come out today?” (99), which seems to confirm Ellis’s belief that the next generation of playwrights are “following darker social worlds”, and Julian Meyrick’s observation that “you’d be hard pressed to find optimism in the voices coming through now” (Safe). The Boomers have betrayed themselves into ineffectualness and the generation which would follow is dead, its voice silenced. The play, then, is a scathing critique of the concession to conservative ideology.

*Post Felicity* attracted highly critical reviews, the general theme being that the uncertainty of style worked against it, with reviewers off-put by the mixture of realism and the surreal. Helen Thomson recognised the generational critique: “Ellis’s satire is directed against the generation whose radicalism failed to survive the 1960s, whose hearts have grown stony, their minds distracted by bureaucratic rituals at work and art-collecting acquisitiveness at home” (“Mad Migrants and a Satire of Middle-Aged Suburbanites” 5), but found both writing and direction of the play inadequate. Martin Ball commented that “just as Ellis seems to be achieving something, he loses his nerve and slips back into a realist paradigm, wallowing in ineffective social critique” (“First Stage of Disquiet” 13), while Chris Boyd found even less to like, writing that after watching the play, “you’ll be ready for a fistful of



pills, too” (“Anything but Felicity” 90). Only Narelle Harris (“*Svetlana in Slingbacks and Post Felicity*”) found the piece successful.

*Post Felicity* delivers a bleak picture of the infiltration of economic rationalist ideology, in which the suicide of Felicity is only able to be interpreted in terms of its effect on economic aspects. Her suicide note is rewritten, her voice silenced, manipulated into the conservative clichés of “victim mentality” which are all her parents and Aarons want to hear. Her parents have clearly betrayed their former ideals, and although James at one point tries to recover the lost beliefs of the sixties, he finds he has doomed himself through his own betrayals, leaving a society in which hope for a less conservative, less economic rationalist society has been stifled. *Post Felicity* is a pessimistic portrayal of the degree to which conservative ideology has rendered itself self-perpetuating, through the abandonment of ideals by former radicals. It is a critique of conservatism and those who have allowed it to flourish.

### **Falling Petals (2003)**

*Falling Petals* also deals with the extent of the infiltration of the mindset of economic rationalism. The play deals with the conservatism of a rural town, cynical about education, racist, and lacking compassion toward the increasing number of mysteriously sick children. The townfolks’ conservatism is linked to their economic rationalist mindsets. The play’s younger characters attempt to rebel against their elders, but their rebellion, too, is coloured by economic rationalism. Their desire to leave town is based on greed and cynicism about the town’s profitability. They

display an inability to empathise with others' oppression or suffering, instead only looking out for their own competitive best interests. Their cynicism toward any alternative to the economic rationalist lifestyle is, as in *Post Felicity*, at least partly attributable to the older generation, and its selling-out of ideals, which has robbed their offspring of any sense of choice other than economic "reality" or the "unrealistic" sixties rebellion.

*Falling Petals* engages, like Rayson's *Inheritance*, with the attitudes and lives of rural Australians. Unlike Rayson's more realistic play, however, Ellis presents a science fiction or fantasy tale in which a rural town is stricken by a mysterious virus, which only affects the young. As might be expected, the attitudes presented in the play are given a more stylised presentation. Unlike Rayson's play, Ellis does not concentrate on the racial aspects of rural attitudes, although there is evidence of racism in Tania's suggestion that the sick kids "Sucked up too much dirt and got some Abo curse, I reckon" (*Falling Petals* 23). Nor is there, in *Falling Petals*, the hope that might be recognised in the more forward thinking characters of *Inheritance*, such as Julia or Felix. There is, however, room for parallel in the play's critique of divisiveness and the permeation of the attitudes of economic rationalism.

There is little romanticising of rural life in this play. Phil comments at the play's start that "this place is small and nasty and fucked" (3), and certainly this seems borne out by the attitudes of many of the townsfolk. Sally tells Phil he will be beaten up if he doesn't get drunk at the local party (8), while her attitudes towards sex comment on her own narrow worldview: "You should have stayed. Could have got your rocks off. Learnt what it's really all about [. . .] I spent half an hour with my eyes shut pashing the wrong bloke" (12, 13). There is little sense of hope or ambition

to be had in the town. These attitudes are clearly indoctrinated by the town's adults, such as Sally's mother (referred to as Woods):

Syme: As careers guidance supervisor, I have to check all the tertiary admissions forms—

Woods: Tertiary?

Syme: TAFE and university.

Woods: University?

Syme: Sally hasn't handed one in yet.

