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Focus on South Australia

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Australian talent in Australian commercial theatre suddenly seems to be burgeoning. *A Chorus Line* with its Australian cast, probably the biggest venture of 1977, has, we hear, won outstanding praise from its originators the Americans, who apparently think the original cast wasn’t as good as this one; and Messrs Brodziak and Edgley have already found it a financially rewarding exercise. Parachute Productions are also very happy about the way *Time Out Next Year*, with Graeme Blundell and Nancye Hayes, has been going on its nationwide tour. Wilton Morley, managing director of Parachute, is convinced that what Australians want is to see Australians — not the TV show names previously agreed where *That Jazz* is concerned — perhaps the producers of *Trade* are doing well with a healthy Australian bias at the Parade, and three classics, two Russian and one Australian (*Esson’s *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*) at their “classics” venue the Drama Theatre. The MTC has two Australian plays at Russell Street, but at the Athenaeum, where they have stated it will be “possible to ‘rub shoulders’ with great writing . . . that has something to say for all time”, of the four plays not one is Australian. They may not be so long-established as the works from older countries . . . produced classic works that speak down through place and time, and surely they have more relevance to our way of life? The critical response has been so negative in Melbourne that the promoters are apparently thinking of never touring that kind of production there again.

If the Australian content is booming in the commercial world, how is it faring in the subsidised theatres at present? The *Old Tote* are doing well with a healthy Australian bias at the Parade, and three classics, two Russian and one Australian (*Esson’s *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*) at their “classics” venue the Drama Theatre. The MTC has two Australian plays at Russell Street, but at the Athenaeum, where they have stated it will be “possible to ‘rub shoulders’ with great writing . . . that has something to say for all time”, of the four plays not one is Australian. They may not be so long-established as the works from older countries ours, but surely we too have produced classic works that speak down through place and time, and surely they have more relevance to our way of life? This segregation of the Australian from the “classics” would seem to be going against what is in the founding charter of the Australia Council; the giving of a national character to Australian art. If this bears any relation to what grant funding is for, it is worth considering what policies of excluding Australian plays from the realm of “the great” and “the classic” are doing to our drama’s national identity.

The *School for Scandal* opened both the MTC and the SATC 1977 seasons; inevitably comparisons were made and it seems the Adelaide production came off considerably better. The SATC is to a great extent in the hands of Englishmen from this year; with Colin George as artistic director, Roger Chapman as head of TIE, and Rodney Ford as designer, and indeed all have established their artistic credentials very quickly and impressively since arriving. However sparkling the productions, though, there is the worry that Adelaide’s major theatre company will be relying too heavily on European stalwarts, like the *Scandal* and *The Cherry Orchard* that start its season. Are the giants of subsidised theatre following the line that is basic to commercial theatre: that of getting the maximum audiences, and not looking enough to their, in some ways, privileged positions of being able to consider before audience-ratings, the importance in the national artistic context of the plays they can put on?

Adelaide has always liked to feel that with her lies the truest appreciation of the arts, and especially the theatre arts; after all, they’ve built the Festival Centre to prove it. But is Adelaide more the home of good PR? This month we have an interview with that past-master of PR, Don Dunstan, who talks about his arts policies. The Festival Centre complex is closely scrutinised and the South Australian Theatre Company assessed, as are its present director and his predecessor.

As Mr Dunstan has often shown, good presentation, though it may not be everything, certainly helps a lot, especially when there’s also something good to be presented. We (as you may have noticed) think Australian theatre is good and therefore deserves to be presented as well as possible; our new partnership with Melbourne printer Norman Field is enabling *Theatre Australia* to become a much better-looking magazine. We hope that this will help us to act as a more effective ambassador for the theatre arts of this country, both at home and abroad, where our own brand and style of theatre, writers, actors, directors and designers must become an important force and one to be reckoned with.
people they once knew . . .

My mother always stocks the cupboards when we go away . . . I have two friends who have drinking problems . . . Yes I’ve known film directors just like that . . . Yes she’s like an actress I know, terribly delightful at parties, but you wouldn’t want her as your best friend . . . I know a professor who does funny voices and moves furniture around . . . Why would someone offer their wife to their best friend? Do you know anybody who’s done that? . . . Does anybody know anyone who has affairs with men as well as women?

Everybody is enjoying themselves. The room begins to sound like a joyous encounter group without the green grass. One by one they slip tentatively into their characters slippers, sandals, cowboy boots and cork shoes . . . The wouldn’t-he’s turn into wouldn’t-t’s . . .

Obviously part of the barrier is broken down because we’ve shared that childhood thing . . . I think it comes out of a sense of righteous indignation. A kind of Scorpio thing . . . It’s constant paranoia, isn’t it? . . . I don’t think calling someone a clown is all that awful . . .

By the end of the second week, the play is beginning to take some sort of clumsily moving shape. Our director, I notice, now begins to start to mould that shape.

They begin to try out various moves of their own. The pervading atmosphere of happy concentrated involvement, I notice, is very productive. Our director sits like a calming anchor on his side of the chalk line and gently pushes each to contribute towards defining the underlying motivations and attitudes behind each scene and line. Even the moves and actions are related back to intent.

"How would you feel under all those shocks? I think that I’d just sit there . . . Don’t worry about the exact moves yet. Amble a bit and see how you feel . . . Take a moment to think of everything that occurs to you before you ask them in . . ."

SALLY, MARK WHAT A SURPRISE! JILL, I KNOW IT’S A CLICHE BUT YOU HAVEN’T CHANGED A BIT . . . "No don’t sit there, that’s the coffee tray . . ."

Sod by happy sod, the gaps are filled in and each character is placed in living, breathing, drinking, copulating, habit-ridden, the somebody-we-all-knew-somewhere reality.

Our director, slowly rubbing his Hamlet chin reassures us that there is no rush to find all the answers yet, that we are all involved in a growing process and that some of the larger truths will only come later in their own time. Everybody looks happily forward to that time.

It is week three of my life as an observer. Scripts are down. Lines are not. Objectives
Parade Theatre:
OLD TOTE (663 6122)
Drama Theatre, Opera House:
Upstairs:
Squeezum, Leo Taylor as Ramble, RonRoger as Constant, Linden Wilkinson as Wilkinson. (Railway Institute, Penrith, 11-22 May; Civic Centre, Bankstown, 25-29 May.)

Dicks. With Ron Hackett, Vola Vandere, Leo Taylor, Ron Roger, Linden
by Henry Fielding, adapted by Bernard Miles of the Mermaid Theatre, London. Designer, Arthur Dicks; director, Doreen Warburton. With Ron Hackett as Mr Squeezum, Vola Vandere as Mrs Lock Up Your Daughters

Q THEATRE, Penrith (047 21 5735)
by Jim Wann and Bland Simpson. Director, Terry O'Connell, designer, Fred Lynn. (14-24 Apr.)

Diamond Studs

ST JAMES LUNCHTIME PLAYHOUSE (232 8570)
The Couch by Mary Drake. Directors, Peter Williams and Ida Marchant. (To 13 May.)

SEYMOUR CENTRE (692 0555)
York: Goldberg and Solomon. (To 30 Apr.)
Downstairs: Sunny South by George Darrell. Director, David Marr. A Sydney University Dramatic Society production. (27 Apr.—14 May.)

SPEAKEASY THEATRE RESTAURANT, Kensington (663 7442)
Son of Naked Vicar by Barry Creyton.

THEATRE ROYAL (231 6577)
Lauder. A one-man show on the life and songs of Harry Lauder devised and presented by Jimmy Logan. (To 7 May.)

UNIVERSITY OF NSW OPERA (662 3412)
Science Theatre: Joan of Arc (Verdi) in Italian: Director, Bernd Benthaak; musical director, Roger Covell. (28, 31 May.)

QUEENSLAND ARTS THEATRE (36 2344)
How the Other Half Loves by Alan Ayckbourn. Director, Kevin Radbourne; designer, Jennifer Raudbourne. With Frank Foster, Jack E. Brown; Fiona Foster, Mary Anne Haslam; Bob Phillips, Alan Hough; Teresa Phillips, Gabrielle Scott; William Featherstone, Michael Downey; Mary Featherston, Christine Kelly. (14 Apr.—14 May.)

Abelard and Heloise by Ronald Miller. Director, Ian Thomson; designer Ian Thomson. With Ian Grealy, Toni Pankhurst, Jeff Hayes, Desoree Taylor, Dorothy Bucknall. (19 May—18 June.)

CAMERATA (36 6561)
A Winter’s Tale by William Shakespeare. Director, David Gittins; designer, Claire Bremner. With Ken Parker, Wendy Nugent, Alan Kleidon, Richard Michael, Robyn Torney, Rosemary Paine, Stephen Sorrensen, Paul Benn, Bill Weir. (7 Apr.—7 May; Avalon, St Lucia.)
(From 19 May The Seagull by Chekov.)

HER MAJESTY’S (221 2777)
Doctor in Love by Richard Gordon. Produced by Gary van Egmond and Paul Dainty. With Robin Nedwell, Geoffrey Davies. (From 9 May.)

LA BOITE (36 2296)
Grease by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey. Director, Graeme Johnston. With Sean Mee, Sally Bannerman, Dale Day, Jo Hardie, Graeme Hattrick, Paul Hasler. (29 Apr.—4 June.)

QUEENSLAND BALLET (229 3355)
Twelfth Night Theatre: (52 5889)
Don Pasquale (Donnizetti; in English)
On piano tour in Ayr (Home Hill, 20 Apr.; Townsville, 21 Apr.; Innisfail, 23 Apr.; Cairns, 25 Apr.; Rockhampton, 28 Apr.; Gladstone, 30 Apr.) Producer, John Thompson, designer, James Ridewood, musical director, Graeme Young. Maz Irwin as Don Pasquale, Arthur Johnson as Ernesto, Sally Robertson as Novina, Denis White as the Notary.

THEATRE ROYAL (221 7749)
Don Pasquale (Donnizetti; in English)

SOUTH AUSTRALIA ARTS THEATRE (87 5777)
How the Other Half Loves by Alan Ayckbourn. Director, Peter Wilkins. (23 Apr.—7 May.)
A Children’s Show by Ian and Pamela Johnston. (14-28 May.)

FESTIVAL CENTRE (51 2292)
The Space: Jack the Ripper by Ron Pemberton and Dennis de Marne. Director, Brian Debnam. Adelaide Theatre Group Production. From 7 May.

Q THEATRE (223 5651)
Mad Like Lasseter by Graham Sheil. Director, Bill O’Day. (20 Apr.—21 May: Wed. and Sat. only.)

The Reluctant Debutante by William Douglas Home. Director, Frank Gargro. (From 1 June.)

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN THEATRE COMPANY (51 5151)
Just Ruth with Ruth Cracknell. Director, Colin George; designer, Rodney Ford. (5—21 May.)

All My Sons by Arthur Miller. Director, David Williamson; designer, John Cervenka. (26 May—18 June.)

TASMANIA THEATRE ROYAL (34 6266)
Count Dracula. Director, John Unicombe. (To 30 Apr.)

University Revue. The Old Nick Theatre Company. (6-21 May.)
The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin by
Phar Lap — It’s Cingalese for Lightning Y’Know by Steve Mastare.

The Hills Family Show (From 5 May.)

Lauder, devised, created and performed by Jimmy Logan. Presented by Paul Elliott (From 11 May.)

GUILD THEATRE, MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY (347 4186) Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie. A new, adult production of the original script. (19-23 Apr. and 26-30 Apr.)

HER MAJESTY’S THEATRE (663 3211) The Twenties and All That Jazz. A musical recollection with John Diedrich, Caroline Gilmer and John O’May. Musical director, Micael Tyack; choreography, Jilliam Fitzgerald; design, Trina Parker. Presented by J.C. Williamson Productions Ltd. and Michael Edgley International Pty. Ltd. (From 16 Apr.)

L.A MAMA (347 6085) Syntactic Switches. A night of experimental music. Chris Mann and Warren Burt. (To 24 Apr.)

Music with Moves. Connections, David Tolley and Dure Dara; cinema, James Clayden.

Syntactic Switches. A night of experimental music.
THEATRE FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

DIANE SHARPE, production manager, Old Tote Theatre Company and ATYP:

"There are two purposes to my visit overseas. The first relates to, but is not the direct outcome of, the Armidale Project. I shall be looking at how the performing arts are developing in disadvantaged areas — which, inevitably, at the moment, have industrial troubles and high migrant populations.

"There is a drift to developing such community activity here, so it is well to see the situation in Manchester and Newcastle-upon-Tyne — what's working and especially what's not working.

"The other purpose is to examine arts administration courses in England, which will include the general meeting of regional theatre in Watford. I have severe doubts about the worth and efficiency of arts administration courses as they are set up anywhere in the world. The three- or six-month crash courses at Harvard and Yale have immense drawbacks; twelve months' placement in a theatre company here just isn't enough. Trainees need three years of practice backed by solid theory — an apprenticeship in fact.

"More courses in this area are being set up here, in Victoria and South Australia. What I want to do is find the strengths and weaknesses of what is happening in English polytechnics and Arts Council courses so that we can incorporate the best and, hopefully, avoid the pitfalls here."

AFTER THE DOLL

RAY LAWLER, playwright: "The Doll trilogy is to be published in October as a hardback threesome by Currency Press. At the moment I'm revising it for publication; the stage directions now have come at the front of the play and there are certain scenes to sharpen up now I've seen the whole three run together.

"There had been doubts all along the way in the long process of writing the plays, and though I wouldn't personally attempt to assess them, I am very pleased now it is complete. I suppose my greatest response was one of relief, when they ran together, that they did integrate.

"Someone said, 'Why not write the whole 17 summers?' But that would be my idea of hell. It is now whole; there is definitely no more. There has been criticism, too, of the traditional style, but it is not written 17 years onwards but 17 years back — and hence the style. I could have written one as an expressionistic piece but it would have jarred impossibly. I can understand that people say, "Why write it at all?", but not that other parts should have been written using more modern techniques.

"I work in close touch with the grass-roots, its rhythms and slang. But even the way the Doll is now played has changed, though that upward kick of Australian speech remains. Writing like that, I feel I couldn't write a modern Australian play because of the change in grass-roots modes of speaking. O'Casey has the same concerns, and that, my love for his work and the 10 years I spent in Ireland, make it especially pleasing to direct Juno and the Paycock [opens 5 May], the first of his plays I've tackled. After being away from practical theatre for so long, it is good to be back. One can lose touch. But John [Sumner] believes I must have time off to write more — but not on the Doll."

ADMINISTRATION

ELIZABETH SWEETING: "An Arts Administration course, business-oriented and of a year's duration is currently being planned in Adelaide. Anyone interested in being kept in touch with its development should write to: Elizabeth Sweeting, c/o Arts Council of SA, 458 Morphett Street, Adelaide. It would be helpful if inquiries included details of qualifications and past and present experience.

"I have worked in Adelaide now for one year and have made two previous visits. Working around Australia in the arts I have found that there is a need for further training in business subjects and with secondment to arts organisations, as well as in the performing arts, music and the visual arts. As art continues to develop this need increases: we must be able to take our students and some professional actors."

BACK TO PERTH

RAYMOND OMÖDE: "First of all, I'm very flattered that the University of Western Australia has chosen me to be its first director-in-residence. The appointment starts on 13 June and lasts for six weeks; the university wanted three months, but I couldn't manage that. I'm also very moved, as I was a part of those productive years in the sixties when university drama there flourished as in no other state. And I'm excited as the university is full of very varied venues for productions. I will be conducting a series of workshops for all students, not just those in the English Department, and some informal lecturing, culminating at the end with a production possibly with both students and some professional actors. This will either be a suitable classic related to studies, or else something quite different; two plays I'm very interested in at the moment are Wedekind's Spring Awakening and a little-known Strindberg called The Keys of Heaven.

"I'm always delighted to return to Perth: the audiences are in many ways more demanding. They never took to the subscription scheme, so theatre really has to entertain and stimulate to get people in, unlike most capitals, where there are people all through a run because they have already bought their tickets. Word of mouth is the way things work over there. Hamlet was sold out before the reviews even came out!"

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

HAYES GORDON, director Ensemble Theatre: "We were approached by the New York agent of Medal of Honor Rag by Tom Cole (in itself a pleasant change from customary procedures). We read the play. 'Yes indeed, may we?' There were problems of course, including casting, topicality and the fact that it was a very short play. A long one-actor.

"The cast? We found it in Arnie Goldman, Lindsay Norriss and Fred Steele.

"Whatever went with it, as something must, would have to match in some manner. Everyone at the Ensemble engaged in a frantic play-reading spree. Suddenly it was there. A long-time project of actress Margie Brown — Alison Mary Fagan, by David Selbourne and directed by Michael O'Reilly — and finally presented one Sunday night for an invited audience.

"Alison has become disturbed in her search for identity. The subject of Medal of Honor has become disturbed mostly from being confronted by his identity. Would the plays work together?

"Would they work at all? You tell us."

NEW HOME FOR HOLE?

JOHN MILSON, director, Hole-in-the-Wall Theatre: "The real problem facing the Hole at the moment is the bugbear of costs. We've been playing to full houses, but with a limited number of seats it's becoming a difficult situation. We're constantly looking for some suitable old building close to the city. Something I'm very excited about is the return of Western Australian Judy Nunn (of The Box fame) to Perth for a season. Running as a late-
night show concurrently with Travesties, in which she will have a part, Judy will be appearing in the famous one-woman show, Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice*, so she will be doing two shows a night!

**UNDISTINGUISHED EFFORT**

**DAVID BLENKINSOP, director, Festival of Perth:** "You want a quote from me on planning next year's festival? This one, 1977, had some interesting results. In particular the Western Australian community supported its own companies very well and innovations such as the street theatre had excellent attendances. As for visiting companies, I think the APG presented an interesting play, and might have done even better in a different venue; I suppose a lot of people were put off by the expectation of 'serious culture' on campus, and the usual campus audiences didn't respond. As for the Old Tote, even though The Plough and the Stars had a distinguished director, a distinguished cast and a distinguished designer, it drew less than 18 per cent audiences. There could have been a more worthy effort from Australia's leading theatre company."

**DREAM COME TRUE**

**DAVID ADDENBROKE, director, A Midsummer Night's Dream:** "I'm very excited and flattered that Tony Frewin and David Gyger in his comments on the Australian Opera's performances of *Carmen* (Theatre Australia, Feb/March), writes of the conductor Russell Channell 'depriving the soloists of their applause'. I was not present at the performance in question, but would nevertheless condemn your reviewer's "star performer" attitude, which can only reduce the presentation of any opera to a series of virtuoso displays. Even an opera such as Carmen, with its number of set-pieces, benefits enormously by being allowed its dramatic and musical continuity to be preserved, uninterrupted by the bouts of inane clapping so beloved of the Sydney opera set. No work is left untouched: once the indefatigable and really dedicated clappers detect that tonic chord, or once the singers seem to realize that the curtain makes the slightest motion in a downwards direction, down go the chocolates, and they're off. Any music that happens to be playing at the time is, of course, lost. And Mr Gyger apparently inaccuracy was brought to my attention by the Australian Film Com- minister of Scottish Opera."

**ASTONISHING ABORIGINAL PLAY**

At the beginning of 1975 a new play opened the Black Theatre season in Redfern, Sydney. This play was *The Cakeman* by Robert Merritt. Now two years later it is being presented by the Aboriginal Arts Board at the Bondi Pavilion Theatre for a season of six weeks beginning Friday, 29 April. The director is George Ogilvie, the designer Wendy Dickson, with film segments by Gill Armstrong and a cast including Brian Syron, Justine Saunders and Max Cullen.

**POM PLAYS AND REVIVALS**

**JOHN BELL, artistic director, Nimrod:** "Revivals and three Pom plays may seem a change from Nimrod policy, but not actually. We are doing nine Australian plays this year, as well as the two Shakespeareans and Travesties. Promoting the three as a jubilee season was just a selling-point — and then done with a very large tongue in a very small cheek.

The two revivals are there because some plays have a longer life than the four and five weeks of the first run. It's a pity not to let larger audiences see them. And some plays have become in some sense hallmarks of the Nimrod style: plays like *Mates and Brothers*, *Benjamin Franklin* and *Mach Ado* are ones we have become known for. I quite like the idea of building up a repertoire though I'm not saying that we will keep these around for years.

"If only touring were cheaper! It works with *Benjamin and Brothers*, but anything beyond a four-hander we just couldn't manage. A Shakespeare is obviously out of the question. Without touring, the only way to get the plays before more people is to revive them. But it's not as if we're being mandated, unlike the Opera Company, where virtually nothing is new.

