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Failed Footballer

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Abstract
I've decided not to try and give a carefully thought out and lucid account of the development of contemporary Australian Drama as I'm being followed by Gareth Griffiths who'll do it much better. I thought it might be interesting to give you a potted account of my experiences as an Australian dramatist which might give you some kind of feel for the peculiarities and specifics of our theatre scene. The talk will be full of unsubstantiated generalities, wild overstatement and blatant self advertisement.
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I’m being followed by Gareth Griffiths who’ll do it much better. I thought it might be interesting to give you a potted account of my experiences as an Australian dramatist which might give you some kind of feel for the peculiarities and specifics of our theatre scene. The talk will be full of unsubstantiated generalities, wild overstatement and blatant self advertisement.

My motivation for becoming a writer, as is the case with most Australian writers, was that I failed at sport. I was marked out by my height and family history of proficiency for future football (Australian rules) stardom. Height is a great advantage in Australian rules football so my whole family gloated as I grew taller and taller. They were also mildly impressed that I did well at school. A footballer is one thing but an intelligent footballer is even better. When my testing time came, however, the hopes of my family were shattered. On the rare occasions I managed to grab the ball I stood there confused and wondered what to do with it. A family conference rethought my future and came up with that perennial Australian second best. A doctor. Unfortunately somebody merely had to say the word blood, and I got queasy. I had the obligatory masculine matriculation of maths, physics and chemistry so I ended up studying Mechanical Engineering at University because it had the least amount of compulsory chemistry, a rote learning subject I loathed. I was not really highly motivated. I can remember walking into the engineering buildings for my first look at what went on and feeling slightly nauseous at the sight of a row of big greasy machines. I had a secret desire to write but kept this to myself for fear of being thought odd or insane. I told my father that I thought engineering really wasn’t for me, but he thought I should do it so I’d have something to ‘fall back on’, so I finished my degree and promptly fell back on it.

I taught engineering for seven years and wrote. My connection with student revues at University had given me a liking for writing dialogue so I decided to be a dramatist. Unbeknowns to me, obstacles were in my way. Our large state subsidized theatres
were in the hands of Englishmen who quite unconsciously (and not in bad faith) took their main brief to be one of educating and uplifting the beer-swilling natives. Occasionally a new Australian play of quality emerged like *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, but such was the extent of our feeling of cultural inadequacy that its writer, Ray Lawler, had to be persuaded that it was good enough for performance by one of the dreaded Englishmen, John Sumner. There are still Australians around who, despite its critical and box office success around the world, still think that 'that dreadfully crude play' should never have been shown abroad. The idea that literature and plays, whenever they did occur, should be a kind of public relations exercise to improve the image of Australia abroad, had already emerged. After all our tennis players were on the wane, our swimmers weren’t winning gold medals any more—perhaps we could catch the world’s attention with our dazzling culture, but more of that later.

As well as infiltrating our theatres, another stealthy English invasion was taking place. Britishers from the midlands were taking over the teaching of English in Australian universities, bringing with them the fiery gospel of Leavis. The world was in intellectual and moral decline. Only true adherence to the faith could save us. The result of this movement was that Australian universities turned out thousands upon thousands of B.A. (Hons) with a heightened sense of their culture’s inadequacies and only one career available to them. That of a critic.

All in all it was a pretty forbidding climate for a would-be writer to enter. Luckily, however, being an engineer I knew nothing of all this and kept on happily typing and at about this time in Sydney and Melbourne, small alternative theatres, La Mama in Melbourne, Jane Street and Nimrod in Sydney started operating. These theatres, founded because of actors’ and directors’ dissatisfaction with the state-subsidised monoliths, were actively looking for new Australian plays. Betty Burstall, who founded La Mama where I first had short plays performed, set it up specifically as a writers’ theatre. The plays proved popular with audiences,
critics relented and the large theatres started doing new Australian plays regularly.

Most of the plays and playwrights tended to be ambivalent about their culture, satirising its materialism, male chauvinism and aggression but delighting in its energy and exuberance. The plays weren’t naturalistic plays of the ‘peel the onion and reveal the motive forces of human behaviour’ type but tended to be plays which observed ongoing social processes. My own plays were concerned with the way people behaved and interacted socially – the way in which they used language and gesture to display themselves, to defend themselves, to capture attention, to try and win love, respect or envy.

The inevitable question arose when my play *The Removalists* won a share of the English George Devine Award. Just how good is our local lad? Has he got what it takes to become a contender for the world heavyweight drama crown? They were soon answered. When the play opened at London’s Royal Court Theatre in 1973 the general tone of the English critics was one of outrage. *The Financial Times* said that it had always suspected that life in Australia was mean, brutal and short and its worst fears had been verified. Migration should cease immediately. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* said that watching the play was like being kicked in the face by a boot. Back home I was almost on trial for treason. Not only had I lost Wimbledon, but I’d appeared on centre court drunk, kicked the umpire, knocked out my opponent and sworn at the crowd.

The situation was further confused by the fact that a lot of the late appearing heavy weight journals gave the play excellent notices and by the fact that it subsequently went on to win a more coveted award than the George Devine, *The Evening Standard* most promising playwright.

My experiences underlined what the novelist Tom Keneally had once said about the dangers of being a writer in Australia. You were discovered, given premature canonisation, the artistic hopes of Australia placed on your shoulders, then if you happened to
have a critical reverse you were subjected to savage retribution and you spent the rest of your life wandering from bar to bar wondering why you weren’t Dostoievsky. I felt as if I knew what he was talking about.