Woods: Good girl [. . .] Look, Mr Syme, me and Sally, I sat her down two years ago when she talked about uni and I showed her the maths, and she and I came to a decision—it costs too much. She agrees with me. (18)

A similar attitude comes from their teachers: “Look. I have to find kids jobs in supermarkets [. . .] why haven't you put down a TAFE choice?” (5, 6). These statements are typical of nineties conservatism's “practicality”, with its cynicism toward any non-economically-based measure of advancement, particularly education.

As the play progresses, the attitudes of the townsfolk become more and more sinister, as they increasingly turn on the sick children. Their attitudes are revealed to be economically mercenary, forsaking compassion in favour of economic rationalism, both at a town level: “It is obvious that we have a small health problem in this area concerning some of the young ones, and that some of us have concerns that this may impact on bookings for the upcoming tourist season” (23), and at a more personal, or family level. This is evident in Sally's mother's treatment of her:

You were always going to be kicked out by the end of the year. Let you become an adult by going out on your own. But now business demands that you go [. . .] I'm giving you a blanket. The business can't afford more. My customers know that I have a child at the high school. Now nobody is saying how this Syndrome gets passed around, but I'm not taking any chances. I don't want people attacking my shop [. . .] There's no alternative. I'm not making the choices.  
(30-31)

Again, economic "reality" is prioritised, and compassion seen as irrelevant. These comments indicate a critique of country town life that is not so much focussed on the passed-down bigotry that is evident in *Inheritance*. While there is bigotry in *Falling Petals*, what is clear throughout is that the almost all (if not all) of the country town's small-minded bigotry and lack of ambition is linked at some point in the play, through comments such as those above, to the unproblematic acceptance by members of the town of the rhetoric of economic rationalism.

Similarly, the rebellion of the young in the play is also cast in economic rationalist terms. Phil and Tania are determined to get away from the small-town ideologies of Hollow, but at times it is difficult to distinguish their own ideology from that of those they hate. *Falling Petals* takes the guise of a typical teen-rebellion drama, but it presents a rebellion that bears remarkable similarities to that which it rebels against. Phil is determined to go to university in Melbourne, rather than TAFE, and yet his plan is to study "Economics and Law", and his ultimate goal is "I might come back and buy a holiday house" (1). University, for Phil, may be rebellious, but the end-point in mind is the same. Phil and Tania's motivation comes from "MindPower CDs" which promote a conservative self-empowerment based on

the stereotype that hard work inevitably creates riches, and hence poverty is equally self-created: “Remember what MindPower says. Luck is made, not a random event” (40). Their hatred of Hollow is also based on economic rationalist criteria: “this place is Nowhere Central. It’s forgotten. It’s not just forgotten, it’s worth forgetting. It’s failing. It’s drought-ridden” (7). Hollow is a “failure” because it’s “drought-ridden”: their critique is based on its inability to function economically. That their teen-rebellion has been rewritten according to the economic rationalist agenda is emphasized by the scene in which Phil loses his virginity to Tania, who fucks him while he recites economic theory for their upcoming exam: “only a higher level of unemployment maintains the chief goal of price stability” (45). This scene satirises the teen-movie staple by subverting its rebelliousness. Even “breaking out” follows an economics textbook.

Just as in Rayson’s play, the characters are unable to recognise the similarity of their positions to that of others. Phil mocks the suffering of the townsfolk around him for their stupidity while echoing their priorities: “These parents—these stupid National Party—and One Nation-Liberal-voting cocksuckers complain about money so much that you think they’d be happy not to have kids anymore [. . .] Let me read you my essay. It’s about microeconomic reform” (21). Phil and Tania are unable to see the connection between themselves and their sick schoolmates. They laugh at the dying kids around them and blame the victims: “No ambition, no future, no bigger picture, that’s why they’re dying. Worthless deaths—that’s not a tragedy!” (28). They distance themselves from the danger by using Darwinist rhetoric. When one of their fellow-classmates dies and Phil wonders if he is not, after all, immune, Tania tells him: “You have one less rival for a university place [. . .] That’s one less competitor you have to worry about [. . .] I chose you , not Harris [. . .] We’re the

evolved ones. We're the ones who can weather this" (37). The result is a cruel lack of compassion for the suffering of those around them, and ultimately their treatment of Sally leads to the failure of their plan to escape and to Tania's likely rape and death (61). Lack of compassion therefore is revealed to be not merely morally problematic, but also impractical, just as in Williamson's *Face to Face* or *Corporate Vibes*.