"It's a matter of trying to find variations on opening a new production once every three weeks on average. Even so, we are all putting in more time than ever and we are tending to burn people up more quickly.

"And the future? I certainly don't want the building to get any bigger; it's fine as it stands, at least for the next five years."

**LETTERS**

I am writing to point out a mistake in your normally accurate reporting; in this instance, in the February-March issue, "On tap — Films" by Barry Lowe.

I refer to paragraph four and the film *Or*, in particular: "This film has been sold for a ludicrously small amount and is to undergo the supreme insult of being dubbed into American."

The incorrectness was brought to my attention by the Australian Film Commission's agent in New York, Jim Henry, and the American distribution house who have bought the American distribution rights. The distributor is not dubbing into American, but is remixing tracks to make the Australian accents clearer for American ears. He also intends making the reggae sound deeper to increase the film's rock appeal.

Further, the deal negotiated was for a substantial "up-front" guarantee and thereafter a percentage of the box office, so that the sales results will depend on the film's success in the States. The sale was not cash outright, as suggested in your article.

**REA FRANCIS, Director, Public Relations, Australian Film Commission.**

David Gyger in his comments on the Australian Opera's performances of *Carmen* (Theatre Australia, Feb/March), writes of the conductor Russell Channell "depriving the soloists of their applause". I was not present at the performance in question, but would nevertheless condemn your reviewer's "star performer" attitude, which can only reduce the presentation of any opera to a series of virtuoso displays. Even an opera such as Carmen, with its number of set-pieces, benefits enormously by being allowed its dramatic and musical continuity to be preserved, uninterrupted by the hoots of inane clapping so beloved of the Sydney opera set. No work is left untouched: once the indefatigable and really dedicated clappers detect that tonic chord, or once the singers seem to have ceased their labours temporarily, or once the curtain makes the slightest motion in a downwards direction, down go the chocolates, and they're off. Any music that happens to be playing at the time is, of course, lost. And Mr Gyger apparently inaccuracy was brought to my attention by the Australian Film Com- minister of Scottish Opera."

"With double the budget of Scottish Opera available to him here, we are confident his presence will help further develop and consolidate Australian Opera."

"There is no one available at present in Australia with such wealth of experience and ability (apart from John Winther, who resigned recently). We are delighted that Peter Hemmings will be joining us."

**OPERA POST**

Peter Hemmings has been appointed general manager of the Australian Opera, his appointment being effective from October.

**CHARLES J. BERG, chairman, Australian Opera,** comments: "Peter Hemmings has had a brilliant career and can go no further at present in Britain, having been at Sadler's Wells, then general administrator of Scottish Opera.

"With double the budget of Scottish Opera available to him here, we are confident his presence will help further develop and consolidate Australian Opera."

"There is no one available at present in Australia with such wealth of experience and ability (apart from John Winther, who resigned recently). We are delighted that Peter Hemmings will be joining us."

**BRIAN FITZGERALD,**

Neutral Bay, NSW.
This year’s ‘Playwrights’ Conference’ now called *Theatre Forum* will be held at the A.N.U. Canberra from 15-29 May. It looks like being the most exciting yet as Richard Wherrett, the artistic director, and Bill Shanahan, the administrator explain.

It has become clear in the course of the four conferences that the event exists on a far wider scale than just the workshopping of plays. It is a coming together of all top personnel in theatre in Australia; hence, we have settled on a new title for this year’s conference: Theatre Forum.

The workshopping of plays remains the central focal point of the event, around which seminars, discussions and additional play-readings take place.

The aim of the conference is to give promising new writers practical playwriting skills by working on their scripts with top professional actors and directors in the rehearsal situation. Scripts are submitted to the conference playwriting committee from all over Australia, and from these, a final six are chosen for workshop at the conference. This year, however, eight plays will be workshopped, four being one-act plays and four full-length plays. In addition, new playwrights whose plays have not been chosen for workshop, but whose work, it is felt, shows talent, are invited to attend the conference as observers to the workshop programme. The opportunity to attend the conference as a paying observer is also open to any member of the public.

The conference committee feels that the work it is doing is of great importance, not only because of the training and practical experience that it affords new playwrights, but also because it brings the playwright into contact with professional people who will be able to help and guide him in the future. As well, it brings members of the profession together for stimulation and the exchange of ideas — an exchange which, given Australia’s geographical problems, would be otherwise impossible.

In terms of these areas of activity, this year’s conference is shaping up as one of the most exciting yet.

The 85 plays submitted were of a particularly high standard, and the final selection includes such notable writers as Steve J. Spears, Kenneth Ross, Roger Pulvers and Tim Gooding. Plays to be work-

### National Theatre Awards

The 1976 National Theatre Awards will be presented at the 1977 Theatre Forum, National Playwrights’ Conference, in May. These are to be professional awards resting solely on the votes of members of the theatre industry. Actors, directors, designers, writers and stage crew are therefore asked to vote on the nominations listed below, which are the result of a national poll of critics. There is an extra space for those who wish to vote for someone other than those nominated.

*Votes received after 10 May 1977 cannot be considered.*

If you are eligible to vote, fill in the form below (or make out a list) and post to: 1976 National Theatre Awards Theatre Australia 7 President Place New Lambton Heights NSW 2305

If you are not eligible to vote, you may still wish to fill in the form and keep it so that you can compare your selections with the results of the poll.

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shopped at this year's conference are:

*Don't Piddle Against the Wind, Mate*, by Kenneth Ross; *King Richard*, by Steve J. Spears; *Rock-ola*, by Tim Gooding; *Strangulation*, by Malcolm Purcell; *Eat*, by Timothy Morrell; *The Two-Way Mirror*, by Debbie Oswald; *Dream Girl*, by Rivka Hartman; *Yamashita*, by Roger Pulvers.

Actors participating in this year's conference include some of the top names in Australian Theatre: Jacki Weaver, Monica Maughan, Kris McGuade, Angela Punch, Janice Finn, Celia De Burgh, Chris Haywood, Tony Llewellyn-Jones, Kevin Miles, Robin Ramsay, Alan Edwards and David Waters.

The artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company, Alan Edwards, and author/director Ron Blair are two of the four directors who will lead the workshopping of the plays at this year's conference.

Dramaturges assisting the new playwrights include eminent Australian playwright Dorothy Hewett and the chairman of the playreading committee of the conference, Helen van der Poorten.

The conference is particularly honoured to have among its special guests John Osborne, one of Britain's most distinguished playwrights for more than 20 years, whose plays include *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *Luther*, *A Patriot for Me*, *West of Suez*, and more recently, *Watch It Come Down*.

We are also excited to have one of Britain's most controversial playwrights of the seventies, Howard Brenton, author of *Christie in Love*, *Revenge*, *Magnificence*, a contemporary adaptation of *Measure for Measure and Weapons of Happiness*, which was commissioned by the National Theatre in 1975.

As Osborne attained his prominence through the Royal Court Theatre in London, so has Howard Brenton who was resident director of the Royal Court in 1972-3.

Other guests so far confirmed are Helen Dawson, former drama critic of the London Observer and Plays and Players, Helen Montagu, general manager of H. M. Tennants (London), and Robin Dalton, a leading literary agent. Negotiations continue for another guest, hopefully from America or Europe.

The programme of the conference includes a daily seminar on all aspects of theatre productions, politics and policies. Some of the proposed subjects for discussion are:

- Artists without Unions
- Playwrights — Percentages and Promotions
- The Fringe
- The Critics' Forum
- The Relationship between Unions and Management

Speakers at seminars will include: John Bell, Katherine Brisbane, Alex Buzo, Graeme Blundell, Hilary Linstead, Kip Porteous, Ken Southgate, John Timlin and David Williamson.

This year, in conjunction with the conference, the Australian Film and Television School will hold a workshop on all aspects of writing for the visual media. Participants in both conferences will mix freely and have opportunities to exchange ideas on formal and informal levels.

The conference will welcome any inquiries from interested parties. These inquiries should be made to Bill Shanahan, Old Tote Limited, P.O. Box 30, Beaconsfield, NSW, 2019. Tel: 699 9322.
"The sadness ... is that no one had the courage to design a theatre that took account of the age we live in"

At my official introduction to the Festival Centre, when only the main hall (designed to cope with every art form from symphony to opera to ballet to drama, to chamber music and solo recital) was on view, I was, I thought, just and modest in my praise. This, I found, is not always the attitude Adelaide residents enjoy in a national critic.

When, some time after, I came over to inspect the almost-completed drama section of the centre, the Playhouse, and when, a little later again, I came to the opening performance in the theatre, I was even more modest in praise.

Those attached to the Playhouse had led me around it exhaustively, and where I was most impressed and full of praise for the luxury of the backstage accommodation for the players, and for the grand scale of the theatre company's permanent production and training areas, the theatre itself left me depressed.

Filled with details of the fly tower, of how capacious the grid was, of how many sets could be flown; shown the vomitories, the clean floor of the stage ("No revolves or any of that unnecessary nonsense"), and also noticing for myself the inflexibility of the theatre, I came away more than a little sad.

As so often in this country, great sums of money had been spent by people not truly fitted for their design tasks.

Just as I had earlier offended the then chairman of the Festival Trust by saying that his beloved metallic sculpture on the main ground-floor promenade looked exactly like disguised outlets for the air-conditioning, I now upset some of the Playhouse men by my opinion that it was certainly the best Victorian theatre built in Australia for a hundred years.

I have not produced in the Playhouse, and am never likely to, but in the practical terms of proscenium-arch theatre I have no doubt it all works very well. The sadness to my mind is that no one had the courage to design a theatre that took account of the age we live in. I am not saying that, because the majority of the population is now habituated to the tight shots and subtle playing of the best television, live theatre should reproduce this. But being part of the action, feeling the involvement of the one-shot and the two-shot, appreciating the fine gradations of acting and communication that television achieves — these are all qualities of the drama that a modern theatre should note.

All manner of ways of changing the cast-audience relationship can be managed these days: a number of stages can be made to revolve around a static audience; the audience can revolve around a stage, can swivel and tilt seating as desired; there can be several concentric circles seating an audience which can revolve in different directions, and at different levels if need be — some looking down on stage, some looking up. Closed circuit TV, multi-channel sound in the theatre chair, all are possible.

The variations and arrangements can be an endless game, but I am sure that somewhere amongst all these notions of mine on a possible "modern" theatre lies a devisal that will give new and major challenges to playwrights. When O'Neill tried, in Strange Interlude, to bring off a double level of communication he could only do it by continuous asides, not easy to make work. Modern sound systems could do it with ten channels to spare.

This is a part of what I feel about the Playhouse, as well as subsequent theatre complexes such as Sydney's more recent Seymour Centre. They have no modernity, the audience of 1820 would have been perfectly comfortable in them.
"The shapes are clear, sharply defined against the sky, white, joyful."

This article is an architectural summing-up of the Festival Theatre.

History: The Festival Centre will house the biennial Adelaide festivals. The site was chosen in 1969, work began in 1970, the Festival Theatre was opened in 1973. The architects were Hassel and Partners. Funds were provided mostly by the South Australian Government.

Design: One of the problems of designing a theatre is bringing the stagehouse into the general composition of the building. The facades usually enclose foyers. They are human spaces, of human scale and architectural expression.

The stagehouse is an alien shape, windowless, abstract, dominant. The classical solution used to be either to force it under the same roof as the theatre or to express it in the same architectural terms and scale as the facades.

At the Festival Theatre the stagehouse is clearly stated as a form of its own. So is the auditorium. The building is a composition of two volumes, brought together by the neutral, horizontal lines of the plaza.

The shapes are clear, sharply defined against the sky, white, joyful. With the Playhouse they form a cluster of glittering concrete tents softened by the surrounding trees of the park. Tents are associated with sideshows, circuses, celebrations. They are good forms to suggest a centre of festivity.

From the white tents, long white lines of terraces descend towards the green lawn and the river. It's a happy landscape.

There is a place for criticism. Some details, like the balustrade — and this applies to the interior, too — are too heavy. People seem to be secondary to the scale. The intersections of concrete planes which form the tents — intersections which should have a razor-edge quality — are made with raised borders. The concept of the simple shape loses its simplicity. The surfaces look put together.

The ridges converge at two points. It was a frightening moment when I saw the roofs as hoods of an immense baby carriage. I am trying to forget it.

The Plaza. The plaza is constructed of mushroom units. A tapering column with cantilevered beams carries a platform. I hope the unit is self-supporting and does not rely for stability on connection with other units, though the shape suggests otherwise. It would be nice to see some of them standing alone where shelter is needed, isolated notes of a tune.

They're slender, elegant and useful. They will give order and architectural unity to spaces to be created when functions related to the theatre will not fit in any more into the volume of the tent. (See remarks on kitchen below.)

Only two stairs lead down from the plaza to the garden. This makes the terraces isolated. I would have liked to see a closer relationship, of rivulets of stairs overflowing the terraces everywhere, making the gardens an extension of the plaza. Maybe they will come. Terraces, stairs, paved areas, lawn; what a splendid world of festivity that would be.

Foyers. The lounges surround the auditorium from all sides. They follow the balconies on the upper levels. It is all one space, under the sloping roof of the main structure.

There is ample room to move around. There are views of buildings beyond, of the plaza, of the park and lights, and of the audience silhouetted against them. A forceful scale of few details. Strong, simple colours: red, white and black. It has a festival atmosphere of expectancy.

Yet it is an undefined space, rather restless. There again like the plaza the different levels of the concourse are isolated, the only link between them is the main stair on the front. A series of stairs in the side foyer would have created a unified

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and dramatic place, a great stage setting for the audience to perform on during the intervals.

**Auditorium.** It's a multi-purpose hall, to seat in the Continental way about 2,000, in stalls, two balconies, and boxes. No seat is further away from the stage than 100 feet. Visibility from every seat is good. The theatre is horseshoe shaped. A wide band of secondary rooms, entrances, stairs, ducts, lavatories isolates the auditorium from the noise of the foyers.

It is a splendid room. Piercing the brown broken clouds of walls and ceiling, the illuminated spaceships (boxes) descend on the molten lava of crimson sunset (seats). We are in a world where anything may happen. We feel adventurous.

But do we Australians take our leisure too seriously? The architecture is brave, the hall beautiful and the details harmonious. Maybe it is my being conditioned to interiors where baroque plaster ladies carry the load of the architectural design that I find the hall just a bit solemn. Oh, for a gesture of frivolity in our interiors for spectacles. But not Miro, please.

**Stage and Orchestra Pit.** The stage, apart from the proscenium opening — which can vary from 40 feet to 51 feet to suit all sorts of productions — is traditional. No mechanical tricks, all scenery is flown. But there is ample unbroken area surrounding the acting stage, and storage spaces make it eminently suitable for repertory production. Technical consultant was Tom Brown, working at present on Sir Roy Grounds' Melbourne Cultural Centre.

The orchestra pit holds 90 players. Full orchestra for concerts can have 100 musicians and a choir of 200. The orchestra shell, which transforms the stage from a theatre into a concert hall is flown and can be put in position in two hours. Tiered for the choir are erected in one day.

**Acoustics.** The hall has adjustable acoustics, to suit sound required. According to the acoustical consultants, Pryce, Goodale and Duncan, the concert hall configuration with the shell in place gives a reverberation time of two seconds. For opera (small cast, an orchestra of 45) the time was 1.5. I am not very musical and until my betters pronounce judgement all I can say is that the operas I’ve heard never sounded better. One of them, The Marriage of Figaro, I heard a number of times before by the same cast in different theatres and I thought their voices had improved greatly. Over to Mr Covell.

**Bar and Restaurant.** Rooms to relax and watch the world around. Glass walls give views of the glimmering foyers and Adelaide asleep in the darkness. But those horizontal, suspended beams, supporting sparse light fittings, must be removed, removed last, and forgotten.

Both rooms are up to their full capacity on important occasions, and I am sure the kitchen is about to burst at its seams. Another set of glass doors must be installed to stop icy draughts from the hills freezing diners already in bad tempers due to floating beams and execrable food.

**Art.** There will be plenty of art at the Festival Theatre. Adorning the walls at present is a tapestry by John Coburn and paintings by Sidney Nolan and Fred Williams. Excellent as they are as works of art, they are all wrong here.

This has nothing to do with their artistic merits. But in a building where the play of forms is so forceful you just can't hang pictures for decoration. Even if they are of the size of Sidney Nolan's "Snake", made up of 324 panels of great delicacy, to be viewed from a distance of two feet.

Pictures for the foyers should be in harmony with the architecture, in size, design, colour schemes. They should be part of the concept of space.

This happens once. The statue of Max Lyle in the entrance foyer shows complete unity between architect and sculptor.

It started with a delightful architectural mistake. The first landing of the grand staircase is thrust unconventionally into the foyer to give more space below. Unfortunately, this space had a headroom of six feet only, clearly dangerous in a world of growing youth. So for safety reasons the space had to be made inaccessible. This was done by commissioning the statue that looks like a heap of bent air-conditioning, to fill the space. It does.

**Summary.** The Festival Theatre is an excellent building, the Festival Centre will be one of the most interesting townscapes of our times. The concept is simple, realistic and inspiring. With it Adelaide has established itself as truly the Festival City of Australia.

**FOOTNOTE:** Readers may notice that nowhere in this article has any reference, allusion, comparison been made to the Sydney Opera House. It was a strain.

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*This article first appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and is published with the Herald's permission. George Molnar is Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of New South Wales and is a Herald cartoonist.*
A one-woman show for Ruth Cracknell is in preparation. Some of the sketches will be contributed by Ruth herself; others by noted Australian playwrights.

I first saw Ruth Cracknell in *Habeas Corpus* in Sydney. It was a public dress rehearsal in the middle of which this intense performer did a "double take" (no, I recall it was a "treble take") on the two gentlemen — for whom her character was consumed with lust — standing on either side of her. The comic expertise of this particular piece of "business" dazzled in the manner only a few performers such as Jacques Tati or Charlie Chaplin achieve. The fact that I instinctively grasp for comparison actors both associated with mimed visual effect is significant; having just directed Ruth as Mrs Candour in *The School for Scandal*, I can testify to her skill in delivering Sheridan's elaborate dialogue and drinking a cup of chocolate at the same time, so that the action underscores and helps to punctuate the spoken word. In her performance, Mrs Candour's passion for gossip veers towards the manic as she devours each new scandalous titbit like a half-starved vulture. As she swoops around the stage, one is immediately held by her intensity — a word I used earlier about Ruth. That this commitment should be present in her work on Madame Ranevsky in *The Cherry Orchard* (now in rehearsal) one anticipated; one was still not prepared for the depth of feeling and nuance that this performer can also offer.

Such a preambles to *Just Ruth* may seem protracted, but this is the only introduction I can offer. Talking with Ruth after *Habeas* in Sydney, we found we shared much common theatre interest — and admired the sort of theatrical approach or "philosophy" exemplified by the late Sir Tyrone Guthrie. I was aware that here was an Australian performer denied the impetus and opportunity that the English theatre and television world offers merely by virtue of its size. (Who is to say that in England, Ruth would not have her own television series?) From my point of view as the newly appointed director of the SATC, I needed something contemporary for our first season, something Australian, something to help balance a steady, classical programme. Together with another new play, a show written by Ruth, and for Ruth by Australian writers, seemed the sort of challenge a subsidised company should snatch up unhesitatingly.

As I write, our mutual obsession is the axe that is sounding through *The Cherry Orchard*. Soon, however, we shall be wrestling and tangling with a host of different characters (not so very different, perhaps), many the creation of Ruth's own fertile imagination, others conjured up by writers such as David Williamson, Michael Cove, Peter Yeldham, Alex Buzo, Ron Blair and John McKellar. What work we include, what we omit, what ideas we expand, what suggestions we put to music, will depend on the inspiration and frustration of a month's intense rehearsal — always in the shadow of the evening magic of Chekhov. This is useful I think, to work on something new in the theatre while performing a theatrical masterpiece at night is sobering to any professional, and can usefully sharpen one's awareness. Three or four of Ruth's "ladies" will be holding forth and weaving their way through *Just Ruth*. The balloon of the pompous will be pricked, the harassed and the bewildered find a voice, and the Pom invasion heartily deplored. (What else can you do when your director and designer are English?) At the piano will be Sybil Graham to add invaluable contribution when required; and the guts of the evening will be Australian — a mix as incredible as that "treble take". With some of the critics in Adelaide positively clamouring for "relevance", and the audience anywhere ever-responsive to the immediate, a production built around a solo performer can effectively foray into the contemporary scene. If some of our rehearsal is spent ransacking the local papers for themes and ideas, we are in good company: Chekhov did the same thing.

