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History and Drama—The Mt Kembla Mine Disaster 1902

Abstract
Bernard Shaw once claimed that history should be taught through historical fiction. His argument, semi facetious, was that only works of imagination can give the full experience of events—the emotional and sensory experience as well as the intellectual and factual. A good historical drama such as Wendy Richardson's Windy Gully can do this and more. The huge and many faceted event that was the Mt Kembla mine disaster is distilled to two hours on the stage and the human dimension of it is made accessible to an audience.

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History and Drama—The Mt Kembla Mine Disaster 1902

Des Davis

Bernard Shaw once claimed that history should be taught through historical fiction. His argument, semi facetious, was that only works of imagination can give the full experience of events—the emotional and sensory experience as well as the intellectual and factual. A good historical drama such as Wendy Richardson's *Windy Gully* can do this and more. The huge and many faceted event that was the Mt Kembla mine disaster is distilled to two hours on the stage and the human dimension of it is made accessible to an audience.

The playwright has described the context of the play as the struggle between men who risk their money and men who risk their lives. Her sympathies in that struggle are obvious in the very first scene. It is an atmospheric scene. First we hear the sound of digging and an ethereal singing of the song "Windy Gully", a song evoking the sadness of the place and the occasion. Then a funeral procession enters with the cast singing "Rock of Ages". It is the funeral of Andy Markwell, coal miner. After the brief service there is some muted conversation. Significant is the information that the relief fund for Andy is twelve pounds and eight shillings a week for the widow. Andy's mate Victor registers the disgust.

VICTOR: Twelve quid eh! And eight bob a week....

There follows twelve scenes in the heart of the play portraying for us the life of a mining village at the beginning of the last century. Each scene is coloured by our knowledge of the impending tragedy. These scenes feature the Markwell family, Andy and Hannah and their children and neighbours. We meet them first as the children come home from school and Andy and Ben come home from the mine. The hardship and poverty of their circumstances are contrasted with the simple joys and the love which binds them. As Hannah scrubs his back in their weekly tub ritual, Andy muses on the job

ANDY: Oh, Hannie, it's hell in that four foot tunnel. If I don't

draw better in the next cavil this back's going to play up no end.

A flashback scene of the myths and legends of the mining community shows us three brief scenes of strikes and scabs. Again the writer's allegiances are clear as the children recite:

"When a scab walks down the street men turn their backs, the angels weep in heaven, and the devil shuts the gates of hell to keep them out."

The scenes shown, all based on actual events, reflect another theme of the writer—the strength of the women in this community. They stop the train bringing scabs, they bravely confront management, and they cruelly capture and tar and feather one scab.

HENRY: Cured him of scabbin' it did. Mum said probably cured him of the drink too.

The Sunday School Picnic is another scene of community fun (including an hilarious billy goat race). A strange ominous note reflecting once again the class differences of the time is the appearance of mine owner Ebenezer Vickery to distribute the prizes. He says nothing but is a frightening sepulchral figure in black. We will meet him again in the second act delivering a speech on mining conditions and defending with startling hypocrisy the use of children and other abominations in the working conditions of the time. This speech is taken absolutely literally from the Parliamentary Hansard. (At one performance of the play a slightly inebriated miner shouted, "*The bastards are still doing it*".) In a multiple location scene typical of the play, Vickery's speech is juxtaposed with a mimed scene played behind a scrim of miners working under difficulties and a scene showing the hardship of the women's lives. The point is obvious.

Act 2 Scene 5 "Door to Door" is an interesting piece of theatre. At one level it gives us a picture of one aspect of village life, the traveling salesmen—baker, butcher, grocer, hawker, and photographer. The theatrical fun is that each salesman in turn is played by the one actor, the one who plays all the outsiders, benevolent as the salesmen, or malevolent as Vickery, or mysterious as the Ferryman. And there are the usual "terminal moments" to remind us of the coming tragedy—the Photographer's *"still as the grave",* the hawker's black ribbon which appears on the hat at the funeral.

One of the most poignant theatrical moments is in the soccer game scene. The game is played entirely "off stage". We see it

through the reactions of the watching crowd. Fortunes flow back and forth, excitement builds, then suddenly the spectators' actions become stylized in slow motion while the young woman emerges from the crowd and sings a haunting little song we heard previously from the children:

"Tell me tell me when you grow up,
Tell me tell me where we'll find you"

The fate of some at least of the players is foreshadowed and the effect is of pathos. In fact we are told in the final scene that eight of the soccer eleven died in the pit. The human dimension of the disaster is made manifest.

The final scene before the disaster is titled "The Premonition". It is a quiet little domestic scene with Andy and Hannah a few nights before the disaster. It very cleverly reminds us of the coming tragedy and the pathos of lives to be affected—the soccer team, Mickey Brennan, Ben, Dungey, and of course the Markwells themselves. It subtly hints at the causes behind the tragedy—the overworked deputy *"he's spread too thin and he knows it";* the "blowers" that have "*scared the hell out of Mickey Brennan";* the dreadful working conditions *"cow of a place where Vic and I have caviled, worse than before."* Most of all it leaves us with a tender if idealised image of our protagonists, made doubly poignant by the verse sung by the Ferryman to end the scene.

"*See him toil up the incline in the wind and the rain,*
He's been home for an evening, now he's back down again,
To dig coal for the company, in the darkness to slave,
For a poverty wage and a sure early grave."

Then comes the explosion itself. Film could give a more literal sense of the physical impact but what live actors convey are the fear and the panic—emotions never far beneath the surface in a mining community. So the scene begins with a collage of events just before the explosion—the schoolroom in the village, a wife calling her small children, miners working (seen again through the scrim cloth) and ironically an enquiry then in progress in Wollongong on mine safety—everyday events. Then comes suddenly the tremendous sound effect of an explosion, which lifts the audience from their seats in shock. And normality disappears. Bodies fly through the air (some slow motion choreography) and the explosion is followed by sounds of chaos, people running, screams, horses, the mine whistle etc. As the actors "rush" to the scene, they simultaneously narrate the scenes of chaos, often as their characters. The long scene portrays for us details of the horror, the fear, the desperate attempts at rescue and

the frustration of inadequate equipment. At two points lists of the victims are intoned: one the young boys with their ages and the single word "dead" followed by the mine whistle, a haunting image; the other the grown men and families recited by the Ferryman as a background to the frantic action.

The pace slows as the emotions are further personalised in the central character, Hannah Markwell, as she desperately seeks word of her husband and children in the mine. The climax of the long scene is the news that Andy has been found.

> VICTOR: We've found him. It's like I thought. He was slowed down. Trying to help two blokes. They're all dead.

The scene transforms into the funeral—the same scene as opens the play. The singing of "Rock of Ages" is now interspersed with a sober recital of some facts of the tragedy—the number dead, the McCabe funeral, the one miner Mickey Brennan who was never found, the eight of the soccer eleven dead, the mass grave. Finally the ferryman sings the sad song "The Price of the Coal" and another transformation takes us to the epilogue and the final Windy Gully song. The whole effect is a powerful evocation of the personal tragedies involved in the disaster.

The Mt Kembla mine disaster remains a significant myth in the community life not only of the village but of the whole city of Wollongong. This was evidenced in the centennial commemorative events held in July 2002. This powerful play with its evocation of the life of the community as well as the disaster has drawn large audiences in three separate seasons at the Bridge Theatre as well as a national tour in 1989. It has been published by Currency Press.