While their economic rationalist mode of rebellion is revealed as futile, *Falling Petals* does not offer any real alternative. The older generation, like James and Madeleine in *Post Felicity*, are revealed to be uncaring, and, where they once had non-conservative values, to have betrayed them and sold out. Phil comments on the attitude of his Boomer teacher towards his future prospects mockingly: "If this was the sixties, maybe you might have been justified in making such a choice; I did. Look where it got me. I'm a has-been. There's AIDS all over the place and I can't fuck as much anymore. So neither should you. I wish I was still a communist free-lover motherfucker, but you have responsibilities now. Take the supermarket job, Phil" (6). "Fucking hippies. They are so out of touch" says Tania, (22), while Phil claims his parents are "Hippies in capitalism" (22). This seems borne out when their parents betray them, and Phil's father, who has preached compassion to him, convinces his mother to flee town, leaving him behind, reciting the same mantra as the economic rationalist kids: "Every problem is just an opportunity. A challenge. We'll win. We'll get out. You'll see" (47). While the children in the play are hardly likeable characters, then, the play indicates that they are the victims of an older generation that has left them little scope for any genuine rebellion. They are, for all their rebellion, merely reflections of the shallow selfish greed of their parents, a fact

which renders ironic Phil's mum's final conservative parting shot: "You kids brought it on yourselves" (64).

Reviews for *Falling Petals* were mixed. Thuy On recognised at least part of the play's critique, commenting that the central characters' "failure to see beyond their aspirations makes them callous towards Hollow's afflicted and dead [. . .] The title is an apt metaphor for a play that tackles the sickness of selfishness and the challenges facing rural youth" ("No Easy Way out of a Dying Country Town" 14). Jim Murphy was less positive, commenting that "it is tough, aggressive theatre played at a high-decibel, frequent-coarse-language intensity that threatens to become tiresome, and the absence of sympathetic characters counts against it". Catherine Lambert also found the characters hard to care for, with the end result that "It is painful and laborious despite being based on some worthwhile ideas" ("Bleak Outlook on Country Comforts" 81).

*Falling Petals* satirises the prejudices of its characters, their bigotry, lack of compassion and cynicism toward education all being linked to the economic rationalist mindset which dominates the piece. The play presents a world where economic rationalism is dominant to such an extent that even rebellion is ultimately cast in its mould, with Phil and Tanya attempting to reject the town but falling into the same patterns of lack of compassion and subservience to economic precepts. The play demonstrates that this capitulation is at least partly the result of their parents' selling out of their ideals, leaving little sense of any alternative. *Falling Petals*, then, is a critique of the pervasiveness of economic rationalist agendas, and of those who willingly abandoned any alternative ways.

### **These People (2003)**

*These People* deals again with the infiltration of the rhetoric of economic rationalism into the unthinking speech of the populace. In this play, Ellis deals with the asylum seeker issue, and the way that “ordinary” Australians use the divisive conservative dialogue to divorce their “reality” from the lives of asylum seekers, who are blamed for their plights. *These People* juxtaposes the lives of a family with that of the asylum seekers, and deconstructs the distancing methods whereby the family members detach themselves from the asylum seekers’ plight. It also critiques the sense of certainty felt by the family towards its own security, suggesting that the situation of those in detention centres is not entirely distant from the suffering “ordinary” Australians could easily find themselves in. In these ways it serves to buck against conservative alienation of those in detention, and against conservative attitudes toward self and community in general.

Ben Ellis’s *These People* continues with the themes of his former works, but transports the debate onto the topical discussion of asylum seekers. Geoffrey Milne has written on the rise of drama dealing with asylum-seekers and their detention over recent years in Australia. Most of this drama has been confined to fringe companies. Ellis’s play represents one of the earliest presentations of the issue by a mainstream company (albeit in STC’s “Blueprints” rather than its main season). While dealing with a different issue, there are echoes of his earlier works in the acceptance by characters of the conservative ideology of the nineties, and in their inability to connect the suffering of others to their own lives.



*These People* is written in a non-naturalistic style, and this allows Ellis to push the bounds of his satire of the acceptance of conservative rhetoric, for example, in the play's opening father-daughter exchange:

Father: The family is the most important unit in society.

Daughter: And without any knowledge of life on other planets, that applies to the universe. (*These People* 1)

Economic rationalist ideals are parodied in the Daughter's fantasy sexual fantasies, in a scene that echoes the economic-textbook seduction scene of *Falling Petals*:

Having flicked past the question in the Sunday newspaper's more serious bits, she muses, Who are the heroes of this younger generation? Accountants who have worked out superannuation [. . .] She keeps secret photographs of Paul Clitheroe. Imagines him suggesting when to roll over funds, the superannuation, when she leaves Woolworths [. . .] Mr Clitheroe is a very sexy man. He knows what to do with her future money. (4)