So ends my catechism; but some of those who have offered contributions, Peter Yeldham, Michael Cove, David Williamson and Alex Buzo, here write about their individual participation. Their thoughts are an indication of the evening's, like Cleopatra's, "variety".
Michael Cove:
The idea for Fields of Offerings was easy enough to come by, and the actual authorship of the play presented, as it turned out, equally few problems.

I should say that Fields of Offerings, is the title of a 15-minute scene that I have put up for the Just Ruth show. Colin George, when at Armidale, commissioned a one-act play which turned out to be Family Lore. The Jewish theme appealed to him (and to me), and when we discussed my writing a scene for Ruth Cracknell, it was fairly obvious that the idea of a Jewish character should be mooted.

Now, writing for a known performer makes selection of material in some ways simple: I didn't think of a traditional Jewish momma, a "ballabusta", when I thought of Ruth's face. But another sort of Jewish woman was suggested, and Fields is that person.

I took the commission to write for Just Ruth mainly because of the technical challenge inherent in it: first, and most obviously, the business of writing a monologue. As it happened, I didn't find special problems in that, although I supposed I should be able to provide a boring theory about the problems of the dynamics in one-person scenes. Can't, sorry. I had the same disappointment in writing The Gift: I got myself set up for the challenge of writing a two-hander, then forgot about it. If the one person is right, the scene happens. If the entire Seventh Cavalry has nothing to offer, all their files and drums won't help.

I've already mentioned one advantage of writing for a known performer; another, in the case of Just Ruth, is the advantage of knowing that the performer who is the object of the exercise is very good. I must say that creates warmth but doesn't change my approach to the job: I always write in the expectation that the performer will be a good one, and then an element of competition (from the audience, for example: "Whose did you like best?") creeps in. Theatre doesn't need it, and, sure as hell, I don't. That's one thought that's been with me, and a less constructive result of writing for Just Ruth.

I first talked to Ruth Cracknell about writing for her in her crowded dressing-room at the Comedy Theatre in London a few years ago. She was appearing in What if you Died Tomorrow, and after the first night, when it seemed as if half the Australian theatrical population of London was crammed backstage to congratulate and reminisce, we both agreed it would be "nice to work together some day". At the time I had a stage play tour in London, and Colin George, when at Armidale, commissioned a one-act play which turned out to be Family Lore. The Jewish theme appealed to him (and to me), and when we discussed my writing a scene for Ruth Cracknell, it was fairly obvious that the idea of a Jewish character should be mooted.

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I finally created two new characters for Ruth, one communicating with an imagined second person, the other directly addressing an audience, but the exercise was far more difficult than I imagined, and until Ruth tries the pieces, I won't be at all sure whether I've been successful.

David Williamson:
When I was asked to write for Ruth by Colin George, I immediately agreed, partly out of admiration for her great talent and partly out of gratitude for her superb and definitive performance as Irene in my play What if you died tomorrow. I asked Ruth for some guidelines for the piece and she suggested I do an Irene-type character, which I thought would be easy, but three days later all I'd achieved was a pile of screwed-up footscrapes and a significant deterioration in household harmony. The reason for my inability to write the piece was probably that Irene's character in the play had been defined by her interaction with the characters around her, and without these characters I couldn't realise her. It was a salutary lesson in the difficulties of writing for a solo performer.

Alex Buzo:
After trying to write a fairly doomed conventional revue sketch and tiring of it, I ended up writing a playette that had been brewing in my mind for some time. It's not something that only Ruth Cracknell could perform, though she seems best equipped to do it. The final result is surreal rather than the blackout technique pioneered by Phillip Street and Mavis Bramston. It uses fantasy and shock to explore a state of mind, rather than proceed along the gamut from A to Z. It's also rather bizarre.

Commissioned projects can be awkward and sometimes inspire well-crafted voids, but when they shake out something that was hovering around looking for an outlet, they can be great.

The only problem with surrealism in Australia is that it is understood only by the well-educated and the uneducated. Aesthetic debate is largely conducted by the half-educated and remains at the 1906 level, when painters were supposed to paint a tree that looked like a tree and Cubists and remained at the 1906 level, when painters were supposed to paint a tree that looked like a tree and Cubists were multiple schlerotics to be pitied and killed. Imagine the screaming if an Australian had written Waiting for Godot in 1952. Yet, in my inchoate opinion, the absurdists were an influence on Australian writing in the 1960s and the ideas and techniques of surrealism continue to nourish both the mainstream and political/experimental strands of Australian drama now.
Miss Ruth Cracknell, whose title as first lady of the Australian stage could be challenged only by Edna Everardge or Betty Blockbusher, was surrounded by tall aunts who led a busy life — if I recollect right­ly. From these aunts, whom she feels may not have been so tight and fierce as once she thought them, actress Ruth Cracknell has drawn magnificent reference over the years.

It was perhaps two years back that I lunched with Miss Cracknell in Sydney, not long after a brilliantly funny intimate revue season at Bill Orr’s Loft at Manly. She would not go to go into something much more velvety and serious at the Old Tote Theatre in Sydney: we mainly talked about from where she drew her famous manie humour, those nursing sisters with steel lips and glaring eyes, or the fee housewife who — after using a swift machete tech­nique on her husband — would fad and dissolve on the flash into a soft and passionate television fantasy. The aunts and their acquaintances had some relationship to these deadly and accurate styles of women.

Since her own adroit and charming personality runs quite concurrently along with the skilled and questing actress that she is.

There are no tricks, no turning of a profile, no restless expectation of recognition by theatregoers. What there is is the true player’s noticing of a good gesture or expression — instantly taken up, reproduc­ed unconsciously, perhaps practised in shadow once or twice, then sent to the fil­ing cabinet, down with the aunts.

In other words, this is a really formidable and remarkable lady; fascinating to talk to since her own adroit and charming personality runs quite concurrently along with the skilled and questing actress that she is.

Jobs to interview Cracknell. She will not, simply will not, talk about directors, or fellow-players except off the record ...

THEATRE AUSTRALIA MAY 1977 15
Peter Ward surveys the chequered history of the SATC — and detects a hopeful change of mood

The father of the South Australian Theatre Company is the irascible, large-gestured, argumentative, complex and generous Colin Ballantyne, its chairman, now and, one trusts, for a long time to come.

Why should I open a piece on the history of the South Australian Theatre Company with such an ambiguous accolade? It is because he is the father of the company in a quite positive, distinctive sense, and the fact that he had to be its progenitor rather than its first artistic director, or whatever, is part of the sad history of early and mid 20th-Century Australian theatre and needs to be told elsewhere.

Let it be enough to say this: Colin Ballantyne as a non-paid — one could not, at his peak, call him "amateur" — producer-director of live theatre in South Australia, kept the flag of the art flying in that interregnum between the fag-end of music-hall and vaudeville, that died from the impact of the movies, and the beginning of subsidy.

This meant simply that the standards had to be maintained, and only dedicated people could do it in those years of gross commercialism.

Ballantyne's dominance of the situation, together with his wide reading in theatre, and blood, sweat and tears, kept it all together, taught two generations of actors, and influenced a young lawyer who was later to be Premier of South Australia: Don Dunstan.

But more than that. He influenced in a fundamental way advisers to the Premier, the designer-adviser of the Playhouse Theatre, Tom Brown; actors, who in the SATC have always taken a central role, like Teddy Hodgeman and Leslie Dayman; and indeed a whole climate of opinion and feeling that has led to the kind of cultural phenomenon Adelaide is today.

Ballantyne, in turn, was himself influenced by his wife Gwenneth, who has always taken a back seat, but whose judgement was critically essential to some, if not most, of his key decisions. As a teacher-producer of children's theatre in her own right, and as an actress, she educated a complete generation of college theatre-goers.

And the two of them, by teaching, example, and general sense of the theatrical fitness of things, assisted in creating a mood that, from about 1948 on, culminated in a kind of "received belief" that Adelaide in particular and Australian theatre in general would never properly reach the outer limits of the theatre arts until there was some kind of subsidy, public or private, and until there were proper theatres in which to play, public or private.

The young politician Dunstan developed many of his commitments from the early forties and fifties, and not only the political but also the cultural notions that were then current. He knew the Ballantynes well. He had himself dabbled in acting for radio, and as a result joined Actors' Equity, a union to which he still proudly belongs, it being convenient for a Labor Premier not only to belong to a union, but also to one that neither necessarily requires him to work on the shop-floor nor is in the habit of striking at, as it were, the drop of the curtain.

And so (all this being a matter of setting the scene), enter the Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the old and not-so-old burghers of Adelaide.

The first South Australian Theatre Company was established in 1965 by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust as part of its regional drama company policy. And in the manner of the trust at the time, a board of management was formed with members representing the trust, the Adelaide City Council, the State Education Department and the ABC. It was, with one or two exceptions, a comfortable little affair. Everyone knew nearly everyone else, several knew something about theatre, and all firmly believed that they knew either what the community, or art, wanted.

Thus John Tasker, the company's first resident producer, was pinioned from the start. (Harsh words perhaps, but I was there at the time, and saw it happen.) The situation that John Tasker found himself in, rather in the same way as the role that Colin Ballantyne played as a producer in Adelaide, is essential to an understanding of what the SATC is today.

John Tasker had arrived on the job by way of being Patrick White's favourite producer-director, in the balmy, bitty early sixties. It was not a recommendation. Many of the members of Tasker's board were closely associated with the board of the Adelaide Festival of Arts, which in those days was making a habit of finding White's plays morally suspect. (The same board rejected Alan Seymour's One Day Of The Year on the ground that it was potentially subversive because it displayed Anzac Day in an unfavourable light.) So a somewhat flamboyant young producer, with a flippancy tongue and, for the board, an unusual life-style, was held at arms length, and eventually administered out of the way.

For Tasker, the two-and-a-half-year struggle was a scarring thing, but the achievement was, for the time, considerable, one of the high points of which was a superb production of Peter Shaffer's Royal Hunt of the Sun for the fourth Adelaide Festival of Arts in Adelaide University's mock-gothic Great Hall. It was a swirling spectacle marred only by
The School for Scandal. Ruth Cracknell as Mrs Candour.
the hardness of the hall’s seats, and one of those theatrical moments that in memory linger to be savoured.

Tasker’s repertoire included Dürrenmatt, Albee, Alan Hopgood, Shakespeare (for schools), Osborne, Hochhuth, and Pinter. He gathered around him a small nucleus of players, some of whom still remain members of the company.

Though frustrated by the meddling of his board, the shortage of funds (in 1968 the ETT’s guarantee was $16,000), and a succession of inadequate theatres and rehearsal-rooms, Tasker’s achievement was remarkable, to the extent that when he was finally administered out of the company, one of the most interested observers was the Premier, Don Dunstan, then in the first flush of office, shortly to be defeated in the polls but to return to government in 1970.

It was as a direct result of the situation John Tasker found himself in that not only did Don Dunstan make the establishment of the SATC as a statutory body part of his election platforms in 1968 and 1970, but also that when finally the government gave the company its parliamentary charter in 1972, the position of artistic director — his autonomy in production matters, and his general pre-eminence — was quite specifically entrenched and underscored by contract. The consequences of that situation are still being worked out, for good or for ill.

Leslie Dayman, now a senior actor with the company, took over as the company’s resident producer in 1968 and continued in that caretaking position for two years. Dayman’s direction rested more matter of factly on the company than Tasker’s. He was less illusioned, and saw his role really as holding something new and possibly fragile together. He did so, aided to some extent by the advent of the Australian Council for the Arts, whose subsidy, together with that of the trust, allowed for the appointment of a resident designer and contracted players. The Adelaide City Council also helped in providing rehearsal rooms above the city vegetable market gratis, a symbolic gesture, some thought, for a company that had the choice of either vegetating or growing.

A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, Loot, The Audition/The Real Inspector Hound, Exit the King and The Caretaker, together with a shortened version of Pygmalion for schools in the city and country areas, were presented during this period, keeping the company’s presence in the city alive.

Finally, as its contribution to the sixth Adelaide Festival of Arts, English actor-producer Peter Collingwood was invited to produce The Seagull with the company’s nucleus augmented by senior actors from other regional Australian theatre companies. It was generally regarded as a successful production.

By 1970 changes to the company’s board, a general municipal change-of-heart, and the prospect of a change in State Government, all compounded to create a generally freer, more relaxed atmosphere. Leslie Dayman stepped down from his position and Peter Batey was appointed artistic director.

Swelling subsidies and a generally rising box office, gave the company a sense of self-confidence, and in the first year Batey produced eight major plays, including The Queen and the Rebels, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, and The Master Builder. An outside workshop was established and increases were made to the company’s administrative and technical staffs.

The year 1971 saw even more activity, a total of 16 productions, with the company touring to the Festival of Perth, Canberra, South Australian country areas, and performing in informal city venues. And this level of enterprise continued in the first half of 1972. The Alchemist was presented for the seventh Adelaide Festival of Arts, and other productions in the repertoire included A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Playboy of the Western World and Butley.

There was also another Canberra tour and two school seasons.

But radical changes were occurring in the city, at State Government level, and in Federal politics, that resulted in the company receiving subsidies worth $140,000 that financial year. Further, the South Australian Government was by then committed to the construction of a drama theatre seating about 800 people for its Festival Centre, together with the passing of a legislative charter for the company. These were moves and decisions that meant, in effect, the overnight transformation of a small regional theatre company into a government cultural instrumentality, with all the good or the bad that could mean.

It was a change in role and ownership that aroused surprisingly little opposition, except from Dr Jean Bat(ersby of the Australia Council, who at the time argued that the notion of a “statutory” theatre company was perhaps placing government and theatre a little too close together for either’s benefit. She was a voice crying in the wilderness, for the Dunstan juggernaut rolled on.

But Jean Battersby’s words were heeded in one important respect. Against the proposal that, in addition to the contracted workers in the company being able to elect one of their members to the board, the artistic director should also sit on the board, she vigorously argued that such a move was not only outlandish but smack of administrative lunacy. How, for instance, could the board determine his or her salary, or future, or performance, or whatever?

A parliamentary select committee which investigated and re-worked the original Bill took note of this argument, so that the somewhat unusual result was achieved of a six-person board, three nominated by the government, two elected by the subscribers of the company, and one by the contracted players and staff, most of whom were selected by the artistic director. But he did not have a seat. In short, an imbalance occurred in which an actor could be better informed of board policy than the artistic
While these moves were under way, there was a caretaker board running the company and this called for applications for the position of artistic director. Peter Batey being invited to apply. It was at the time asserted that the caretaker board acted a little cavalierly and Batey, who was, indeed, not pleased at the somewhat abrupt ending of what had been two seasons of hard work and vigorous promotion. The caretaker board argued that, with the new company structure, and the government’s ultimate responsibility, the senior position should be thrown open once again. Fair handling or not, the position was advertised, and George Ogilvie, then with the Melbourne Theatre Company, got the job.

Ogilvie brought to the South Australian Theatre Company all the qualities that had made him a star-producer in Melbourne. Dedication, a romantic commitment to style, passion and the large gesture, and a total conviction that in the matter of forming a theatre company of vitality and impact, the most important ingredient was an almost embarrassing capacity for members of the company, especially of the artistic directorate, to become highly defensive and verbally argumentative. All of which were signs of the tensions underlying the surface show.

But there was a honeymoon period in all this. Ogilvie was hired as director in November 1972, and between then and the company’s move into the Playhouse of the Adelaide Festival complex, it settled in an old suburban church and performed in a variety of theatres with varying success. Plays during this period included David Williamson’s Jugglers Three, Long Day’s Journey into Night, Measure for Measure, A Certified Marriage, Occupations, Alpha Beta, Hans Kohlhaas and The Comedy of Errors.

For the 1974 Festival of Arts there were two productions, Louis Esson’s The Bride of Corinth and a repeat of The Comedy of Errors, as well as a late-night show and lunchtime performances. With Helmut Bakaitis as director of young activities, the company began its Theatre-go-Round programme and began touring schools. At times hesitantly, at others with a vigour edging on brushiness, it began properly to be recognised as a cultural force in its own right, not entirely there, but with obvious talent and creative potential.

And it was now big business, as theatre companies in Australia go.

In October 1974, the company moved into the multi-million-dollar Playhouse, where every dream of a struggling producer in the forties and fifties was realised in technical facilities and community support. The total funding picture told the story of an annual subsidy, combined State Government and Australia Council, went from $140,000 for the 1972-3 financial year to $293,000 in 1973-4, to $466,000 in 1974-5, to $496-000 in 1975-6. (Current projections for 1976-7 indicate a total revenue, combined box-office and subsidy, of something in the order of $750,000.)

The opening season in the Playhouse in late 1974 saw three “show” productions, The Three Cuckolds, The Department, and She Stoops to Conquer.

In 1975, the company’s first full year in the new theatre, brought in such plays as A Handful of Friends, Otherwise Engaged, and Major Barbara were outstanding productions.

But let it be enough to say this: the advent of Colin George in late 1976 has changed the company and the mood of things generally, so much that whatever happens, things will never be the same again.
George Ogilvie retiring from his job as artistic director of the South Australian Theatre Company was the most relaxed Ogilvie I had met. Directing his closing production, playing a role in an *Old King Cole* show for the school holiday season, neither stress closed in on Mr. Ogilvie at all. Position had been lifted from him like a cloak, and he seemed cleaner and clearer than before. Always amiable, always with an opinion, plainly possessed of an intense outgoing love of theatre and its practitioners, George Ogilvie can contrive the shyest, most unobtrusive entrances to an event that I can recall amongst … impolite, I have seen Ogilvie at a large gathering of critics, imply some regret at having to disturb such eminent folks.

Other artistic directors have their entries and their exits quite beautifully choreographed; they move and seat themselves in an imperial aura of attention-getting. With Ogilvie it is different; only in conversation will he develop vibrations towards you — and then only if the conversation is working well.

Some time ago, when *Equus* was beginning its meretricious flight around the leading Australian companies, I was at a critics’ luncheon and was coming under attack for my review of the play in its Old Tote production; I dismissed it all as trite commercial nonsense, not at all the sort of piece to be picked up by theatres which proclaimed serious aims. A woman reviewer gushed at Ogilvie: “Of course you’ll be doing it in Adelaide, won’t you?” Ogilvie: “Not at all. I don’t think it is the sort of play we should be doing.” From memory, Anthony Steele and I cheered. I added the point that a newspaper editor I knew stayed for the second half of the play in Sydney only because he’d heard that the actress playing the girl had a great pair of tits. Certainly, it was the neolithic sort of remark one expects from editors, but it was as a good comment on the play as I had come across. At least, it amused Ogilvie and confirmed his view.

Subsequently, Ogilvie and his company did the play, and when I brought this up at this latest luncheon, it opened many George Ogilvie opinions. We had been discussing the influences imposed by the physical presences, and traditions, of theatre buildings themselves.

“I would never have done *Equus* in our old home, but it was right for this place”, (“this place” being the Playhouse of the Adelaide Festival Centre). “Everything here is so splendid, you’re surrounded by all the desirable things — but after a time it becomes very clear that this luxury has its own needs. And they were different from our earlier life.

“With the Playhouse, I was very much aware that a lot of people were coming to the new theatre with expectations not at all like the audiences we had had at our rougher earlier venues. Suddenly, it was all right and proper that *Equus* should be done — in this place and for this audience.”

The Ogilvie policy, though “policy” is a hard word to use with George Ogilvie — his package of ideals for theatre and its workers would be a better term — was to perfect a group of players and an organisation that would punch consciousness of live theatre into the surrounding community.

Revered in his profession because of his respect for his co-workers, Ogilvie achieved his fair share of marvels for the South Australian Theatre Company. If he has a regret, it comes from the way the group had to become centralised around its handsome new permanent home.

“In our old premises,” Ogilvie says, “everything happened somewhere else. All our work was out, we would play in various venues, in many country towns. The workshops went well, we had a really very big and busy school and community venture in our Theatre-Go-Round. We had a centre, but people were mostly going out from there, there was a bustle of activity all outside the building.

“Here, we’ve always had the Playhouse looming over us; in a matter of months it became the big thing. We noticed that the things that used to happen outside our building in the earlier days became a little less important in the thinking and priorities of the company.

“The showplace, the Playhouse — that dominated. What were we doing there became far the most important day-to-day question. And as we were saying, different audiences built up — with different expectations as to the sort of plays they would see.

“So, it has all been a new time for us. I think it would all have shaken out quite well if I had continued here; … well then any upsurge of over-attention to a luxury theatre will settle down and the real work will go ahead again.”

It was 1972 when George Ogilvie took over as artistic director of the SATC and after nearly five years his urge is for a time of rest; some months or a year to fix his latitudes again. One of Ogilvie’s fortunate qualities is his professionalism; he can step from working with campus or amateur stages into star commercial theatre.