The behaviour of asylum seekers is portrayed as irrational because they do not adhere to economic rationalist ideals: "They don't pay off" (7). The Mother utilises the weight-loss metaphor, used by Rayson's characters to defend economic rationalism in *Competitive Tenderness*, in order to justify the government's border protection policy: "The whole country needs its stomach stapled. Too many people. It's bursting with struggles and languages and obesity. That's what border protection is about. A national diet. We were unhappy—[. . .] maybe we still are—but thanks to border protection we are more confident. Smaller" (22). Border protection is thus linked with "rationality" and the "natural" need to downsize. In this context the asylum seekers are portrayed as irrational and selfish. Their actions, being denied the

opportunity to be “right”, are necessarily portrayed this way: “Attention-seeking selfish slasher [. . .] Ah. Selfish! [. . .] The Son thinks about the fires the detainee probably lit. For attention [. . .] Selfish” (20). The Father sees the actions of the asylum seekers as an irrational refusal to face “reality”: “On the National Wankfest Network. Hears of drownings at sea. Again [. . .] One hundred and fifty children kept floating up. For attention [. . .] Welcome to the world, arseholes. Life’s just tougher for some” (12), while the Daughter finds even the attempt to come to terms with the asylum seekers’ side of the debate an affront to her ideology: “She can’t wait to stop weighing evidence for the sake of teachers’ balance. She likes economics—the ultimate objective is not balance, but a rush for the opposite. Wealth” (6).

These distancing techniques are disrupted through the play by the juxtaposition of the lives of the asylum seekers with the day to day lives of the family. The mother catches the son masturbating and comments: “She caught him. . . self-abusing [. . .] Daily acts of self-harm? By adults and children? [. . .] Including cutting, ingesting shampoo and hunger strikes” (2). The son believes that “Hunger strikes are useless”, but admits that “The son has been a day without food himself since the all-nighter—tripping on acid, dancing on ecstasy, and running” (7), rendering absurd the “alien-ness” of the self-starving behaviour. Similarly, the daughter’s inability to comprehend the clothing dictates of other nations is satirised and rendered ironic by her own concerns: “Imagine being forced by your religion to wear the veil. She considers the items on the bed for tomorrow. She doesn’t like her stomach, her belly—which is why she got it pierced [. . .] She’ll wear a midriff top. Choices. Choices. The question is, how much midriff to show?” (5). The distinction made by the family between “rational” behaviour and the “irrational” behaviour of the asylum seekers is deconstructed, the behaviour of the economic rationalist

consumers shown as perhaps more strange, in that their actions occur without the intense context of the asylum seekers' plights.

Similarly, while there is a clear distinction between the comfortable lives of the family and the harsh struggles of the asylum seekers, the family's self-satisfied existence is shown to be less than stable. *These People* demonstrates the ease with which an "ordinary" person can become one of "these people". The manner in which the family blame the asylum seekers for their plight is rendered ridiculous by the precariousness of their own economic rationalist existence: "stressed out. By all the building work created by the First Home Buyers Grant. If the Reserve Bank puts rates up a quarter of a percent, he's screwed [. . .] A quarter of a percent will kill his way of life" (11). The son is locked up when, under a drug fantasy, he is unable to rationally account for himself (49,50), just as Lyn comments on the refugees: "He was rejected at the first thing because [. . .] Any inconsistency... But traumatised people can't remember anything" (33). The parallel is drummed home by the play's finale:

Father: [. . .] He struggles for breath.

[To the family] We've got to get out of here.

Newspaper says, 'Hundreds Flee by Boat as Wall of Fire Races on Homes'.

The fires weren't meant to happen here. [. . .] Clouds of smoke and soot gather around the family and their home.

Son: Until none of them are sure—

Mother: Exactly where it is they are—

Father: Or where they will arrive. (54)

The delineations between the “rational” existence of the family and “irrational” existence of the asylum seekers are thus completely destroyed.

Reviews for *These People* were more positive than for Ellis’s earlier work. While Colin Rose found the piece too didactic: “There’s nothing in Ellis’s shallow critique of consumerism that will worry ideologues in whatever political camp [. . .] If he can curb the tendency to sermonise, he may well write a great play. In the meantime, those in the audience, collect your parcel of guilt on the way out” (“No Hiding Place from Blame” 28), Stephen Dunne was more sympathetic to the play, claiming “Even though it doesn’t all work it’s wonderful to see new Australian writing that is culturally relevant, theatrically imaginative and daring [. . .] The point is about disconnection: the way we abstract distant suffering” (19). John McCallum was most positive, claiming that “there is a moral passion and outrage lurking beneath a dazzlingly clever wryness and gleeful feeling for the absurd [. . .] *These People* is not about the stories of the detainees, although some of those are told. It is about the refusal by Australians to listen to those stories [. . .] It all ends in a fearfully apocalyptic vision of a country that has turned its back on humanity and lost its soul” (“Parody of Suburbia in Crisis” 9). If the reviews are to be believed, then, it would seem that with *These People*, Ellis has approached a more successful marriage of his political critique and satiric abstract form.