On some occasions with his own
company or others with which he became closely involved Ogilvie did, in my judgment, lean a trifle too kindly towards his players, not driving them to a schedule tight enough to ensure that opening night would see all their explorations brought together. Yet in a major professional engagement everything was taut and trim and utterly right on the night.

With complete amiability, Ogilvie recollected that I had said in a preview or so that "Mr Ogilvie's productions are always much better in the second week" — which statement, one supposes, is some sort of a compliment, and critical more of a system that does not always allow sufficient production time.

Last year Ogilvie produced Mozart's *II Seraglio* for the Australian Opera. I suggested that it must have been the most daunting job he'd faced.

"I was petrified." Ogilvie took a little time to call together exactly the quality of the fear and its overcoming that the opera had given him. "There they were, this great company, so completely professional, stars on every hand, very formidable wherever one looked.

"One thing I knew — I had to measure up somehow on the musical side; luckily, I was trained as a musician and when I managed to establish some musical credentials it all softened up.

"Then I treated them exactly as I would a company of actors; we sat down and discussed the opera, its plot, Mozart's thinking, his time and style. To my relief, everything went perfectly, in the end I think it gave me as much pleasure as anything I've ever done."

It must have given the Australian Opera some solid satisfaction as well. Ogilvie is invited back to produce another opera in the 1977 season. High professionalism of this more spectacular sort may not play the main role in the future of George Ogilvie; it is easy to sense that his large idealism is not dimmed. Withdrawal (so is his hope) will show him, as he tours and rests, what right and particular way he will go.

Early in his career Ogilvie spent six or seven years in Europe; training in mime, studying movement, acting in famous mime groups, teaching, conducting workshops for the Royal Shakespeare Company. The teaching side is a strong element in his perspective; one way or another, his directing has always had a light touch of the tutor.

Perhaps Ogilvie will be drawn back into a rougher theatre activity than the thick blue carpet of Adelaide's Playhouse and the wide lavishness of the Festival Centre.

A compact man, he is calm in style and a pleasant receiver of others' opinions. If, though, the talk is diffuse, Ogilvie puts a fine garden rake over it until a seed is found. He has none of the aggression that often accompanies that other compact man of the theatre, Mr Neil Fitzpatrick, yet the Ogilvie man is very much together.

What he leaves behind in Adelaide is a well-founded and confident company; a city less parochial than when he entered; many pointers to the way theatre can imprint on its whole ambience. The mood in South Australia now is one of the blossoming of many flowers; plans of the Department of Further Education are for scores of regional theatre centres and for help in small places. Although it doesn't show up in any bureaucrat's files, the George Ogilvie stay in Adelaide has done much for this new approach to theatre in the popular places.

It is right for Mr Ogilvie to move on; when you have built a monument, that is what you do.

Mr Colin George, the new artistic director of the South Australian Theatre Company, has come amongst us with that invincible set of qualities: professionalism of the soundest and highest type; spiritual ardour for theatre that stems, it seems, only from the European style.

Such practitioners as this — and Mr George has been joined at the SATC by Mr Roger Chapman, another Englishman, as man-in-charge of theatre in education (a phrase heretofore pretty tarnished in this country) — show that at last we can beat a different drum from the old cry that everything should be native-born.

Twenty years ago, giving up my selective chauvinism, I argued for importing theatre talents. In that enthusiasm I even suggested that spirits such as Michel Saint Denis should be wooed, to give our beginnings of funded theatre some notion of what the art was all about. Apart from the very few geniuses of theatre, there were, I proposed, a number of younger British and American figures who seemed exactly what we needed.

Such talk was then utterly fashionable; we had to have the complete Australian job, even though the talents needed did not exist. Since then the picture has become better, but had we at that time bought in the men and women we needed from overseas, my belief is that our ranks of acceptable professionals in all departments of theatre would be immeasurably more impressive.

Colin George is, thus, a protagonist for a cause. He strips well for the role. Drowned in theatre for almost exactly the same stretch of time as his new company's retiring director, George Ogilvie, Colin George is lean, toey, restless — a boxer. As yet, he is not sure as to the handling of critics in Australia; he learns, however as he goes.

There is some discussion of critics; I fire my usual cliche on the topic, that until
Biography shows a wholly busy and impressive life with the stage. Up at Oxford in 1952-55, Colin George was founder of the Oxford and Cambridge Theatre which became the Elizabethan Theatre Company. Here he directed with Toby Robertson, John Barton, Peter Hall — campus friends who have stayed very close to him, as campus friends so often do.

From this beginning: Three years of repertory acting, then into his mainstream, as associate director and finally as the artistic director of the famous regional theatres: Nottingham Playhouse; Sheffield Playhouse; the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield. In 1975 he came to Armidale, Australia, as head of Drama Department, University of New England.

"Getting on with boards of management is not a bogey for Colin George. "Tyrone Guthrie said to me that the first job of an artistic director these days is to get on well with boards. The focused energy, the clear sense of direction, the irrepressible competence of Mr George indicate no board trouble."

About his Armidale stay, obviously shorter than the university hoped it might be, he has a little regret: "I think they feel I used them a bit, but there it was — I did a lot of workshopping up there and got my students alongside playwrights. Somehow it paid off." The focused energy, the clear sense of direction, the irrepressible competence of Mr George indicate no board trouble.

About boards he says: "No, I'm not really afraid at getting back into this sort of swim again. In a selfish way, Armidale tuned me up for it. One is just enormously lucky to come into a centre such as this Adelaide Festival, and inherit a company that has worked so well with George for so long.

"I'm looking all the time at actors all over the country; I want to get the best here, and perhaps one or two from Britain. Most of them will be able to have only short seasons, two or three plays, but they'll enrich the permanent company — and the company will challenge them."

"Getting on with boards of management is not a bogey for Colin George. "Tyrone Guthrie said to me that the first job of an artistic director these days is to get on well with boards. The focused energy, the clear sense of direction, the irrepressible competence of Mr George indicate no board trouble."

A question on repertoire rebounded on me; I had to tell George where I thought the subsidised theatres had been wrong in choice of plays. My thoughts: no long-term attempt to show the main traditions of theatre; too many lightweight plays that ought to have been in the straight commercial theatre; not enough courage with the more experimental overseas plays; penury in treatment of some handsome and promising local plays.

With most of this George agreed. He is beginning his own new season with two new ones — The School for Scandal, The Cherry Orchard, for both of which he has persuaded Miss Ruth Cracknell down from Sydney. With typical drive, he has also organised around her a one-woman show, for which his old playwright friends Michael Cove and Ron Blair will be writing material, as well as Miss Cracknell herself, a lady who knows how to script for herself very well.

Judging from his English history, George will pay a deal of attention to contemporary plays, as he runs himself in. Adelaide means quite a lot to him; he senses that back of him he has the most sympathetic government attitude to performing arts in Australia. South Australian society may still be still with its background of local plays and would be aristocrats, but the new mood makes it the most exciting artistic centre in the continent.

To bring all this promise under control should not be difficult now for the SATC, given the Colin George experience in that much tougher English scene.

"As to the wide community activities of the company, George has a happy position. "Running all the educational activities, I've got the enormous luck of having Roger Chapman. Do you know him?" (Yes, I had met Chapman.) "Well, in Europe, in theatre in education, he is just . . . " (and a gesture completely indicated the status of Mr Chapman). "It means I absolutely relax about that whole section of the theatre's work here. It couldn't be a better arrangement."

George finds that, on the whole, funding of theatre here is more generous than in Britain. "You've got to work hard for your money there. You get good official assistance, but your theatre has to sell a massive number of seats on its own merit. I'm sure we can do it here too."

In the theatre physically, it is likely that Adelaide audiences at the Playhouse may see less square-set and conventional stagings than before. George likes thrust stage; would like to bring his action more into audience contact. He has also proved already very co-operative about use of his main theatre by other arts, especially the enormously promising Australian Dance Theatre, now rebuilt so remarkably by English choreographer Jonathan Taylor (another British import!). For George, the total arts scene is as important as the successes of his own particular field.

To his company of actors, Colin George has already brought a new style of professionalism. Just as dancers take class every morning, so should actors, he thinks. We discussed what I felt to be a certain laziness amongst Australian stage players when it came to training. (At the Old Tote in Sydney, director Bill Redmond arranges special classes with visiting front-rank teachers — then found them largely neglected by the company!)

"This attitude is not that of George. "You're quite correct. The dancer, from Margot Fonteyn down, does bar work every morning. With actors I like to do the same sort of thing — movement, voice, games in imagination, the lot. It's essential." After a few early surprises, some of our actors and actresses will at last begin to see what it is, and what it takes, to be a worthwhile craftsman of the theatre.

This year of 1977 looks to be the year for the South Australian Theatre Company. Ogilvie took the company through a revolution of attitude, on into a superb permanent home; Colin George comes in with a new energy, knowing the things that can be done because he has already done them three times over. All that energy, all that forwardness — I cannot see it being defused or diverted.
RON BLAIR worked as assistant director on Colin George’s first production for the SATC, *The School for Scandal*. Here he reports on the experience.

Australia’s worst enemies are other Australians

A work that lasts two hundred years is tough, said W. H. Auden. He was referring to *The Magic Flute*, but the judgment stands for Sheridan’s masterpiece *The School for Scandal*, which first opened in May 1777 at Drury Lane and went on to become the money-spinner of the age.

Colin George’s “wooing” of one gentleman, who had used the work of an amateur group to beat the SATC about the ears even before the play had opened, was deadly and blunt. But Mr George is a Celt, and when slapped, will lay aside his customary tact and good manners to give as good as he gets. “Australians’ worst enemies,” he murmured, as he put down the phone, “are other Australians.”

At the first rehearsal he talked about the play and its relevance — that word which has become the catchcry of those who would outlaw high spirits from the stage.

Sheridan’s society, he said, gave its serious attention to gossip while it lost America. If the language of the play seemed artificial to our ears, it was nevertheless true to its time. Here the director read a passage from Boswell’s journal of 1763, the touching entry where Boswell established his sexual arrangements with Louisa:

> “Now sir, I have but one favour to ask of you. Whenever you cease to regard me, pray don’t use me ill, nor treat me coldly. But inform me by letter or any other way when it is over.”

> “Pray madam, don’t talk of such a thing. Indeed we cannot answer for our affections. But you may depend on my behaving with civility and politeness.”

The play was blocked in five days, with the curtain call thrown in for good measure. “I’ve worked on a lot of shows,” grumbled the laconic production manager, “but none was ever blocked in a week.” This kind of immediate attention to the demands of stage movement is a direct result of Colin George’s years in the English repertory system. However, it did not stop there. For the remaining five weeks he worked with the crack cast he had gathered from across the country, altering and shaping scene after scene, day after day. Behind all the stage business was a thorough awareness of the need to root the action in the reality beneath the artifice. As a result, Brian James’s Sir Peter Teazle became more than just a comic old husband with a frisky young wife. His portrayal of a generous old fellow tormented by first love was one of the production’s highlights.

Another unusual aspect of the production was the esteem in which the younger actors came to hold those with more experience — far from common in the Australian theatre, alas. I remember the delight which Ruth Cracknell gave as she developed her own exact comic business with the chocolate cups and the sugar spoon when she, as that notorious ambulance-chaser Mrs Candour, related the misfortunes of others with salacious delight. It was a treat, too, to watch Ted Hodgeman (a wonderful actor) develop his Crabtree.

The first preview audience came from the Coca-Cola factory. What hope had we to interest them in a tangled plot of duplicity and disguise told in circuitous English? There were a few casualties at the first interval, but by act two we had them. By opening night, the audience was swept along by the play and the playing. Even the Adelaide critics gave their lofty imprimatur.

A work that lasts two hundred years is tough.
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WRITE TO US FOR A COMPLETE LIST OF DANCE BOOKS
"The South Australian Theatre Company so far hasn’t reached the world standard for which I had hoped”

It was a matter of chance, a quickly arranged interview fitted in at the first available opportunity. But the most assiduous image-maker could not have staged circumstances more reflective of the Dunstan style.

He had that morning driven to Adelaide from Whyalla, an economically troubled South Australian industrial city, after an overnight visit that combined governing and politicking.

Immediately afterwards he was going to the ABC’s Collinswood studios for his latest poetry reading session: Marvell and A. D. Hope.

And, to complete the effect, we met in a restaurant in the heart of his electorate — betwixt the city and the ABC — over a steak and a glass of wine for the interviewer and the attendant aides, of cider for the interviewee.

It was relaxed, informal, a rapid tour d’horizon by a man in command of his subject and with a professional consciousness of his eventual audience.

Such revelations as there were were less than startling. But some of the Premieral judgements — for instance his evident rating of the work of State Opera compared with the South Australian Theatre Company — are bound to cause more than a ripple locally when published.

I began by asking Mr Dunstan, who, as Minister responsible for the arts, will this financial year hand over grants worth $1.5 million, what role he saw the arts having in South Australia.

"I think they have a role both in the community function of holding a mirror up to life and also in providing a tremendous enjoyment of life for a steadily widening group of people," he said.

"It’s inevitable in modern times that drama tends to be a bit of an elitist thing. With colour television readily available, people need to make more effort to go to the theatre. But that’s inevitable with all the performing arts.

"But I think that what is now happening in schools and community theatre generally shows a very considerable revival of interest in the theatre.

"I think it is significant that, at the time television was introduced, a lot of people thought radio would die. It hasn’t, but the listening audience has become very much more acute than it was.

"In the same way, I think the performing arts are not going to die now. And the presence in South Australia of a theatre company of excellence will mean a great deal to community activity and to our general quality of life."

The Dunstan administration — continuously in power and active in the arts field since 1970 — has given considerable support and hard cash to the arts.

As well as backing the Adelaide Festival of Arts, provision of the Torrens-bank Festival Centre complex, big subsidies to drama, music and other groups, the government has established a special department for arts development.

The Dunstan Government’s latest major move in the arts area had been to buy Her Majesty’s Theatre from J. C. Williamson’s for $440,000.

I asked Mr Dunstan if he thought the community was getting a sufficient return on its investment.

"Mr Dunstan: “I think it’s getting a very good return. Already, without adequate development of our tourist infrastructure, we have the highest domestic surplus from tourism in Australia.

"There are two factors in that. One is the quality of life in Adelaide, with the input from the arts as a major part of it. The other is the wine industry. These two are major selling-points for us.

"The fact that people can enjoy the arts here to the extent now possible is one of the reasons why so many people come here.”

Through the efforts of the State Government, the South Australian Theatre Company has been provided with a glamorous permanent home in the $6.5 million Playhouse part of the Festival Centre; it receives major subsidies and has been established by statute.

What did Mr Dunstan think of the company’s performance and potential?

"Its performance so far has been uneven and it hasn’t reached the world standard for which I had hoped. I think it came from a professional beginning to a lesser standard of professional excellence than was achieved by State Opera which went from a virtually amateur company to a rather better one in less time.

"But I believe it has enormous potential. It has some extremely good actors and it now has a director [artistic director Colin George] of world fame.

"There is every opportunity for the SATC to become a significant company in world terms.”

One of the constant themes in the unending discussion about Australian theatre generally is the relationship between the state-supported companies, commercial theatre and community theatre.

"Was Mr Dunstan happy with the way community theatre was developing in South Australia?

"We’ve been endeavouring to help community theatre wherever we can. A great deal has been given in grants towards their operations. But they haven’t always reached the standards we would like, either. It is not possible, by simple funding, to see that community theatre does reach an effective standard.

"There have been some disappointments in this area. But we want to do more.

"I am not satisfied that the expenditure we are making on the theatre is adequately reaching the citizens of Port Adelaide.”

I mentioned that the Dunstan Government’s latest major move in the arts area had been to buy Her Majesty’s Theatre from J. C. Williamson’s for $440,000.

"Why?

"In the first place we couldn’t afford to have that theatre disappear from the scene in South Australia. There are a great many performances which require, economically, an audience of the size that can be provided by Her Majesty’s. The Festival Centre was built assuming the continuance of a 1200-seat theatre in Adelaide. Without one we would be faced with real problems about venues for a range of events.

"It was necessary for the Festival of Arts. But there were other reasons why we could not let it go.

Tony Baker

DON DUNSTAN, SPEAKING OUT
We needed a permanent home for State Opera, which it now is. Also, by having this theatre, we could see to it that those companies which we fund get an opportunity to use a theatre of such size.

Since the Government purchase, Her Majesty’s has been used by one community theatre, Circle, augmented by the local country rock band, Mount Lofty Rangers, to stage their own musical, Lofty.

Back to a much broader question: How, in the well-travelled Premier’s view, did South Australia’s overall performing arts achievement compare with what he had seen elsewhere?

“We are not yet of the standard of some European centres. But I think that, for instance, State Opera is up to most companies. Their production of La Boheme was better than some European productions I have seen.

“I don’t think the SATC is yet at the standard of the Royal Shakespeare, say, but it’s certainly up to that of a number of major English repertory companies.

“Generally speaking, I’d say that Adelaide is rapidly approaching the continuing standard that can be expected in a number of European centres such as Manheim, which, with its neighbouring city, is about the same size as Adelaide, but which has a tradition in the performing arts dating from the Middle Ages and which has a centre comparable in many ways with our own.”

What then, of the future? How did Mr Dunstan see development in the arts, especially theatre, over the next few years?

“I think we’ll see wider and wider activity throughout the State of the SATC and its various offshoots, far greater participation by citizens in drama.

“Communities across the State are now being provided with facilities. It’s not just the Festival Centre in Adelaide; there will be centres in towns such as Renmark, Mount Gambier, Whyalla and Port Pirie. I envisage that they will be greatly used by local people and by touring companies.

“I expect, too, a much greater level of exchanges between State companies than has so far happened.

“I think there will be a revival of liveliness and participation.”

A personal note again.

How did the obvious Dunstan love of the theatre begin?

“As a small boy in Murray Bridge I was taught elocution. I suppose that’s where my theatre activity began and I’ve been interested in it ever since.”

And favourites — plays and players?

“Like real creativity in the theatre. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s Midsummer Night’s Dream — the Peter Brook production — was a terrific theatrical experience. I was quite mindblown by Sizwe Bansi Is Dead [by Athol Fugard] when I first saw it in London. It had immense impact on the audience — excoriating. It gets across a whole point of view in an extraordinary way.

Also, and since he’s here at the moment. I like quiet, good work in the theatre. I thought Richard Chamberlain’s Hamlet was a damned sight better than the mannered performances of some of the oldies I’ve seen.”

Personal commitment aside, though, were there any votes in the arts? Was the present level of support in South Australia the result of a response to the public’s demands of its government or was it because of special factors?

“It’s remarkable that in our surveys in South Australia people accord quite a high level of approval to the government for its achievements towards the arts. That is very widespread in working-class areas.”

Could support continue, then, as a coherent, ongoing policy?

“I do believe so and I’m very proud of it. Before the [$$17 million] Festival Centre was opened there was a lot of criticism about our devoting money to it. That criticism has been entirely stilled and now people in all walks of life boast about it.

“When I was last in London I went to the South Bank, and two writers from leading English newspapers who’d been to Adelaide came up saying they wanted to point out, since I was there, how different a place it was from our Festival Centre and that the difference was entirely in our favour.

“South Bank always gave people a sense of distance from ordinary life and activity. There’s a gap to be bridged, whereas South Australia’s centre is welcoming.”

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Many actors feel that when it comes to film they are the last consideration. It is cameras, lights, sound, start the dolly, there’s a dog barking, a plane going over, someone farted, the sun’s out again, stand by talent, and finally, very finally, action. And they are not happy.

As a budding director who wants every actor to give their very best, it worries me that they are not often happy. Having mainly worked amidst the technical morass of the film set, I wanted to find out about that place where the actor is generally the happiest, the theatre. More particularly, that rarely experienced luxury on the Australian film set, the rehearsal period.

Gill Armstrong

“Now where were we up to, Sally?”
(or how to be an actor’s director)

Gill Armstrong is a film-maker. She was one of the first graduates of the Australian Film and TV School. Her films include The Roof Needs Mowing, Satdee Night, One Hundred a Day, Gretel, and Smokes and Lollies. The latest, The Singer and the Dancer, starring Ruth Cracknell, was winner of a 1976 Greater Union award and is soon to be released commercially.
My mother always stocks the cupboards when we go away ... I have two friends who have drinking problems ... Yes I've known film directors just like that ... Yes she's like an actress I know, terribly delightful at parties, but you wouldn't want her as your best friend ... I know a professor who does funny voices and moves furniture around ... Why would someone offer their wife to their best friend? Do you know anybody who's done that? ... Does anybody know anyone who has affairs with men as well as women?

Everybody is enjoying themselves. The room begins to sound like a joyous encounter group without the green grass. One by one they slip tentatively into their characters slippers, sandals, cowboy boots and cork shoes ... The wouldn't-he's turn into wouldn't-I's ...

Obviously part of the barrier is broken down because we've shared that childhood thing ... I think it comes out of a sense of righteous indignation. A kind of Scorpio thing ... It's constant paranoia, isn't it? ... I don't think calling someone a clown is all that awful... Yes it is. I was always called a clown at school and it used to rile me ... You're a clown, Bell ... Deep down I think he knows his films aren't very good, either ... Am I joking or serious here? ... Wouldn't I go and help? Would I give you a kiss? ... I feel funny sitting ... Then try standing ... When?

There is a distressed pause. All look to the director for direction. Once again he guides them back into finding their own: "Try it again ... See how it feels ... Let it come naturally ... Just try to remember what you're trying to say in this scene ..."

They begin to try out various moves of their own. The prevailing atmosphere of happy concentrated involvement, I notice, is very productive. Our director sits like a calming anchor on his side of the chalk line and gently pushes each to contribute towards defining the underlying motivations and attitudes behind each scene and line. Even the moves and actions are related back to intent.

"How would you feel under all those shocks? I think that I'd just sit there ... Don't worry about the exact moves yet. Amble a bit and see how you feel ... Take a moment to think of everything that occurs to you before you ask them in ..."

SALLY, MARK WHAT A SURPRISE! JILL, I KNOW IT'S A CLICHE BUT YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT ... "No don't sit there, that's the coffee tray...

Sod by happy sod, the gaps are filled in and each character is placed in living, breathing, drinking, copulating, habit-ridden, the somebody-we-all-knew-somewhere reality.

Our director, slowly rubbing his Hamlet chin reassures us that there is no rush to find all the answers yet, that we are all involved in a growing process and that some of the larger truths will only come later in their own time. Everybody looks happily forward to that time.

By the end of the second week, the play is beginning to take some sort of clumsily moving shape. Our director, I notice, now begins to start to mould that shape. "... Hold it. Remember the sense of what he is thinking ... Did you do the dishes out there? Did they make you feel good? What are you both doing in that little piece? How do you feel? Who's dominating? ... Think to yourself every time you say a line, 'How does that grab you?' ... Try counting five between each line ... Use those silences ... Try following her around as you talk ... Let's remember the effect on the audience ... Let's lead them along and then shock them ... OK, let's try it again, keeping all those things in mind."

It is week three of my life as an observer. Scripts are down. Lines are not. Objectives...
are still being refined and defined. Moves are still being invented, discarded and occasionally even set. Everybody is still looking happy and I'm beginning to find the play is actually becoming more engrossing with each run.

I'M SHATTERED. IS THAT WHY TEDDY (Gnash, gnash of Peter Carroll's teeth, invented that morning) KENNEDY AVOIDED ME AT THAT FACULTY PARTY? YOU TOLD HIM I WAS A HISTORIAN?

WHAT DID HE SAY TO YOU, WENDY? YOU DIDN'T GET AROUND TO TELLING US... Who's this Teddy Kennedy?... Groans Anna... Oh, not THE TEDDY KENNEDY... Really? Oh. I just thought it was any ordinary Teddy Kennedy... Now watch me say the line exactly the same... WHAT DID HE SAY TO YOU, WENDY? YOU DIDN'T GET AROUND TO TELLING US...

(He should have known, the Golden Rule, animals, children, relatives...)

Now they've got a basis, everybody begins to luxuriate in detailing and embroidering. Something that all film-makers wish they had the time to indulge in between clouds.

... No that's not a very clear swastika to me... Have I got time to make her a gin and tonic?... Do you think we're drinking too much coffee?... What else can we bring out? After-dinner mints, dope?... Can you give it a little vocal lift?... Try both speaking at the same time...

The actors enthusiasm is devotedly un-ending. Peter Sumner has bought a pair of cowboy boots, Berys has had her hair trimmed into a journalist-like cut. Peter Carroll is being more and more hysterically inventive each day as RUSSELL becomes a funnier funny man. His head has so far been inside, underneath, around the side and standing upon the one chair as

YOU THIS WEEK'S EPISODE OF HISTORY. WHERE WERE WE UP TO SALLY?

... I know, what if I make her a ventriloquist's dummy?... like this... or a weathergirl... We could both put our heads inside the chair...

Happiness is reaching climactic proportions as the key answers start magically to explode around us, just as our director promised they would.

God, it's self, self, self, all the way through, isn't it?... She can't see past externals... It's a negative tolerance, not an all-embracing tolerance... He despises himself... She really cuts out... He's a liar isn't he? He lies all the way through the play... He's a natural bullshit artist!... Oh no, he's not coping... He's not coping at all. He'll soon go out to the freezer and there'll be no chops left and he'll have to start getting in the barbecue chickens...

The runs of each scene are now longer. Our director is beginning to reveal that he had a vision after all. He begins to relate each scene to the other and to the play as a whole.

"It is a problem in the play that there are three quarrel scenes in a row. But we should try to make something out of it. We shouldn't reveal them as quarrel scenes until at least half way. We mustn't anticipate it... You must keep the energy level up... There are two danger spots where its dropping. Let's get a feeling of the old rivalry. You're both conceding so much that there is no contest. There should be a lot of space in this scene... Keep it light... Try hitting a real high on GO ON CARVE ME UP."

"No, I think my high is a bit later on..."

YOUR GRANDFATHER WAS A SHIT." (Relatives again.)

FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT! Peter Carroll is dancing on one leg towards Anna, his hand waving in the air in time to the
blaring music. What's happening? This isn't in the script. Still they all look especially happy. Peter and Anna tango cheek-to-cheek across the fading chalk marks.

I have blundered a bit late into week four and I can see everyone has been especially inventive in my absence.

The final week of rehearsal. The frustration of being so near and yet so far. Memory thwart the flow time and time again. No one can hear the stage-manager’s mumbled cues. He desperately tries to follow the dialogue as it leaps up and down the page. “Ah, Peter, that's unlikely and unlovely, not unlovely and unlikely.” David Williamson would be proud of their determination to get every word spoken as it is written.

“Stop. Go over that line again. Now say it three times. Again. Try it again, Anna. Don't break it up. You must run the two lines together."

YOU MIGHT AS WELL . . . GOON . . . CARVE ME UP . . . HERE RIGHT ACROSS THE THROAT . . . (Bugger) 
YOU MIGHT AS WELL GO ON . . . CARVE ME UP HERE RIGHT ACROSS THE THROAT . . . (Bugger).

"Please look at lines tonight. I can't tell if it's working. It's still too ropy."

Anna goes home with her director to repeat three times across the dinner table, YOU MIGHT AS WELL GO ON CARVE ME UP HERE RIGHT ACROSS THE THROAT . . . YOU MIGHT AS WELL GO ON CARVE ME UP HERE . . .

Only practice makes perfect. Only perfect makes for real happiness. Our director pushes the scenes that are proving trickily imperfect. Routines are repeated untringly. His “OK-one-more-time” persistence begins to work. Suddenly timing and pace are growing. Tension, precision and energy are building. And everyone is happy. “Yes, that’s on the right level. It mustn’t come down there . . . Can you make sure all those cues come very fast so they haven’t got time to protest? . . . That’s good. Just try to extend further each game . . . Hang on to that. Don’t make it any harder or more bitter . . . Consider the way the two use words . . . You must give it a more immediate quality . . . OK, let’s run the dance routine one more time . . ."

FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT! Peter and Anna, led by a robust choreographer are on the real stage, knocking their real knees together and doing real-looking leaps off the real furniture.

It is the first dress rehearsal. Everyone is looking very pretty in their new clothes, especially Sally.

Lights, sound, coffee . . . SALLY! MARK! WHAT A SURPRISE.

The audience of five Nimrod staff, a photographer, two minute Bell daughters in their summer nighties, and one row of the public who have stumbled in by mistake expecting to see last week's production, chortle.

"Now don't let's lose some of that key information. We've all got so used to it that we have forgotten the audience hasn't heard any of it before . . . and pause after those laugh lines or you'll be drowned out . . . All in all, it went very well."

Anna hugs each daughter perched on either side of her on Russell McAllister's couch.

"John, John, they laughed!" Everyone beams. (Maybe relatives can sometimes work.) "Yes, I forgot it was funny." The director and his actress wife look very happy. Everyone looks happy.

The next night A Handful of Friends opens to a handful of everybody's friends, the public and the author.

I watch David Williamson's face in the crowd.

FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT! He looks slightly shocked. Peter Carroll does a spectacular side-leap. There is a burst of spontaneous applause. He grabs Anna and they tango with unerring precision around the coffee table.

It is the first dress rehearsal. Everyone is looking very pretty in their new clothes, especially Sally.
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Graeme Murphy, recently appointed artistic director of the Dance Company (NSW), who has taken the place of Jaap Flier, talks to William Shoubridge.
"All I can say is I'll try damn hard, watch my step and be prepared to heed warnings . . ."

Shoubridge: Graeme, could we start with some background details — personal history?

Murphy: I started in Launceston with Ken Gillespie, director of the Tasmanian Ballet Company. While there I got a scholarship to the Australian Ballet School which I took up; and was there for two and a half years, then joined the company itself. I was with the Australian Ballet for three years that first time.

We did an American tour and I decided I wanted to see more. On tour you just can't see enough of what's going on. So I went to New York on an Arts Council scholarship. I studied everywhere and saw tons of theatre.

Shoubridge: Then came Peggy van Praagh's ballet workshop?

Murphy: Yes, that was 1970. It was an interesting year; works by Don Asker, Leigh Warren, John Meehan. But then funds got rather short, so I went to London, to the Royal Ballet; it made me miserable. It was exactly what I didn't want to be doing.

Shoubridge: What did you want?

Murphy: Contemporary dance. Much to everybody's horror I left the Royal Ballet after six months. I mean, one doesn't leave the Royal Ballet — except in a wheelchair. Anyway, I then found a contemporary company that really did please me, the Felix Blaska company. We were a mixture of all nationalities, and almost everything we did was by contemporary composers. I remember a whole Berio programme. Working in that company
Graeme Murphy:

made the whole thing about dance come to life.

Shoubridge: Who did the choreography there?

Murphy: Blaska himself was very much a one-man choreographer; it was fascinating. I was with the company two and a half years — we became almost clairvoyant about what he was going to do next. And nothing was ever sterile, stereotyped or dull. The audiences — Blaska catered mainly to youth, and we had an enormous university audience across Europe — could never have realised all that variety was the work of one man.

Shoubridge: Then back to Australia?

Murphy: Yes, but before that was a rather frightening hitch-hiking escapade [with Janet Veram, who was on leave from the AB] across Europe with a company called Ballet Caravan. We got to Manila — then very happily said goodbye and returned to Australia. We were offered positions then with the AB, but I preferred to sit it out for a year. I'm glad I did, because I really got to know what was going on in Australia. In the Australian Ballet you get to know what's going on in the Australian Ballet.

Blaska himself was very much a one-man choreographer; it was fascinating. I was with the company two and a half years — we had an enormous university audience across Europe — could never have realised all that variety was the work of one man.

Shoubridge: Before we talk about the present, what about your stay in New York?

Murphy: A struggle to make ends meet, but it was a very creative year: working with a lot of regional companies, creating works. But it was financially sparse, so we rejoined the AB and enjoyed it for a year. Then, briefly, London and a telegram about the NSW position — and here we are.

Shoubridge: Before we talk about the present, what about your stay in New York?

Murphy: New York is definitely the dance capital at the moment. They've developed vast audiences, which gives so much more room for experimentation. Here, if you try to be brave, you can win 25 people over, but you'll lose 15. Risky.

Shoubridge: Any choreographic influence from there?

Murphy: The Joffrey company as a whole impressed me more than any particular choreographer; what struck me was the format of clever programming, wide, balanced sort of repertoires. Actually, because I started in Australia, I wasn't influenced by any particular choreographer; I just didn't work with or even see enough choreographers here. At the Australian Ballet there was some Ashton, Balanchine, Butler, but I don't think any of them influenced me.

Shoubridge: You missed the perils of experimentation?

Murphy: Yes. In New York they've built up an audience that is adjusted to experiment. On the other hand, in England, if you try something different you find you can get an amazing backlash; people there are so conditioned. But then again, because contemporary dance hasn't been seen so widely here in Australia, people don't have pre-conceived notions. I remember working in Queensland: modern dance went especially well in country areas where there's no ballet tradition to get in the way.

Shoubridge: Yes. A certain spirit of adventure is often called for, isn't it? After all, as Sondheim and Prince were saying about Australia's capacity to create musicals — we really haven't got that European tradition here; we're far more eclectic.

Murphy: Right. We don't have to adhere to anything from overseas; I don't think it would work if we did. We have to work in a direction that's peculiarly our own. The pressures just aren't here to create another Nederlands Dans or Rambert.

Shoubridge: So, your company?

Murphy: Yes, our dancers themselves feel this in a way, too. The influences in the company are enormous — Graham dancers, "classical" dancers; we're a nice melting pot of everything. And we're producing something that's our own.

Shoubridge: To round off: being an artistic director?

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Shoubridge: You missed the perils of experimentation?

Murphy: Yes, the studio thing is important. When Merce Cunningham left Graham's company, he could afford only small studio performances. His whole style of dance was evolved from those small performances.

Shoubridge: That's obviously important to you — diversity, the wide repertoire. What other plans do you have in these terms?

Murphy: We want to encroach on other territories: dance — theatre — drama. It's a great possibility and one that hasn't been tapped here, though it has by others overseas. We have interesting dancers here with strong personalities and we want to co-work with straight theatres here in Sydney. Perhaps the fringe theatres.

And there are other things: local composers have expressed great interest in writing works for us; we want to involve live musicians.

And there are other things: local composers have expressed great interest in writing works for us; we want to involve live musicians.

Shoubridge: To round off: being an artistic director?

Murphy: Oh, I've enormous qualms. I've never been one before. Not even an assistant. All I can say is I'll try damn hard, watch my step, and be prepared to heed warnings from inside and outside the company. But, well, ultimately it's my responsibility. I hope I can do the company good and help towards as much development and progress as we've had in the past five years.

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All around body at 12 only

For performing rights apply to John Timlin and for music to the songs apply to Martin Friedl; both c/- Australian Performing Group, 325 Drummond Street, Carlton, 3053.
Jack Hibberd has a unique guffaw, a high snort — like a karate chop, such that a cast always knows when the Doctor is in and well pleased. There is a harsh critical thrust to this hoot, a deep appreciation of the huizuire and the not-on, more than a touch of shit and derision and a tendency to become manic. It matches the high comic style of his writing all the way from Epic J. Remorse to The Overcoat. The appeal of his language is that it pools the resources of the larrikin and the litterateur, applying to a fund of slang and, invective an ear for decorative coloratura. What I enjoy is the urge for riotous verbal occasion, preposterous combination and over-extension. Things can run amok. Early on, characters like Epic, Nostril, La Gorgonzola, Kafka and Saloon were provided with a body of language that is somewhat unsustainable theatrically — Jonsonian, incontinent and gleefully anal. As Hibberd became more playwright, less doctor, and had more actors about him, the orgy became more a complex routine: Bull and Mousey juggle the dialect of the tribe while executing funny walks and One of Nature's Gentlemen is a great vehicle for actors with comic nous of any sex. It is arguably the best comic three-hander in Australian theatre, putting the ritual behaviour of pub-bound power struggle in the framework of the vaudeville sketch.

When Peter Cummins was rehearsing The Overcoat, one of his worries was that Kak was going to be a czarist son of Monk. Perhaps it was the eating business, the man alone, cold comfort given circumstances and the feeling he was doing

Peter Cummins as Kak in the APG production directed by Tim Robertson.
The Overcoat: Underview 2 by Malcolm Robertson

“There is a poetic and lyrical quality to it, very theatrical; I feel this is all too subtle for the public. It will take time for it to understand all the shadings. Alas, how many stupidities we will have to hear about this play! Nevertheless it will have a tremendous success because as a play it holds you. It is so completely a whole that one cannot delete a single word from it. It may be that I am prejudiced, yet I cannot find any defect in this play.” Constantin Stanislavski wrote these words to Anton Chekhov after first reading, The Cherry Orchard in October 1930. These thoughts by the famous actor-director struck me, when I read them last week in the newly opened, handsome performing arts section of the Victorian State Library, as being particularly pertinent to the first production of Jack Hibberd’s adaption of Nikolai Gogol’s short story, The Overcoat, presented by the Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory in September 1976.

Because of my own theatre commitments, I was not able to see Jack Hibberd’s The Overcoat until the last week of its season. Gloomily, I was told before the beginning of the performance that the response to the play, both by the Melbourne critics and the public, had been poor. I could detect that indefinable air of misplaced ideals and rejection in the atmosphere of the Pram Factory on that night. The audience for the performance was indeed small. I felt an initial embarrassment for the five members of the orchestra as they surveyed their handful of customers while tuning their instruments. How were they feeling under these circumstances? What energies would they dissipate in their performances to compensate for the paucity of response from this minuscule audience?

The first scene was played, the first song sung, and any sense of embarrassment, or more ashamedly, pity, I had been feeling for the plight of the actors, playwright, musicians and singer was forgotten. What I witnessed that night at the Pram Factory was an experience in the theatre that was rare and wonderful. Who had said The Overcoat was unsuccessful? Who had mentioned the word “failure”?

For the first time since the production of Gogol’s The Government Inspector, directed by George Ogilvie at the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1971, a genuine effort was being made to broaden the experience of our actors and open up to them a European experience of theatre. Ironically, Mr Ogilvie’s production, in its attempt to disorient the audience and plunge them headlong into the nightmare world of Gogol, had also been greeted with critical abuse.

“Alas, how many stupidities we will have to hear about this play!”

What made the advent of The Overcoat at the Pram Factory all the more remarkable, was that it was being done in a bastion of the ruggedly individualistic style of playwriting and acting. Here was the playwright of White With Wire Wheels and Dimboola genuinely and successfully employing a European approach to fashion a play that, while acknowledging its European lineage, was not merely an adaptation but a piece of writing that stands as dramatic literature in its own right. The Overcoat is finely disciplined playwriting. By the word, “discipline”, I do not mean the playwright has been subverted by the dramatic unities. The discipline Jack Hibberd has accepted in The Overcoat is a respect for the original short story by Gogol. This discipline has, in turn, allowed the playwright ultimate freedom. The Overcoat is the most successful and challenging piece of theatre Jack Hibberd has written since A Stretch of the Imagination. It may be that I am prejudiced; yet I cannot help thinking that Jack Hibberd’s The Overcoat and what the play contributes to our deepening Australian experience will in time equal the contribution Bertolt Brecht’s Threepenny Opera has made to the European theatre over the last five decades. With The Overcoat, an indigenous playwright has for the first time thrown off the shackles of our Anglo-Saxon background and attitudes towards the theatre.

It would be ingenuous to suggest that all was well with the production of The Overcoat at the Pram Factory. There were lapses in style by some of the actors that inevitably blunted the vision of the playwright. Inexperience and the danger of rationalisation, robbed the play of the important juxtaposition of “hardship and humour, the real and the absurd” that is inherent in Gogol and dramatically important to Hibberd. The castle-like setting by Susy Potter had the effect of dwarfing the audience as it ascended into the rafters of the Pram Factory. The “eyrie” platforms provided for the actors in this setting failed to convey the claustrophobia essential for them to eke out their wretched existence. The audience at no time felt like the puppet-master manipulating and being manipulated by these tangible victims and their mad masters.

It was in the hauntingly abrasive music by Martin Freidl that the production sublimely echoed the integrity of Gogol and the vision of Hibberd. Jan Friedl, as the singer-commentator, caught with unerring precision the right mood of detached irony. All the positive aspects of the production came beautifully together in the deathbed scene of the play’s protagonist, Kak. Here the director, Tim Robertson, the actors, Peter Cummins and Evelyn Krape, and Jan Friedl brought the play both chillingly and emotionally to life.

At this stage, it would be a negative exercise to list the possible reasons for the insensitive critical reaction in Melbourne to this production of The Overcoat. Suffice it to say, that if a play of this quality can be dismissed by the majority of critics in Melbourne their rejection must stand as an indictment of their expertise.

The balm that can be applied to counter this initial rejection of The Overcoat is the same balm that has been applied to the playwright throughout history of drama: the balm Stanislavski so aptly provided for Chekhov, when he wrote, “It will take time for it [the audience] to understand all the shadings... Nevertheless it will have a tremendous success.”