*These People* again satirises the unthinking acceptance of the logic of economic rationalism, and the attendant lack of compassion for others, and juxtaposes it onto the asylum seeker debate. The play depicts a “typical” Australian family and the manner in which it distances itself from, and blames asylum seekers for the plight they are in. Through its satire and juxtapositions, the play deconstructs this attitude, and demonstrates the extent to which the family’s life is similar to that

of those they ridicule, and how easily their circumstances might place them in a similar plight. In its dark satire it attempts to undermine the conservative attitudes of mainstream Australia, and to offer a more compassionate view.

It would be dangerous to take Ellis's work as indicative of any homogenous "youth" voice. The work of younger authors infiltrating the mainstream (as well as those outside it) would offer much room for further analysis. However, his work is included here as an indication that the themes discussed above are not merely the territory of the aging Boomer authors. In *Post Felicity*, *Falling Petals* and *These People*, Ellis sets up conservative ideology as an unquestioned norm, and has his characters act according to economic rationalist, non-compassionate, dictates.

Through his dark satire, Ellis undermines the hypocrisy and futility of these attitudes and re-establishes the value of attitudes of kindness and social engagement, which in these plays have been prematurely thrown away.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation has attempted to trace some of the political tendencies manifested in the work of a number of the most successful mainstream playwrights of the 1990s. During the early part of the decade, playwrights frequently reflected and promoted the growing conservative belief in the immutability of economic rationalism, and displayed a cynicism towards compassion, social justice and change. The latter part of the decade and the first years of the twenty-first century saw a revision in many works of these attitudes, and an attempt to recover the previously discarded leftist ideals in the face of an increasingly conservative political climate.

The drama of the late sixties and early seventies in Australia was related to the broader social movements occurring at the time. There was a concurrent criticism of tradition and conformity as a negative rather than positive thing, and a critique of social regulation as arbitrary and enforced, and therefore alterable. There was an attack on US imperialism and Australia's traditional perception of itself in terms of regional and world hierarchies. Attitudes to other races were criticised as conforming mindlessly to racist stereotypes, and attitudes to women, likewise, were problematised in terms of their hypocrisy and subservience to structures of oppression. The capitalist system was critiqued as constructed, rather than "natural", and the ideology which serves it shown as hollow. Overall, the drama of the New Wave saw a focus on change and on the potential for and need to overthrow existing structures of thought and oppression.

The period from 1975 to 1988 was marked by a revisionism, both at a political and at a theatrical level, of the previous era's radical aims. Politicians and playwrights alike turned from reforming the system toward working within it, and

hopes for radical change to a large extent died. Works by upcoming authors such as Nowra and Sewell emphasised this shift, dealing with decaying ideals and the internalisation by the oppressed of the standards of their oppressors. The generational shift was re-cast and the perception of a youthful generation overthrowing the beliefs of their more conservative predecessors was reconsidered and cast in more hesitant, if not completely pessimistic, light. In drama by women and minorities, too, the focus shifted to working within the system rather than overthrowing it. Clearly the politics of the eighties was to at least some extent reflected in the period's drama, and the decline in radical aims and optimism evident therein.

The late eighties and early nineties saw the so-called "fall of communism" and the use of these events, despite the contextual complications, by conservative commentators to posit a pseudo-scientific binary between capitalism as "realistic" and "natural" and successful, and socialism as "ideological", "imposed" and "proven" to fail. In the absence of any strong local communist movement, the right seized upon "political correctness" as a location-point for its arguments of leftist totalitarianism. Attempts to recognise and legislate for minorities' rights were exaggerated and generalised in order to invalidate them and to posit them as a threat, and to facilitate the myth of the dominance of the left. The assumption of socialism's "death", the naturalisation of economic rationalism, the image of the dominant left, the portrayal of social justice and equality as "ideological" and imposed, the reversal of oppressor/victim binaries and the focus on individual social concerns were aspects of early nineties conservative rhetoric which were to gain steady currency throughout the decade and which would play a large part in defining the drama of the early nineties.

The plays of the early nineties appear to conform to the growing conservative momentum. Plays such as David Williamson's *Money and Friends*, Katherine Thomson's *Diving for Pearls* and Tony McNamara's *The John Wayne Principle* are examples of the belief in the triumph of free-market capitalism over any possible alternative. In these plays, there is little sense of economic rationalism as unstable or as untenable. Rather, it is portrayed as pervasive and at times naturalised as the only potential system. In Williamson's play, for instance, there is little alternative posited to the characters' greed, and acts of kindness, when they occur, only do so to the extent that they are able to be rationalised within an economic framework, that is, when kindness advances, rather than contradicting, monetary competition. There is no sense of any viable resistance to these ideals. Indeed, those characters who do rebel are ultimately, for better or worse, converted to capitalist ideals.