I am certain Jack Hibberd’s The Overcoat will be an integral part of our dramatic literature for a long time.
THE OVERCOAT

An adaptation from Gogol
by Jack Hibberd

CHARACTERS

Kak
A Clerk
Departmental Head
Tailor
Tailor's Wife
The Man
A Policeman
The Important Person
A Clerk
Landlady
Gogol

NOTES

1. The play requires a small ensemble of musicians and two actor-singers: one female, one male.
2. The play requires at a minimum five actors: four male, one female.
3. Projections are suggested for titles of songs and scenic declarations. They can, however, be announced in an intrepid Brechtian manner should projections be felt to encumber the design.
4. Kak should be pronounced to rhyme with stark or clerk, not sack or cack.
5. I refer the actor and director interested in a depiction of Gogol to Nabokov's delicious book on the author.
6. I have balked at a description of the Tailor's Wife. She should, however, be strong, earthy, tough, shrewd, and in no way the conventional beauty.
7. The adaptation is necessarily free; a theatrical double somersault and half-pike from the springboard of Gogol's insane prose. — Jack Hibberd.

SONG OF OUR CITY

In our city the wind never ceases,
From every cold quarter it howls,
In ice-age gusts and breezes
It lashes both rats and ghouls.

In our city the sun never sparkles,
In ice-age gusts and breezes
It lashes both rats and ghouls.

The order number should clearly read XYZ1234567.
Pause.
(Perplexed.) XYZ12345 . . . 7 . . .
Pause.

SONG OF OUR CITY

In our city the mist never ceases,
From every cold quarter it howls,
In ice-age gusts and breezes
It lashes both rats and ghouls.

In our city the sun never sparkles,
In ice-age gusts and breezes
It lashes both rats and ghouls.

Pause.

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LUNCH
Kak goes to his coat and removes a parcel wrapped in wax-paper. He takes it to the desk, looks around suspiciously, then opens it, revealing a small cooked pig trotter, three green peas, and a cabbage stalk. He removes a plate, knife and fork from a drawer, puts the food on the plate, smacks his lips ruefully, then starts to eat.

SONG OF THE FUTURE
— con molta gioia
The future is full of slothfulness and hope, Of archipelagos in the sun.
And oysters dance upon your tongue.
The future is full of opium and dreams, Of carnivals each day in the year,
Where young lovers intertwine in cream, And when it rains it rains cool beer.
The future is full of anarchy and wit, And death is just a last foxtrot.
Where the elderly are brown and fit
And death is just a last foxtrot.

THE TAILOR’S SONG OF THE TAILOR’S WIFE
— avec attaque deboutonner
My husband is a rabid sot
Who guzzles night and day
Like a new-born baby in a cot.
I work my elbows to the bone
Cleaning up his cess and mess,
He’s such a nice man.
I am contentment itself just copying, sir.
He ogles the next section. Pause.
Kak: I always open my lunch in the corridor.
Kak: I always open my lunch in the corridor.
Kak: Women?
Tailor: He was such a nice man.
Wife: Stop squawking!
Tailor: You asked for this.
Tailor: Ahhh, like the Urals in spring.
Wife: Better than a cold spoon.
Tailor: I always knew he had one foot in the grave.
Wife: TKO.
Wife: Your customer.
Tailor: He’s a tall man.
Wife: He’s dead.
Wife: Who?
Tailor: I always knew he had one foot in the grave.
Wife: He was such a nice man.
Wife: You do want the bugle treatment?
Wife: A customer!
Wife: At least we got the deposit.
Wife: He breaks down into sobs and sniffles.
Wife: A drink perhaps?
Tailor: At least we got the deposit.
Wife: I haven’t the heart to tell him he’s dead.
Tailor: He’s a tall man.
Tailor: TKO.
Tailor: A drink perhaps?
Wife: I haven’t the heart to tell him he’s dead.
Tailor and Wife: A customer!
Wife: Give me that.
Tailor: He was such a nice man.
Wife: He breaks down into sobs and sniffles.
Tailor: He was such a nice man.

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Tailor: It must be heaven to have a wife.
Tailor: She is a jewel in the helmet of womanhood.
Tailor: I can see who wears the trousers.
Tailor: I take no claptrap. Biff! You understand?
Wife: I couldn't.
Wife: Or a nosebag.
Tailor: Of course we'd have to stint on the buttons a little.
Wife: I'm done with my dash now.
Wife: Well, what can we do for you for?
Tailor: This coat.
Tailor: What would you ask to repair it?
The Tailor takes a hand-lens, holds it to the eye and studies the coat from a bizarre angle. A moment of science.
Tailor (shaking his head): Threadbare.
Kak: Ninety-eight?
Tailor: The bloke's a dill.
Tailor: They nod, painfully. The Tailor falls off the table.

An Interior Monologue:

Kak sits at the desk before a plate which contains a pickled onion and a small sprig of parsley. His coat hangs nearby, about half its former length, and even more frayed.

SONG OF THE SOCIAL CRIPPLES — avec effervescence sardonique et optimiste

Despite the gangrene of our toes
And the weevils in our lungs,
Despite the subfusc of our clothes
And the handcuffs on our tongues,
We know the world will change,
Not into a land of milk and honey,
Not into a land of milk and honey.

THE OFFICE: AN INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

Kak: I am one fucking chilblain from head to toe. There has been no summer whatsoever this year. Usually the thermometer relents a little. Even the geraniums have packed up. One of the worst leap-years I can remember. I've been forced to cut costs to keep the radiator at full belt. Can't even afford the luxury of an occasional pig trotter for lunch. I am skin and bone. My coat looks more like a necktie.

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parsley.) Vitamin C. (Pause.)
Kak takes out a lead pencil, inserts it into a sharper and attaches it to the side of his desk, then winds. He collects some of the shavings and puts them on his plate. He eats some. Pause. The Department Head enters and watches with Roughage. (Pause.)

D. Head: I've been watching this codger for months. He's in a decline. In fact I ordered a time-and-motion study on the bugger. The results were horrendous. He halved his productivity in a week. A departmental record. The shame. What can I do? You can't sack a member of the civil service. The only answer, stuff it, is to create yet another division of the service for him, lower his wage, cut his prestige, and hope to Jesus that this inspires him to greater efforts. If only he took a firm grip of himself and disguised his lack of intestinal fortitude. A cheerful mien and some legerdemain would work wonders for the lad.

The Departmental Head walks across to the desk. Pause. (Pointing to the onion.) May I?
Kak: Of course, Your Eminence. The Department Head auto-torses two quarters with a fork and eats them with relish as Kak watches, pleased. Pause.

D. Head: Kak.
Kak: Sir?
D. Head: I have some sour news for you. (He smiles. Kak smiles.) You're demoted.
Kak: Gosh.
D. Head (annoyed): Is that all you can say?
Kak: I am immune to all the slings and arrows of fate, Your Loftiness: I have a mission in life.

D. Head (dubiously): Oh yes.
Kak (semi-delirious): To buy a new coat. (Pause.)

D. Head: Allow me to be the first to congratulate you.
Kak extends a hand which the D. Head ignores.
Kak: I intend to raise the tone of the entire department.
D. Head (arching his eyebrows): And enter into smart society?
Kak: I hadn't thought of that.
D. Head: Nor I. But I'd first suggest, in all humility, a spot of plastic surgery.
Kak: A moustache? A monocle?
D. Head: Something more radical, Kak. A daily massage of the face with rough sandpaper, the application of a hot iron each night to the nose, and finally the suspension of a pound of salami from each ear.

D. Head: You wish to see me, Kak?
Kak: I don't think you should speak of women in that way, sir.

D. Head: I wish to see you, Kak.
Kak (gaunt and grovelling): I have a mission, sir.

D. Head: How much?
Kak: I believe it is twenty.
D. Head: Make it forty.
Kak: Sir!

Kak seizes the D. Head's hand, kisses and slaps them in Kak's in-tray.

D. Head: Sir?
Kak: I've been watching this codger for months. He's in a decline. In fact I ordered a time-and-motion study on the bugger. The results were horrendous. He halved his productivity in a week. A departmental record. The shame. What can I do? You can't sack a member of the civil service. The only answer, stuff it, is to create yet another division of the service for him, lower his wage, cut his prestige, and hope to Jesus that this inspires him to greater efforts. If only he took a firm grip of himself and disguised his lack of intestinal fortitude. A cheerful mien and some legerdemain would work wonders for the lad.

The Departmental Head walks across to the desk. Pause.

D. Head: You want a holiday?
Kak: A mere week.

D. Head: Get out.
Kak: Please, sir it's about my holiday bonus.

D. Head: How long have you been waiting?
Kak: A mere week.
D. Head: Get out.
Kak: Please, sir it's about my holiday bonus.

D. Head: You want a holiday?
Kak: Just my bonus.
D. Head (ignoring him): I can recommend the Canary Islands, Kak. Oodles of sun and wine, a Spanish fly that would unzip a bishop, satanic squid, bananas the size of canoes, and broad-bummed senoritas clacking their licentious casanetes.
Kak: I don't think you should speak of women in that way, sir.

D. Head: I smell a virgin. Intacto Protracto.

D. Head: You besmirch the memory of my mother.

D. Head: You can't muscle with your mum. (Kak gawks.) Open her oyster.

D. Head: We could never afford oysters, sir.

D. Head: The man's an idiot.
D. Head: How much?
D. Head: I believe it is twenty.
D. Head: Make it forty.
Kak: Sir!

Kak seizes the D. Head's hand, kisses and slappers over it with gratification.

D. Head: A windfall, sir.

D. Head: I'm sorry, sir. (wiping his hand with a handkerchief): Don't mention it.

D. Head: I shall remember this to my dying days.

D. Head: Don't punish yourself unnecessarily, Kak.

Kak: I have a mission, sir.

D. Head: Lash out and sport yourself a ten-course meal.

Kak (horrified): I couldn't.
D. Head: Well, when do you want it?
Kak: Next year.

D. Head: Next year?

Kak (sententiously): Only fools dash in where wise men fear to tread.

D. Head: Very apt. Listen. In the meantime I'll invest it for you in government bonds. Nought point two five per cent.

D. Head: The radiator comes on. Pause. (Grinning): A light comes up slowly on Kak sitting in bed in his underclothes. He looks anxiously, dementedly around, a human skeleton. Pause.

D. Head: He gets out of bed, looking around, timid and suspicious. He kneels before the radiator. Pause.

Kak: Please, God, make them go away. All I want to be is ordinary. Nothing special. Nothing flash. I wouldn't harm a silverfish. There's not a mothball of hate in me. I've never been a deliberate bother to a single soul. Believe me. I am what I am. Pause. He sob's. Pause. Dvorak's Humoresques; on violin. After a while, he looks up: The Tailor's Wife has entered.

Wife: Good evening, sir.

Kak: Good evening.
Wife: Cold?

Kak: Agony.

SONG CONCERNING KAK

Day by day he wastes away In an effort to compete, His diet consists of hay And the nail parings from his feet.

Day by day he wastes away In an effort to improve, His bed is as cold as clay While the rain dribbles through his roof. (Pause.)

Day by day he wastes away In an effort to expand, His work is a beast of prey Eating its victim gland by gland.

OFFICE OF THE DEPARTMENTAL HEAD

D. Head (sitting at the desk): You wished to see me, Kak?
Kak: That's what I'd treasure most, sir.

D. Head: How long have you been waiting?
Kak: A mere week.

D. Head: Get out.
Kak: Please, sir it's about my holiday bonus.

D. Head: You want a holiday?
Kak: Just my bonus.

D. Head (ignoring him): I can recommend the Canary Islands, Kak. Oodles of sun and wine, a Spanish fly that would unzip a bishop, satanic squid, bananas the size of canoes, and broad-bummed senoritas clacking their licentious casanetes.
Kak: I don't think you should speak of women in that way, sir.

D. Head: I smell a virgin. Intacto Protracto.

— erotic

SONG OF THE ANKLE

I have a little ankle
And show it everywhere,
It glitters like a spangle,
And how the poor men stare.

I have a little ankle
And dink it through the air,
Or hold it at an angle,
And how the poor men stare.

I have a little ankle,
In fact I have a pair, I love to let them dangle,
And how the poor men stare.

Pause. The radiator comes on. Pause.
A light comes up slowly on Kak sitting in bed in his underclothes. He looks anxiously, dementedly around, a human skeleton. Pause.

He gets out of bed, looking around, timid and suspicious. He kneels before the radiator. Pause.

Kak: Please, God, make them go away. All I want to be is ordinary. Nothing special. Nothing flash. I wouldn't harm a silverfish. There's not a mothball of hate in me. I've never been a deliberate bother to a single soul. Believe me. I am what I am. Pause. He sob's. Pause. Dvorak's Humoresque; on violin. After a while, he looks up: The Tailor's Wife has entered.

Wife: Good evening, sir.

Kak: Good evening.
Wife: Cold?

Kak: Agony.
Pause. The music ceases.

Wife: You’re lucky to be able to afford a radiator.

Kak: It’s the only comfort I have left. Intermittent heat.

Wife: There are cheaper ways of achieving that.

Kak (naively): Please tell me.

Wife: Give you one guess.

Kak (beaming): A new coat? (She nods ironically.) You’ve come about the material? (She nods again.) Have a seat. She sits on the floor.

Wife: Comfortable?

Wife: Have you got your purse?

Wife: How’s your husband?

Wife: The very mention of that man brings tears to my eyes.

Kak: Marriage must be a wonderful institution.

Wife: It takes a lot of beating.

Kak (morosely): I can only speculate.

Wife (elbowing him): What a card!

He moves aside a little. Pause.

Wife: I have followed him for miles, sometimes from the rear, sometimes from the front; sometimes I have dashed along side lanes just to catch a glimpse as he strutted across the mouth of a distant street. This is the climax of a long and useless career.

Pause.


Wife (taking him gently by the arm): Not unaided.

Tailor: True, my sweet, true. After all, I only have one eye.

They laugh. They hug. The Departmental Head enters.

D. Head (incredulously): Aha! The new overcoat. Congratulations, Kak. (Kak beams proudly.) You’re a credit to the civil service. (Pause.) I feel tempted to throw a departmental party for the dasher.

Kak (shyly, blushing): I don’t deserve it, sir.

D. Head: Drive this is definitely a cause for celebration.

Tailor: Indeed it is.

D. Head: We shall christen the new coat. With sweet sherry.

Tailor: Vodka!

D. Head: And who are you?

Tailor (with great pretence): The gentleman’s clothier, sir. Monsieur Le Cyclops.

D. Head: How’s your husband?

D. Head: We shall christen the new coat. With sweet sherry.

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Tailor: Vodka!

D. Head: And who are you?

Tailor (with great pretence): The gentleman’s clothier, sir. Monsieur Le Cyclops.

D. Head: How’s your husband?

Tailor: Drive this is definitely a cause for celebration.

Tailor: Indeed it is.

D. Head: We shall christen the new coat. With sweet sherry.

Tailor: Vodka!

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Tailor: Vodka!

D. Head: And who are you?

Tailor (with great pretence): The gentleman’s clothier, sir. Monsieur Le Cyclops.
SONG OF THE IMPORTANT PERSON

I believe in discipline,
The truncheon and electric shock,
I believe in the edict's sting,
The reprobate slapped in a stock.
I believe in comradeship,
Provided they're of equal rank,
I believe in castrating wits
And drowning savants in a tank.
I believe in government,
The orderly control of greed,
I believe in the means and end,
The mongrel state of those I lead.

The Important Person sits down at the desk,
takes an enormous quill, and with supercilious panache signs a letter.
I.P.: Another snivelling petitioner. (Pause.) I wish they'd evaporate. (Pause.)
Anyone would think I was elected.
(He chuckles. Pause.) Whatever difference that makes. (Pause.)
We did hold an election once. Everyone voted. One hundred per cent donkey.
We decided after that the people were corrupt.

A Clerk enters. The Important Person, without looking up, hands him the letter. (Pause.)
(At last.) Something pressing?
I.P.: How dare you! Clerk: Sorry, sir. I.P.: Does he have any money?
Clerk: A few rubles.
I.P.: Proceed, scum.

A clerk loiters outside. He desires an interview, I mean, audience.
I.P.: Does he have any money? Clerk: Not a razoo.
I.P.: Tell him I'm busy. He'll have to wait. (The Clerk leaves. Pause.)
What presumption!
He takes out a long cigarillo and lights it. He puffs for a moment, then snatches up a letter and reads it. He winces, then takes up paper and quill.
(As he writes.) Yes, I do recall those perifervid and pile-producing rock. Ah yes. A bold and entertaining letter. Stewed in the most agreeable nostalgia. Request refused.
I.P.: I wish they'd evaporate. Pause. He signs with a flourish. They'll stoop to anything.

Pause. He reclines back, puts his feet up.
Time for a snooze.

It's urgent, sir. I.P.: Just a moment. Have you been through the correct channels?
Kak: I've heard nothing but good reports. I come on bended knees. You are my last chance.
I.P. (exasperated): What's it all about?
Kak (ecstatic): Sir, some weeks ago —
I.P.: Just a moment. Have you been through the correct channels?
Kak (crumbling): Correct channels.
I.P. (peevèd, bored and suspicious): Yes. Filed an application with the appropriate clerk in the catacombs, been frisked by the Sergeant-at-Arms, grilled by the Titular Counsel, processed by the Under-Secretary, etc., etc.? Clay: (crestfallen): No.
I.P. (outraged): No?
Kak (attacking): It's urgent, sir. (Pause.)
I.P.: Nothing is urgent. (Pause.) He light's up his cigarillo again. (Pause.)
I.P.: I have all the time in the world. (Pause. Kak backs out. Pause.)
An anarchist. (Pause.)
(Aghast.) I could've been shot.

SONG OF OUR CITY

In our city the wind never ceases,
From every cold quarter it howls,
In ice-age gusts and breezes,
It lashes both rats and ghouls.

In our city the sun never sparkles,
Both winter and summer it rains,
In drops the size of marbles,
On footpaths as grey as drains.

The mongrel state of those I lead. — come braggadocio

I.P.: Another snivelling petitioner. (Pause.) I wish they'd evaporate. (Pause.) Anyone would think I was elected. (He chuckles. Pause.) Whatever difference that makes. (Pause.)
We did hold an election once. Everyone voted. One hundred per cent donkey. We decided after that the people were corrupt.

A Clerk enters. The Important Person, without looking up, hands him the letter. (Pause.)
(At last.) Something pressing?
I.P.: How dare you! Clerk: Sorry, sir. I.P.: Does he have any money?
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(As he writes.) Yes, I do recall those perifervid and pile-producing rock. Ah yes. A bold and entertaining letter. Stewed in the most agreeable nostalgia. Request refused.
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Pause. He reclines back, puts his feet up. Time for a snooze.

It's urgent, sir. I.P.: Just a moment. Have you been through the correct channels?
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I.P. (peevèd, bored and suspicious): Yes. Filed an application with the appropriate clerk in the catacombs, been frisked by the Sergeant-at-Arms, grilled by the Titular Counsel, processed by the Under-Secretary, etc., etc.? Clay: (crestfallen): No.
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I.P.: I have all the time in the world. (Pause. Kak backs out. Pause.)
An anarchist. (Pause.)
(Aghast.) I could've been shot.

SONG OF OUR CITY

In our city the wind never ceases,
From every cold quarter it howls,
In ice-age gusts and breezes,
It lashes both rats and ghouls.

In our city the sun never sparkles,
Both winter and summer it rains,
In drops the size of marbles,
On footpaths as grey as drains.

In our city the mist never ceases,
But muffles both mansion and slum,
With mildew and diseases, 
To beats of a funeral drum,
In our city the men never buckle, Their laughter fills bedroom and park, 
As women grimly suckle 
More idiots in the dark.
The music of the song continues for a while. Kak stands stooped by his bed, haggard, filthy. He shivers. He stares at the bed. Pause.

He takes off his office coat, his shoes, and trousers. He folds the clothes neatly. Pause. He stands in his tattered underclothes. He climbs into bed. Pause.

Kak: The only thing to do. (His teeth chatter.) I feel so hot. (He throws off some bedclothes.) It's an Indian summer. The first in decades. (Pause.)

(Shouts.) Turn off the radiator! There is no radiator. He writhes in bed.

Pause. He stands in his tattered outfit? ... A large Panama hat, white tropicals, and snakeskin shoes . . . dressed to kill . .. Never missed a day's work ... . . . Still . . . all good things must come to an end . . . C'est la vie, eh Maman? Bon soir, mon cheri. . . bon soir . . .

I heard a noise. (Pause.) A thief! He's wearing my overcoat. Stop, thief!

When I die Bury me in a box Of weeping willow, And let me lie In a field of phlox With dandruff for my pillow.

When I die Bury me on a day Of sun and showers, And let me lie In a field of hay As compost for the ploughers.