Compassion, in this framework, is seen as an outdated notion, a sign of subservience to "ideology" rather than "realist" concerns. Louis Nowra's *Cosi* portrays a conflict between Marxist social concerns and more "universal" (read: non-rebellious) values such as love and fidelity, in which the proponents of the former are deconstructed and shown as hollow and superficial, and the latter values are subsequently reinforced and shown as more "real". Michael Gow's *Sweet Phoebe* deals with a well-off, insular couple's search for a lost dog, and displays the manner in which their forced interaction with a broader social spectrum achieves no good and serves only to undermine the happiness of their inward-looking existence. David Williamson's *Sanctuary* offers a critique of "moral ferocity" in which the young idealist is revealed not only to be a selfish capitalist, whose claims to social justice are a façade, but argues that his idealism is more dangerous and violent than his opponent's selfish greed. Joanna Murray-Smith's *Redemption*, similarly, undermines



the character concerned with social justice and compassion, revealing his altruism to be a mere veneer to mask selfish motives, and, furthermore, a veneer which is harmful and leads directly to social harm. In these plays, desire to do social good is deconstructed and painted as an “ideological” façade, as an illusion which achieves no good, and sometimes is the cause of harm.

Many of the plays of the early nineties revise the generational tableau of earlier works, portraying a family structure where the boomers are in ascendancy and the older generation is depicted as dying. There is, in these works, a frequent nostalgia for the older generation, which is depicted as not-so-bad as previous depictions had made out. Elizabeth Coleman’s *It’s My Party (and I’ll Die if I Want to)* suggests that the dying patriarch’s children are less oppressed than suffering from a “victim mentality”, a staple of conservative rhetoric during the period. David Williamson’s *Dead White Males* and Stephen Sewell’s *The Garden of Granddaughters* depict with similar sympathy aging patriarchs, while simultaneously undermining and critiquing the sixties attitudes, particularly but not only feminism, of their boomer children. The changes fought for in the sixties are presented as an ideological façade, and the older generation, despite their flaws, are portrayed as sympathetic and honest, “real” in contrast to those who kow-tow to “political correctness”. Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Honour* depicts a similar conflict in feminism, with younger feminists critiqued as selfish and power-hungry, validating instead more “traditional”, subservient female roles of times past.

Feminism is a recurring target in early nineties drama, as it was in conservative anti-political correctness rhetoric. Peta Murray’s popular relationship drama *Wallflowering* depicts a relationship which is almost destroyed by feminism, here portrayed as based on surface clichés rather than contextual analysis, and as

blindly obedient to its core ideology at the expense of those it wishes to “save”. The play ultimately reaffirms the “traditional” relationship, insular, unquestioned, and resistant to change, over any more recent models. Hannie Rayson’s *Falling from Grace* critiques radical and Marxist feminisms, satirising the feminist so blinkered by ideology that she fails to achieve her aims. Even the supposedly liberal feminist central characters are a revision of feminism. Their ideals take second place to economic imperatives and the driving desire to find a man. Murray-Smith’s *Love Child* depicts a familiar anti-feminist trope, that of the sixties feminist mother confronted by the child she never had. Here all of the mother’s feminist attitudes, her faith in social justice and compassion, as well as individual reason, are portrayed as nothing more than ideological rhetoric designed to cover the lack inside at the choice she made, due to social pressure, read “political correctness”, to eschew the traditional maternal role.

The plays of the early nineties, then, represent a significant revision of the sixties’ drama’s belief in social justice, compassion and structural change. They echo the era’s conservative rhetoric in their depiction of economic rationalism as natural and triumphant, their rejection of social equity and compassion as imposed and “ideological”, and masks for baser desires. They revision the generational tableau, attempting to recoup lost respect for the values of pre-sixties Australia, and rewrite the history of feminism as one of “unnatural” acquiescence to dogma at the expense of more “genuine” concerns.

The following period represents something of a contrast. Politically, the late nineties and early twenty-first century has seen a solidification of the conservative ideology of the early nineties, and an intensification of its adoption in the mainstream. Politicians such as Pauline Hanson, and subsequently, John Howard,

have successfully adopted anti-political-correctness rhetoric in order to advance their political careers. Economic rationalist rhetoric has become the norm as it becomes increasingly untenable for any politician to argue a case not fundamentally premised on economic “reality”. Under the Howard government attacks on welfare, on the rights of Indigenous Australians, on refugees and migrants, and on women have frequently been grounded in the same individualist, competitive language and the same reversal of oppressor-victim dichotomies which marked the conservative arguments of the previous period. Despite, or perhaps because of, this increase in the acceptance of such ideology, the drama of recent times has been marked by a reversal by some of the more successful mainstream authors of their conservative tendencies, and the recovery of a number of the previous era’s values.

David Williamson’s work of the late nineties demonstrates a more critical attitude toward conservative discourse. In *Heretic*, many of the same conflicts arise as in *Dead White Males*, but here Williamson is more careful to balance the scales, recognising that all subject positions are based on social context, and coming to terms with the benefits of the sixties, particularly with regard to feminism, as well as simply its problems. While there is still a focus on a type of “human nature”, Williamson balances this with a recognition of human agency and the potential for humans to overcome mere competitive biology and to sculpt society for good. In *Corporate Vibes* and *Face to Face* Williamson deals with the legacy of economic rationalism on the workplace, and argues against its inevitability. In these plays, economic imperatives are demonstrated as frequently incompatible with successful business and, even where this is not the case, he revives the sixties notion of “quality of life”, that is, of non-economically-based measures for success, as necessary. In these plays, social context is important, and it is economic rationalism’s reductive

discourse that is portrayed as “ideological”, and compassion as the antidote to its problems.

In *After the Ball* and in *The Great Man*, Williamson presents a portrayal of the family, again, in generational tableau. *After the Ball* differs from *Dead White Males* in that, while it presents the Boomer generation and its dying predecessors, it moves temporally through a number of decades, both emphasising the role of social context in creating human values, and allowing the older generation to be presented in its prime, and thus at its height as an oppressive force, and thus avoids complicity with conservative notions of a monolithic powerful left. *The Great Man* depicts a slightly different generational conflict, with the Boomers now the dying generation, and their predecessors assessing their legacy. Boomer, “sixties” ideals are here to some extent revived, while the dying Jack is critiqued and seen as having sold out his ideals, the nineties’ economic rationalist solution is also rejected, and the living characters resolve to appropriate the good elements of Jack’s philosophy in order to work for a more just and equitable future.

Hannie Rayson’s writing exhibits a similar rewriting. In *Scenes from a Separation* she deconstructs the barrier between the personal and political, between “reality” and “ideology”, as the central character’s politics are seen as intrinsic to the failure of his relationship. The play also deconstructs the notion of traditional relationships and the accompanying fear of change. In *Competitive Tenderness* Rayson satirises the rhetoric of economic rationalism, making clear that downsizing is both irrational and self-defeating. Resistance, in both of these plays, is portrayed as both necessary and possible.

*Life After George* engages with similar arguments to Williamson’s *The Great Man*, dealing with the boomers’ selling out to economic rationalist ideals. As with

Williamson's play, the legacy of the sixties is here assessed by those left behind, and again, while there is recognition of George's failures, his ideals and recognition of the need for class-based analysis and resistance are seen as valuable, and as providing a form of hope for the future. Rayson's most recent play, *Inheritance*, meanwhile, openly engages with the Pauline Hanson phenomenon, and, while critiquing racism in rural Australia, also functions as a broader critique of individualist competitiveness and offers a call for the oppressed to recognise the need for solidarity and an acknowledgement of the difference between working toward equity and social change and rebellion motivated purely by self-interest.

In Joanna Murray-Smith's recent work, she sets up similar situations to her earlier work, only to deconstruct them. In *Nightfall* she establishes a relationship which privileges the idea of nuclear family, interiority, and pragmatism over idealism. Into the picture is thrust a lost child, portrayed as "morally righteous", fashionably rather than due to any real suffering. As the play progresses, though, this image is torn down when it is revealed that the daughter's anger is in fact well founded, and that it is the conservative traditional family which is the illusion, a cover story for the abuse of power linked intrinsically to competitive acquisition. Ultimately it validates the need for morality and idealism to usurp this power. In *Rapture*, similarly we are presented with a couple given to consumerism rather than ideals, conformist and fearful of anything which may disrupt the traditional nuclear family and its values. These characters are confronted by friends who have abandoned their successful capitalist lifestyles in order to seek "spiritual" happiness. This is initially seen as delusory and pretentious, but as the plot moves on it is, again the consumerist couple whose lives are revealed as based on superficiality and illusion, masking a deeper unhappiness, and again, compassion and the desire to help

others, even “change the world” is offered as a solution to the emptiness of an economic rationalist existence.