The Important Person sits at the desk looking at some letters. His expensive overcoat hangs nearby on a hook. After a while, he sighs.

I.P.: A man's day is never done. (Pause.) (Amorously.) Neither is a woman's. (Pause.) Ah, the imponderable conundrum of the sexes. (Pause.)

(Smugly.) I concur with Byron. (Pause.) Tonight, for example, I have no desire whatsoever to go home to my wife, whom I love dearly. She will weep. Large nacreous tears. Too bad. Instead, I shall dine in the company of men, engage in substantial conversation, and afterwards attack the fleshspots. (He stands.) Expend a few hundred on Herbie.

He goes to his coat, removes a packet, and forwards. (Producing his wallet): A holiday in the Azores?

I.P.: I'm going straight home to my wife. (Pause.) I.P.: A new coat?


Thieves. They got away?

I.P.: Me too.

I.P.: I shall treat every case seriously in the future.

I.P.: I'm going straight home to my wife. 

I.P.: I didn't mean it!

I.P.: I'd like to report a pilferage.

I.P.: The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the smiles of love and peace Wriggles a universe of screams,

As compost for the ploughers.

As compost for the ploughers.

I.P.: I suppose you'll do. I'd like to report a pilferage.

I.P.: I suppose you'll do. I'd like to report a pilferage.


The Man appears in Kak's overcoat through the mist, shakes his huge red fist at them, then disappears.

The Important Person's overcoat descends from above and flaps backwards and forwards.

They scream, grovel and whimper.


SONG OF GOGOL

The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the smiles of love and peace Wriggles a universe of screams, Where corpses skate on human grease.

The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the clock of day and night Oozes the timelessness of dreams, Where sun and moon emit no light.

The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the warmth of coats and cowls Shivers a continent of weeds, Where spectres copulate with ghouls.

The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the body heat of the living, Where corpses skate on human grease, Where spectres copulate with ghouls.

The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the clock of day and night Oozes the timelessness of dreams, Where sun and moon emit no light.

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The world is not quite what it seems, Behind the body heat of the living, Where corpses skate on human grease, Where spectres copulate with ghouls.

Thank God you've come, Sergeant.

I.P.: Constable.

I.P.: I suppose you'll do. I'd like to report a pilferage.

I.P.: (taking out a pad and pencil): Could you describe the snapped-up article? 

I.P.: An overcoat. Worth five thousand.

I.P.: (taking his down): Pheew!

I.P.: It just disappeared into thin air.

There one minute. Gone the next.

I.P.: I shall accost the scoundrel, sir.

I.P.: Probably some abject clerk.


I.P. (roars): I will skin the bastard alive!


They both laugh and slap one another on the back. Kak appears in the fog. He is completely naked, wearing no overcoats. Pause.

SLOW MOTION. A green light comes up on Gogol in the fog.
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"Even the ever-straight public servants of Canberra got the play’s message..."


After the opening at the Nimrod, I remember some of us saying that the message of the play, social oppression of an individual on such a grotesque scale, lacked plausibility in today’s Sydney.

Now, one week before the Canberra opening, this city’s sex-aids shop was raided by the ACT police for handling snapshots and magazines picturing underage people in lurid poses. Had there been an adult involved, had that adult been shooting Swiss clocks with shotguns, and had one of his other pupils been related to Mr Staley or Mr Endicott (as Maura is in the play), the nation’s capital might very well have had its case of Robert O’Brien. In Fraser’s capital it’s the law of the living-room that rules, with Ozzie and Harriet as sheriff.

Juvenile sex is society’s new whipping-boy, the same society that idolised the hell out of youth in the first place. (This is precisely the theme of one of Gombrowicz’s novels, Pornographia.) It is hypocrisy that I believe Spears is aiming at in this play, the hypocrisy of a society that lives on drugs yet feels compelled to oppress young people for the crime of choosing their own brand. The comedy in the play — the wonderful emotional caricatures of Double Bay snoot — is there to underscore the tragedy of the last scene.

Spears, as a playwright, is a grand talent much like John Romeril — a political playwright whose work is textured with tough laughs, vaudeville, and hyperbolic flights of language that entertain and drive the message home at the same time. Richard Wherrett is a director of emotions who often seeks to enrich the compassion of a character. He has done it here so very well. It is the compassion he infuses into Robert O’Brien which helps us identify with the man and his torments. Even the ever-straight public servants of Canberra, at the first night, got the play’s message through identification while they nervously laughed at every bit of ambiguous machismo.

The acting, needless to say, is quite fantastic. It’s hard to imagine the part being done by anyone else now, but this was the
Lust for Power or Perils at Parramatta

“They left their Oz inhibitions at the door and booed, hissed, cheered . . .”

This time round, the leering black-moustached villain is Alton Harvey alias Hamish Stewart, “a rotter of a squatter” with designs on the reins of the colony and — you’ve guessed it — the governor’s young, beauteous and, of course, wealthy niece Teresa Wilmott. No doubt any slight resemblance to the ego-tripping founding fathers, such as John Macarthur, is purely and sheepishly coincidental. But it would take more than Stewart to pull the wool over our discerning eyes!

Teresa, naturally, falls for our hero, Harry Masterman (personable John Hamblin), an emancipist or — shock, horror — freed convict. So Stewart plots to set him up . . . It’s all abetted by John Allen’s Cedric Fortescue-Smythe, the inevitable silly-ass army type, with Clive Marshall and Ron Blanchard aiding as colourful colonials.

But the night really belongs to pretty blonde Anne Semler’s exuberant lady’s companion, Sarah Partridge, whose many splendid attributes include boobs with aspirations towards popping right out of her strategically low-cut bodices without ever quite managing to make it, an admirable addiction to losing her skirt in a crisis and a fine line in ultra-highkicks. Her unerring sense of timing couldn’t be bettered this side of Greenwich and she has refined the game of ironic self-spoofery down to a truly saucy art. Gail Muller’s Teresa Wilmott is also rare among simpering heroines in adding spice and spunk to the obligatory sugar-coating.

Once again musical director Don Harvie has composed all the original numbers, which include at least one rollicking showstopper. And he rises, like some extinct cinema organist, from the bowels of the theatre on to the stage and back down under again while indefatigably playing the piano. Douglas Smith’s fetching costumes and sets are more conventional than Lingwood’s, but very effective for all that, while choreographer Michael O’Reilly’s lively jigs have an authentic touch of blarney about them.

And once more the weekend wits were out in force and the packed audience loved every minute of it. They left their Oz inhibitions at the door, let down their hair, and replete with excellent food and drink, booed, hissed, cheered, sang along and showered the actors with much good-natured applause. The Music Hall is just this kind of potless therapy, better by far than a trip to the psychiatrist. And surely much more fun.

Maria Prerauer is music critic and arts feature-writer for The Australian and writes by permission of that paper’s editor.
"As a play, it is pure champagne for the intellect, and as a production, a barely flawed, exhilarating night out"
and so, as an idea, was The Real Inspector Hound, in which the critics appear on the stage and give their comments as the play unfolds. What was original was the intellectual gusto with which Stoppard worked the ideas out. Joyce enters in a whirlwind of limericks, offers Carr the role of Algy in The Importance of Being Earnest, ponderously catechises Tsara (in the manner of the drunken catechism scene in Ulysses) on the origins of the Dadaist movement and exits dreamily waltzing with his book. In grave Edwardian cadences Carr mourns the great days in the trenches, where the mud ruined two pairs of trousers, and fondly psalms the safety of sloping Switzerland at spite of the crowds of spies and counterspies that make it impossible to get a seat at the best restaurants; and greets the news of a social revolution in Russia with the words, “A social revolution? Unaccompanied women smoking at the opera, that sort of thing?”

Carr, an actual historical figure (his wife astounded Stoppard by turning up alive and irked on opening night), is one of the more brilliant creations of 20th-century theatre. Seen simultaneously as an old and bickering pensioner with a fuddled memory, a Wildean dandy, a Wodehousean twit, a Proustian self-doubter and a Shavian iconoclast, whose actions and opinions, wedged into the plot and a good deal of the dialogue of The Importance of Being Earnest (the handbags containing Joyce’s and Lenin’s manuscripts get mixed up; Carr, in oafish monocle, pretends he is Jack Tsara’s wicked older brother, Tristan, and so on), he somehow sums up all the aspirations of the 19th century and all the disappointments of the 20th, and he is, among other things, a first-rate role for a first-rate actor, which luckily he gets. John Gaden is stunning, a wily, articulate half-wit wrestling in the arms of ... with lady-like mellifluity; and Matthew O’Sullivan as Joyce gets into his bog-Irish cadences a sonorous, deepening lunacy that is a joy to hear. The other, more repellent roles of Lenin and his wife and the bumptious Tristan Tsara were less

The play has much to tell us, of the hankering, vain and sorrowful, after-fame, the dull and earnest nature of the true political hero, the kindergarten frivolity of the artistic innovator, the meaning of courage, the meaning of art (quite literally) and the nature of memory, and never have we been told such things so painlessly. As a play, it is pure champagne for the intellect, unexpectedly after 15 years to the home of his former wife, Katherine, to attend the wedding of their daughter, Jessica, to a young Texas rancher.

There is, however, not much depth or colour to his characterisation. His voice is light and he does not project strongly enough. There is a superficiality to the charm — “embarrassing coyness”, one experienced theatre-goer called it — which he is called upon to exert in his selfish but successful campaign to persuade Jessica to defer marriage for a year and to join him in a continuation of his self-indulgent gypsy-style peregrinations.

“Pogo” is, of course, a type that rarely, if ever, existed outside a fiction-writer’s imagination and it calls for a special flair to flesh the character out. In his film roles Fairbanks undoubtedly exhibited this quality, but it was little in evidence here.

Jessica is most understandably and appealingly played by Christine Amor. She even makes credible her naive assertion that her decision to follow her father is motivated by a loyal desire to afford him a measure of the companionship he missed by not being a part of her growing-up.

However, the one whose company gives greatest pleasure is that of the real actor and wily old Jesuitic, the wily old Jesuitic, the wily old Jesuitic, the wily old Jesuitic, the wily old Jesuitic. For this Fairbanks came out of retirement of a sort to repeat a role he has played many times in many places. Indeed, it has been stated that the role was written for him and this may well be so, although it appears to be in some conflict with a claim in the 1960 programme that the lead characters were created on Broadway by the two who played them so brilliantly here, Australia’s Cyril Rickett and Miss Skinner.

Her contribution to authorship was mainly the dialogue, and as an actress herself, she has written lines that are eminently speakable.

Vince Martin is ruggedly convincing as Jessica’s discomfited fiancé, disadvantaged by his concern for his prize bull, and versatile David Goddard scores in a cameo role as Toy, the Japanese servant.

The elegant setting, designed by Terry Parsons, was imported from London together with the stars.
You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown

“Nicholas Papadametriou’s Red Baron act brought the house down . . .”

You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown. Book, music and lyrics by Clark Gesner. Independent Theatre, Sydney. Opened 12 March. Director, Hugh Munro; musical director, Lindsay Partridge (piano, Lindsay Partridge; percussion, Jeff Edwards; drums, Gary Visontay). Charlie Brown, Hugh Munro; Lucy, Cecily Slade; Linus, Robert Wells; Snoopy, Nicholas Papadametriou; Patty, Wendy Tory; Shroeder, Tony Carden.

You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown is an old show in search of a new audience. Originally a Broadway musical for adults (previously presented unsuccessfully in Sydney as such), it is now being offered to the Saturday matinee audience.

This venture is based on the wide appeal of the Peanuts comic strips, which form the foundation of the work. But there are difficulties, some inherent in the nature of the show and some due to the current presentation.

If one were to start from scratch to make a musical specifically for Australian children from the Peanuts series, the material would be chosen and slanted differently. The form is that of a revue, with the items recognisably shaped by the short comic strip, and while this is not in itself unsuitable, the first half contains too many unconnected and not very amusing short pieces, some of which went over the heads of the young audience. This is partly the fault of the production. A brisker pace and more attention to diction and projection would help.

The other main problem is that of adults impersonating children, particularly children whose “real” faces and characters are so firmly imprinted on our minds because of their origin. Hugo Munro had a suitable expression of innocence and dim hopefulness (alternating with hopelessness), even if he didn’t really look like Charlie Brown, but in general the diverse sizes and shapes of the cast didn’t correspond too well to the ideal models.

The great exception was the Snoopy of Nicholas Papadametriou. There was no attempt at dog costume or doggy behaviour, but he was more authentic than any of the humans. Expressive of face and intonation, eloquent of gesture, lithe and energetic of movement, he communicated the quintessential Snoopy. He was not a man playing a dog, but a dog playing at being a person (while at the same time retaining his right to be a dog commenting on the human situation). Of all the Peanuts characters Snoopy is the chief cult figure for the very young and they were lucky to have him so well portrayed. His Red Baron act brought the house down and the show is worth seeing for his performance alone.

In the original comic strips the most outstanding of the children is Lucy: bossy, infuriating and always right. You love her or you hate her, but you have to notice her. This gives her a well-defined personality which is less difficult to put across than the others, and she was well served by Cecily Slade. To judge from cries of approval from the audience, lots of small girls find it easy to identify with the liberated Lucy and my small daughter went so far as to prefer her even to Snoopy.

Apart from Snoopy’s appearances, the best items were some of the group numbers, particularly the quartet of “book reports” on Peter Rabbit and the “Glee Club rehearsal” interwoven with bickering. These helped to make the second half much livelier than the first.

The Independent Theatre is hoping that the wide appeal of the Peanuts series will bring in the teenage audience, but I’m not sure whether they attend Saturday matinees at the theatre these days. Which is a pity.
"How sad it was to find the play reduced to the level of undies and innuendo..."

*What the Butler Saw* by Joe Orton. Hunter Valley Theatre Company, Hunter Theatre, Newcastle. Director, Terence Clarke; designer, Eamon D'Arcy; Dr Prentice, Alan Becher; Sergeant Match, Tom Considine; Eamon D'Arcy; Denise Otto; Nicholas Beckett, Chris Benaud; Dr Rance, Neil Redfern; Sergeant Match, Tom Considine.

Joe Orton met his death aged 34 at the hands of his jealous male lover. The killer then committed suicide. The circumstances made for good press, just as his earlier unrepentant pasting of nude photographs into library books had put his name before the public eye — and earned him a six-month stint in jail. In this, and ironically, in his macabre death, as with Pasolini later, he stood for honesty and liberalisation in sexual relationships. The brief span of his creative period, four years, saw the gauntlet thrown down, in all his work, to the restrictions of exterior morality. But if it challenges, it does so by creating a different norm which in the world of plays becomes consistent and acceptable, if zany. Mr Sloane the psychopathic killer and sexual athlete, is subjugated into a bi-sexual, thinks nothing of dumping the sansas erispirit remains of his mother in favour of protecting the cache of stolen money; the pragmatism is biting, striking at sacred cows but exposing the emotional rather than rational ground on which they stand.

Yet herein is the paradox of Orton. Despite his historical place in the new-wave theatre of anger and menace, he committed the crime of commercial success, as did Frank Marcus, with whom he bears comparison, in the same era. There was the compulsiveness of airing sexual attitudes just one step ahead of the public debate (and several ahead of practice) in the way Benjamin Franklin does now, but then only just released from the censorial grip of the Lord Chamberlain; there was the use of the farce mode, though often twisted against itself, and the casting of the plays in an idiom, racy and crackling and grounded in everyday speech, which had just won the battle against attempts to re-poticise the theatre; and the traditional mode, by and large, of stage setting — all these ingredients made up the right, and often heady, brew that intoxicated the West End. And grand figures of the English stage like Noel Coward could beam down their approval of the homosexual content so openly treated by their youthful new champion. Despite a recent season of Orton at the Royal Court in London (1975), his name is still far from prominent amongst the new wave. They had their commercial success too, *Look Back in Anger, The Caretaker* and so on, but in a sense this was unintentional and incidental to what originally motivated the writing. Where they seemed portentous and sparse of plot, Orton, in the farce mode, crammed his plays with humour and incident; where they explored new techniques, he stuck with the old ways — though undoubtedly he kicked them along in the process.

Commercial production was both the making, in the short term, and the breaking, in mid-term respect, of a natural talent. The plays could be produced as Brian Rix with a touch of Milliganesque zaniness; if they touched on vital issues of ethical concern, all could be made genial with the excuse of comic unreality. In the longer term, Orton must be re-assessed, and one can sense the beginnings of a revaluation in, for example, the writings of John Lahr. Though his creations have mainly been treated as somewhat risque pieces for the titillation of the carriage trade, they can be seen as acts of subversion with as shattering an impact on the crowds as a grenade tossed into a hotel lobby.

For his world is less kitchen-sink than Osborne, his menace more sociologically pervasive than Pinter. He writes of sexual liberation but knows that beyond a certain point freedom becomes anarchy. If he uses the basic techniques of farce, it is because of its in-built ability to go beyond the naturalistic to a domain where disorder reigns and from where order can be fundamentally questioned. Representatives of society are crooks (Loot) or fools (What the Butler Saw); external authority is manipulated (Mr Sloane) or lampooned (Sir Winston Churchill's prowess is related to penis size, not intellect). The sacred is desecrated and the deviant made the norm. How sad it was, then, to find *What the Butler Saw* reduced to the peek-a-boo level of undies and innuendo, to be back on the smooth carpet of middle-class appeal rather than treading the broken glass of the true spirit of his plays. Deeper issues were relegated to the programme notes and then only in reference to the old sanity/madness syndrome (an issue as gripping as sharks' teeth a decade ago when Laing and Co. first hacked at the roots of psychiatric practice). The effect of the government commissioner come to inspect the asylum, is written as a disturbing creation, perverting the course of enlightenment by jumping to the most perverse conclusions about the situations he finds. In Neil Redfern's characterisation he became too obviously just a mechanism by which confusion was heaped on confusion rather than embodying the worst excesses of Freudian theory. Excesses, which, coupled with the bungling attempts by Prentice to conceal his lecherous advances, lead to the cropping of the ingenious secretary's hair and her certification as insane in the belief that she is a victim of incestuous rape (actually as it turns out almost true!) And when the cruelty is taken this far, one is forced into a highly ambivalent view of the "comedy".

In traditional farce manner there is the merry-go-round of clothes-swapping and the role reversal which it entails. The bellboy, who has pornographic photos of Prentice's wife to blackmail the couple for payment and a secure job, loses his trousers in an attempt to avoid police. Mrs Prentice has lost her dress back in the hotel and the secretary and policeman lose their clothes on the pretext of medical examinations. Even on this level the production was hard put to bring off the titillating transformations from which the play derives its title.

Of the cast, Pat Bishop as the sexually insatiable and near-alcoholic Mrs Prentice ("They'll send you to the grave in a Y-shaped coffin") must take the first night honours alone. Her accomplished handling of lust for the young bellboy, doubts for her husband's sanity, befuddlement with drink and eventual fears for her own mind when faced by near-naked and injured men, held the pulse of the production and
What can you say about theatrical activities which serve a social purpose, reach an audience to whom other kinds of theatre are largely unavailable, and provide practical therapy for those involved? Only that it's good to know that theatre can be of some use. The two short plays of which I write have little in common, perhaps, apart from my reaction to them which, in both cases, was one of admiration for the motives of those involved.

**Next**

**Brylcreme and Maggot Pies**

“My reaction was... one of admiration for the motives of those involved”


*Resurgents* by Bob Golding. Resurgents, Parramatta Jail, NSW. Director, Tony Ralph.

Kid, Neil Carroll; Bongo, Laurie Bettarel; Failed, Jimmy Driscoll; Actors, Don Duffell.

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**Next**, presented by Lunchtime Playhouse at St James Playhouse, was directed by Peter Williams. Now that the AMP Theatrette is no longer a viable proposition for Q Theatre and that time-honoured lunch-time institution has moved

As at Q, I found myself touched by the enthusiasm of this neglected and underprivileged audience for the social and cultural occasion provided by a sandwich dressed policeman clambers through the roof to claim the lost piece of Sir Winston, Rance advises, “Let us put on our clothes and face the world.” But the wraps had been on for too long for this line to have the impact intended. The darker side of Orton’s disturbed and disturbing genius, and thus the trenchant power of his comic vision remained a potential for others to realise.
Hobson’s Choice

. . . a plethora of beautiful costumes, a whimsical story, and a steady flow of smile lines . . .

Hobson’s Choice by Harold Brighouse. SGIO Theatre, Brisbane. Opened 16 March. Director, Murray Foy; designer, Peter Cooke.