Stephen Sewell's *The Sick Room* also sets up a family with fairly conservative values, who put “pragmatism” over idealism. They are, again, economic rationalists who see competitiveness as inherent. In this case, the stability of their beliefs is threatened by the terminal illness of their daughter, and they are forced to question their acceptance of their ideals. Compassion and social change are here recovered from the scrapheap of discarded ideals (evident in laughing suggestions of helping starving children) and seen as a necessary aspect of fulfilment in life, as opposed to the hollow facades of economic rationalism. In his most recent work, *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*, Sewell delivers an even more scathing critique of a society which has swallowed the conservative rhetoric of the nineties, where Marxism is outdated, intellectualism is something to be opposed, belief in change is equated with competitive envy, and academic rigour has been displaced by concerns with trends and marketability; the highest goal for a scholar is to be published by Jackie Collins' publisher. Set in the post-September 11 anti-terrorist climate, Sewell literalises the sense of economic rationalism as an ideological façade by having his characters unable to see the central character's brutal imprisonment and torture, instead blaming him and claiming his wounds are self-inflicted. The play argues that the only remedy for this blindness is to see beyond the mirage of pessimism and futility with which the left has crippled itself, and to recapture the belief in morality, social change, resistance and compassion which are the only way in which society can avoid self-destructing due to its own mythology.

Ben Ellis's work represents a younger author's take on contemporary politics. Through his plays *Post Felicity*, *Falling Petals* and *These People*, Ellis satirises contemporary Australia's acceptance of economic rationalism, the divisiveness and lack of compassion inherent in contemporary mindsets, the difficulty of rebellion when faced with previous generations' betrayal of revolutionary aims, and the hypocrisy of attempts to ostracise and deny our common humanity. Ellis offers a bleak vision which contains criticism in common with the plays of elder authors, but are perhaps less optimistic in their vision of the future.

Drama in Australia in the 1990s has been intrinsically linked to the changing political climate. The plays of the early nineties frequently reflect conservative rhetoric in their rejection of compassion and the drive for social equality, their acceptance of economic rationalism as natural, and their subsequent cynicism toward the desire for social change. The plays of the late nineties and early twenty-first century, in contrast, can often be seen as a rebuttal of these playwrights' earlier work, as well as the political climate, and a recovery, in a forward-looking rather than nostalgic sense, of ideals which the disillusionment of the early part of the decade had led them to prematurely abandon.

There is always a risk when presenting an overview that one might close off avenues of argument prematurely, leading to an overly narrow vision of the subject in question. It is not my intent here to present a single vision of Australian drama at the turn of the century as *the* interpretation of this period. Drama in this country remains a non-homogenous entity with many variations and conflicting directions.

What I have attempted to do is to draw out a number of tendencies which I see as recurring and as engaging with one another consistently over the last thirty or

forty years. No doubt other authors will uncover other debates, other conversations between texts. But it has been my aim here to present one such analysis, and to examine the manner in which, throughout this confluence, mainstream texts can be seen to support both radical and conservative political arguments at various times.

In terms of my initial question, as to the political position that mainstream drama in this country takes if we see it as not necessarily, by virtue of its form, inherently conservative, I would argue that the evidence seems to indicate a swing in the mid nineties from conservative to more radical politics. Whether this is indicative of an intrinsic desire among authors to be oppositional, thus critiquing Labor in the early nineties and the Liberal party in the latter period, or whether it took the dramatic increase in the swing to conservatism to drive the playwrights in question to re-engage with political radicalism, or whether there are other factors operating which I have overlooked, is a potentially fruitful matter for future debate. However, I think I have demonstrated that, if we avoid the homogenisation of *all* mainstream drama as inherently conservative, it is possible to see both radical and conservative tendencies within text-based drama, and that these tendencies are capable of both reinforcing and challenging the prevailing winds of contemporary politics at any time. It is my hope that the above analysis has proven that it is illuminating, too, to examine these texts in terms of the political discourse evident in society as a whole, and that an awareness of the ways in which this discourse functions in theatrical texts may make us more aware of the ways in which it functions in the media and in political speeches. In this regard I believe that analysis of dramatic texts can be relevant beyond providing knowledge of drama itself.

In terms of the literature on Australian drama, I hope that this dissertation has gone some way toward remedying the absence of discussion on mainstream



Australian drama over the last ten or fifteen years. The above overview makes no pretence at being exhaustive, and while I hope it provides a reliable broad analysis, it is also my hope that it will provide a springboard for further analysis. It is my belief that it is the interplay between broad studies and more tightly focussed studies which enables us to obtain a more complete picture of the drama of any period, and that further instances of both would be advantageous and enriching. I hope that I have demonstrated that there is room for the study of mainstream drama, and for analysis of playwriting in broad political terms, as well as the engagement with subjectivities and form present in other accounts. For while this account has aimed for some degree of scope, there remains, as ever, a great deal more to learn.

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