Alice Hobson, Robyn Gurney; Vickie Hobson, Louise Rush; Maggie Hobson, Kate Wilson; Albert Prosser, Ron Layne; Henry Horatio Hobson, Don Crosby; Mrs Hepworth, Hazel Howson; Tubby Wadlow, Phil Moye; William Mossop, Douglas Hodge; Jim Heeler, Russell Newman; Ada Figgins, Gillian Hyde; Fred Beenstock, Warren Meacham; Dr MacFarlane, Reg Cameron.

My critical compatriot Don Batchelor by chance recently attended one of a number of performances by the Queensland Theatre Company at the end of which the audience was invited to stay behind and discuss QTC policy with the actors and directors of the play, and so forth. Perhaps the company sees itself at the crossroads; its monopoly in Queensland on the conventional theatre world is secure, and it is already looking to new possibilities such as regional youth theatre and perhaps a small experimental company.

The main topic of discussion on this night, however, was the kinds of plays that went into the main SGIO seasons, and one proposition which the company rather hopefully put was: “Would you like to see a play by a local writer or performer?” A little more variegated and adventurous programme?” About 50 audience members — and a fairly random sample of middle-class society — had stayed to hear this suggestion, and their response, according to Don, was almost uniformly negative. What they valued about the QTC seasons of plays was their predictability, their wholesomeness: a good night out where you knew what you’d get and you could take the kids. Not like the films: no nastiness, violence, no four-letter words, though someone in the play had said “testicle” and they rather wished it hadn’t happened.

One sample doesn’t make a survey of course, but I’d mused over Don’s anecdote for several days when I happened to walk into a Saturday matinee of Hobson’s Choice. It was certainly an audience which wanted to see Hobson’s Choice, a slight piece of comedy written during the First World War and looking back to the high-Victorian 1880s — an age of affluent middle-class shopkeepers, of relative stability in the world, and of daughters who wanted to put bustles on their hothorns. They’d come to see gentle comedy, and they were rewarded with a plethora of beautiful costumes, a whimsical story, and a steady flow of smile lines.

Taken seriously, the play would be pretty objectionable. It pretends to make a few digs at snobbishness and class prejudice, but in essence it reveals the same contempt for the working-class as the snobs it pokes fun at. Hobson, the ageing widower, is run over by the truth one day. Tell me lies . . .

So stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies . . .

The QTC has worked hard over the years building audiences by developing an acknowledged house style. And there is even, perhaps, a sort of tacit understanding between company and audience that, whenever the company feels obliged to stretch their wings a little by offering more varied or adventurous fare, the audience will understand and stay away for a while without holding it against them.

And so I came away with Don Batchelor’s story, a trivial play, a fine production and the obvious enjoyment of four hundred people to juggle with. Watching them file out with smiling faces, I thought again of the lines:

So stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies . . .

Their Moreton Bay bubble floats serenely on.
"One felt sorry for the poor performers in a silly vehicle . . ."

Dangerous Corner By J.B. Priestley, Twelfth Night Theatre, Brisbane.

Don Batchelor

These reflections of our fathers are often revealing indications of how far and fast things are changed, and make it clear how many of our preoccupations have less than absolute value.

Marcella Burgoyne;

By J.B. Priestley. Twelfth Night Theatre, Brisbane.

Burlinson;

Freda Caplan,

Carseldine.

we in Oz too readily deride in favour of the immediate and the novel.

Crummond

production of wilderness." So says Jimmy Porter with a look back in anger at J.B. Priestley glancing over his shoulder at a fading Edwardia. Just what sort of "He's like Daddy — still casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from his comfortable disenfranchised

Director

Dangerous Corner "One felt sorry for the poor performers in a silly vehicle . . ."

I saw Priestley on the BBC last year, a good twenty years after Jimmy Porter's harsh judgement, and was fascinated and moved by the great span of his life and the prodigious output. Such programmes on TV give a chastening sense of perspective and an appreciation of experience which we in Oz too readily deride in favour of the immediate and the novel.

The recent past does have its ludicrous side, of course. We in Brisbane have just had the refreshing spoofery of Bullshot Crummond as a hilarious reminder.

There is a different sort of merit in resurrecting a period piece. The present interest in murky film footage from the thirties and forties is not all modish nonsense. These reflections of our fathers are often revealing indications of how far and fast things are changed, and make it clear how many of our preoccupations have less than absolute value.

For these reasons it seems churlish to dismiss this Priestley revival merely because it is 45 years old. There are other reasons for my distaste.

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The play is a maze of fiddling contrivances. What mind, indeed, could frame such awful symmetry? And what of the society...
The Department

"It says much for the pace of the dialogue and the strength of performances ... that our interest is never tempted to flag"

The Department by David Williamson, WA National Theatre Company, Playhouse, Perth. Opened 24 March. Director Aarne Neeme, designer, Anna French.

Nearly two years late, David Williamson's The Department has reached the Perth Playhouse. In fact, the delay is of no consequence. Even in 1975 it was already "period", set back in a golden age (1967) when tertiary education still saw the sky as the limit, and empire-building was a game in which you used student enrolment numbers as ammunition fired at the funding bodies, who shot back money.

The later perspective shows up the play's more complex layering. It's not merely about the manipulations and group dynamics within one particular engineering department at one particular time, but about the whole tertiary system, and beyond that, about the running of organisations in general. True, the immediate shock of recognition in the education business is the most powerful, but even public servants have been able to apply the patterns to their sections.

The Department occupies a special place among Williamson's works. By restricting himself to the format of the staff meeting, he has imposed rigid limitations on himself, which force him into deeper exploration and more subtle nuancing of his material. In the looser framework of patterns of family life exploding into domestic violence, or the social comedy of the party situation, the serious and the comic, the fact that the college is noble and worthy of the nation is the most unscientific. The friction is seen in terms of base and human error. Thus, the possible collapse of the building because of the faulty installation of the tank is duplicated in moral terms by the discovery that the college was originally founded on crooked money. Yet it survives on both levels.

The stresses brought out by the staff meeting repeat the pattern. The structure may buckle a little, but it holds up.

Apart from Robby, and the female intruder from the Humanities, Myra, the characters are just a shade removed from the average office (Chloe), whom Robby humours in his comic incompetence, and Al (Neville Gaffney), whom the system has turned into a irritible neurotic. Between them they demonstrate most of the things a bad system can do to its members, and also what kinds of people, added together, create a bad system.

In the character of Robby, head of the department, something more personal is explored: he has gained a department but lost his soul. In the Melbourne production the emphasis had been on exhausted disillusionment. Alan Cassell in the Playhouse version plays him with more fidgety nervous energy, suggesting a man aware of his shaky position, aggressively on the defensive and play-acting for all he's worth. The closest he allows himself to get to sincerity is in the moments alone with Myra, but at the same time he puts up a barrier of restraint against the possibility of intrusive emotion.

Carole Skinner brings with her the experience of having played Myra in the original production, and exudes an easy and passionate commitment to the interests of the students nicely shows up the lack of genuine concern among her colleagues.

Physically, it must be one of the most uncomfortable productions the Playhouse has seen. Although the dialogue suggests the laboratory environment, Anna French's set gives pride of place to a...
At War with Shaw

"Director John Milson’s deft touch . . . seems surer with every production"

Touted in the publicity as a post-Festival “refresher”, the new Hole-in-the-Wall double bill of one-act plays lives up to ... of Shavian comic wit into a light, bright and sparkling evening’s entertainment. Perhaps the brevity of the two plays, The Man of Destiny and O’Flaherty V.C. works in Milson’s favour, for because of it we are mercifully spared the boring and none-too-subtly disguised authorial harangues which too frequently mar those plays Shaw himself considered his most substantial.

Written in 1915, and sarcastically subtitled A Recruiting Pamphlet, it depicts an interlude in the life of Private Dennis O’Flaherty, V.C., a simple Irish lad set thinking by his experience in the trenches. Shaw uses the play to attack British jingoism (represented, in its mild form, by Sir Pearce Madigan, the general O’Flaherty is accompanying on a recruiting tour, and on whose Irish estate his childhood has been spent) and to satirise Anglo-Irish antagonisms, represented through O’Flaherty’s termagant mother.

O’Flaherty was played by a relative newcomer to the Perth stage, former undergraduate amateur, Alan Fletcher. He is a young actor of real promise and was convincing as the slightly hemused, slightly bitter young soldier so sick of warfare, Irish mothers and English generals that he contemplates becoming a French farmer. Fletcher’s control of the notoriously difficult Irish accent was only just short of impeccable, and a couple more nights in the role should see him expert enough to fool St Patrick himself.

As O’Flaherty’s mother, Margaret Ford has a plum comic part, and she did it more than justice, to be sure. By turns obsequious, aggressive, domineering and affectedly grief-stricken she is a delightedly comic virago of an old woman, and Margaret Ford made the most of her.

For O’Flaherty V.C. Rod Williams complemented his comic innkeeper of earlier in the evening with a nicely handled Sir Pearce Madigan, upper-class military gent, crusty but essentially good-natured, dazzled out in the tweeds and riding boots obligatory for all generals retired to country estates. Tricia Youlden also makes a brief re-appearance, this time as Tessie, parlourmaid and former O’Flaherty sweetheart. There’s little enough for her to do, but what there is is done well, in keeping with the high standard of performance over all.

Apart from the crispness of performance in both plays, they are also a delight for the eyes. Costumes are uniformly (no pun intended) good and the set, a slightly raised platform backed by two whitewashed flat board walls set at an angle is effective both when dressed as an inn room (The Man of Destiny) or a garden courtyard (O’Flaherty V.C.). Presented in a spirit of breezy fun, and with a delightful lack of pretension, these two plays do make an effective refresher for theatre patrons overexposed on Festival drama. They have all the sparkle and effervescence of a glass of Andrews, but, fortunately, no traces of the diarrhoeic after-effects. The Hole management has every right to hope for a successful five-week season.
"Blundell is... at times so emotionally ill-at-ease that both love and accent slip..."

Same Time Next Year


George, Graeme Blundell; Doris, Nancye Hayes.

Graeme Blundell, as the adulterous auditor in the new Bernard Slade comedy Same Time Next Year, penitently declares to his primed paramour that: "Women are more pragmatic than men: they adjust to rottenness better."

The audience was amused. His lover Doris, played by Nancye Hayes, responded with a glaring look of admonishment.

And laughter in tandem with sexism resonated through a near-empty Her Majesty's, in Adelaide.

But Blundell's seemingly cursory remark, a provocative one in the capital of sexual democracy, offered an early clue to Slade's raison d'être. Doris and George are both model marrieds of American middle class. And they take on an extra-marital commitment to each other in true consumer style. Their curious affair is a case of love by instalments.

For one weekend each year for 24 years, Doris and George meet in a guest cottage in a North Californian country inn insulated from cares, ties and responsibilities by the comforting thought that all's justified because "the Russians have the bomb... we could be dead tomorrow."

George comes out from New Jersey yearly to audit a friend's books. He has a perfect alibi. Doris, an American-born Italian Catholic, leaves husband Harry and the children in Bakersfield for her annual retreat. She has no alibi but simply plays truant and finds spiritual, not to say sexual, uplift in the arms and companionship of the amorous accountant.

From the outset Doris, more than George, makes flexible her rigid principles in order to cope and "adjust to rottenness better." George suffers pangs of conscience. He answers a phone call from his pre-school daughter in a voice "still hoarse with passion." Or he worries aloud about the "looks of betrayal in the eyes of the children."

Doris adjusts. And that ability to adjust sees her blossom as an individual, developing in stages from pregnant high-school drop-out, pregnant high-school graduate in her 20s, sexual adventuress, middle-aged college hippie, fashionable financial whizz and finally to gracious, but always adulterous, grandmother.

Nancye Hayes handles the transitions expertly. But her pace and spark, unfortunately, are often impaired by Blundell's daffy performance. He is clearly uncomfortable in his role, and at times so emotionally ill-at-ease that both love and accent slip.

Harsh words perhaps, since he is a relatively recent addition to the show, but that's show biz.

And so where Miss Hayes is equipped with a maturity that leads to more than a superficial understanding and interpretation of her character, Blundell appears somewhat handicapped. Age in theatre must be more than grey frosting and painted wrinkles.

Gordon Hunt's direction was, one must say, discreet: perhaps too discreet, for it was as if the puppet-master had cut the strings, only to allow his marionettes to flop down in tangles.

The set was likewise uninspiring, a kind of trendy bachelor pad rather than the guest house of a country inn, and the taped voices and music used to provide time-links between scenes left much to be desired.

In short, Same Time Next Year, was not a satisfactory night of slick comedy and fast performance. Rather, it seems more appropriate to say that, as a parachute production, it left one constantly hoping someone would pull the curtain's rip-cord.
Macbett

setting itself tasks which have provoked challenging and direct responses

Macbett by Eugene Ionesco, Union Hall, Adelaide. Opened 16 March. Director, Martin Christmas; designer, Jon Smithies; Candi Vowels; Geoff Crows; Macbett, Piers Duncan; Banco, Rob Brookman; Lemonade Seller, Jill Bridian; Orderly, John Webb; Lady Duncan, Sue Rider; Duncan, Eric Maddern; Lady in waiting, Meme Throne; Woman, Jean Right; Soldiers, Nick Carstensen, David Roberts; Servants, Tricha Elix, Verity Laughton, Jennie Matthews.

Ambrose Bierce's cynical view of ambition as "an overmastering desire to be vilified by enemies while living and made ridiculous by friends when dead" would no doubt meet with the approval of an Ionesco who purports to show in his Macbett the paradoxes and futility of man's attempts to outsmart destiny. His Macbett is a set of reactions, a list of attributes, most of them — ambition, superstition, envy — have their source in Shakespeare's hero. But here they are hung on the character like decorations, or lettered pennants each of which can be waved at the appropriate time. The obvious and easy justification of this approach to character and plot is the catch-phase "absurdist"; as all human behaviour is seen by Ionesco as absurd, this view allows him to include in his cast a female in boater, clutching a butterfly net, a Thane of Candor who has Glamis as a ventriloquist's dummy, and a Lady Duncan who doubles as Macbett's spouse and a witch. It's all fairly ingenious and daring; but it would be wrong to mistake these qualities either for relevance or for an honest examination of the questions the play pretends to raise.

These reservations aside, the Adelaide University Theatre Guild and its director are to be commended for their tackling of the play. A touch of adventurousness is sadly needed on the Adelaide theatrical scene at present, and it is encouraging to see such a group setting itself tasks which, although not solved altogether by this production, have provoked challenging and direct responses from cast and director.

Not the least of the production's merits is the highly effective, expressionistic set design and use of lighting. It's a relief to see confirmed a conviction that the stage does not need to be so cluttered with furniture and props that it looks either like an antique dealer's hideout or a trendy, mod-converted apartment suite. The performance area remains bare but for a stone, the occasional use of a throne and rostrum with steps, and a lofty hollow square built of four perpendicular columns, and cross-beams which do not meet. Set on the revolve, this effective image is used imaginatively in the second act, although at times there was just the suggestion that the machinery was being set in motion for its own sake. And the simple idea of an enormous length of floating grey cloth, swooping from the front of the stage down in graduated peaks towards back-stage middle was again an effective realisation of the tenet — as appropriate to the theatre as it is to architecture — that "less is more". In conjunction with the skilful and suggestive lighting, the set tended, however, to overshadow both performers and play.

As an exception, Sue Rider's Lady Duncan/First Witch was full of energy and presence: vocally strong and physically displaying attributes that clearly provoke a response in Macbett, she provided the focal point for the production. And although many of the other costumes tended in their drabness to neutralise the characters, the gold bikini she displayed on appropriate occasions was worn with both style and a conviction that this femme fatale had more to offer than is usually available in traditional productions of Macbeth. In this respect, Ionesco's reviewing of the character is both ironic and shrewd: and the double perspective was well realised in Ms Rider's performance.

In the Banco-Macbett double act, Piers Duncan and Rob Brookman also had some good moments, apart from some uncertainties over the plot. Macbett could have been both more comic and more chilling than they proved. But the second act, which takes much of the external action of Shakespeare's text at a brisk jogtrot, was cleverly managed and full of vigour. On this evidence, Martin Christmas has much to offer: and his progress, together with that of the Theatre Guild, deserves to be watched with more than passing interest.
Ravages: Two new plays written and directed by John Wood. La Mama Theatre, Melbourne. Opened 3 March, 1977. Heels Over Head: Nilma, Sue Jones; Cecil, Tim Robertson; Freddy, Peter Cummins. Dropping In: Ralph, Bruce Kerr; Edna, Sue Jones; Jean, Liddy Clark.

In 1974 a Melbourne Theatre Company actor, John Wood, wrote a lampoon Marx Bros sequel entitled On Yer Marx which was produced by the Australian Performing Group in the Front Theatre of the Pram Factory, Melbourne. It was a laboured comic piece, spared from complete unmemorability by some deftly observed impersonations: Max Gillies (Groucho), Lex Marinos (Chico) and Evelyn Krape (Harpo).

The two new plays in the Ravages season — Dropping In and Heels Over Head — are different and more substantial pieces. While neither is marred by the derivativeness and contrivance that characterised On Yer Marx, Heels Over Head is the more original and sustained of the two. Both pieces are confidently naturalistic and in command of their language and milieu. Wood is still writing comedy, but now he knows who he’s laughing at and when to stop laughing.

Dropping In is a macabre short one-acter which takes place on an outer suburban door-step. But, despite thoroughly convincing performances by the three actors involved, it doesn’t quite come off. As an understandably disturbed, deserted young mother, Liddy Clark was vulnerably old-before-her-time beneath a black comic facade. In the play she is forced into confronting her past by the distantly related couple who drop in on her. As the henpecked droll husband, Bruce Kerr gave another of his pain-takingly observed performances, and as his tight-lipped but vociferous wife, Sue Jones was suitably proper and nasty. The play opens well with a meticulously played scene of conjugal neurosis, and the tension builds in a succession of ordinary tragedies tonelessly related by the young woman; however, towards the end the tension falls away and the denouement is predictable and silly.

Heels Over Head teams two fine actors, Peter Cummins and Tim Robertson, with Sue Jones in a tight, sustained examination of the inadequacies of the Australian male. Set in the adjoining kitchen and bedroom of another suburban house on Anzac Day, the play begins in the morning over breakfast and ends late that evening when the husband (Tim Robertson) a decorated Anzac hero, returns home hooved and bearing more bottles to find his wife (Sue Jones) in bed with his war-time mate, Freddy (Peter Cummins), the man whose life he had saved. What is so dramatically impressive is the way in which the four scenes of the play change and build the tension by contrasting moods, which range from the funny, wise-cracking opening through tender, furtive love-scenes and the inevitably violent finale.

Throughout, the characterisation is complex enough to weave in the previously established moods while simultaneously creating a new one. Tim Robertson plays Cecil, the aggressive alcoholic whose idea of human engagement is the pub. Nilma (Sue Jones) is his ignored but still trying wife, who attempts to revive their flagging relationship. He responds with sneers and grunts, but she has some resilience left and can give as good as she gets, and a wholesome slanging match ensues in which they volley superbly placed insults at each other. Her purpose is constructive — she wants him to see what he is doing to her and their relationship — whereas he merely characterises her as the nagging bitch, and withdraws to the march and the pub. There is no way he will allow himself to be drawn into the affective world of interpersonal relationships, let alone begin to resolve the ongoing dilemmas of his relationship to her. Their argument does not seem particularly traumatic, and, although he says he won’t come back, it is obvious he will and that when he does she will forgive, though not forget entirely. Throughout the argument she has made passing references to Freddy, the legless wonder, the sene qua non of Cecil’s glorious war record: Freddy, the unwanted and pathetic alcoholic who regularly turns up every Anzac Day to fawn (in Nilma’s eyes) at the hero’s feet and call her the “missus”.

Peter Cummins as Freddy, had the more difficult role. Freddy has to live up to expectations and create new ones. He has to have traces of the former object of Nilma’s pity while fast becoming the alternative to Cecil, and the object of her newly awakened desires.

While Cecil had at moments a certain brutish charm and a boozey joie de vivre, Freddy’s appeal is initially defined in negative terms, as unlike Cecil, he is not a war hero: not aggressive and bursting with bravado; not insensitive and indifferent to Nilma’s tenderness and sexuality. He is also, significantly, no longer an alcoholic and not Nilma’s husband. This negation of Cecil must be transformed into an actual man whom Nilma wants for a lover — not her husband’s mate, her own lover. Peter Cummins maintained the tension between what Freddy had formerly been to Nilma and what he was to her now, and created a sympathetic character. Even when they are in bed, Freddy is still calling her “missus” and profusely and genuinely apologising for the inconvenience, just as on previous Anzac Days he would say when asked to stay for dinner. “Thanks missus, I wouldn’t want to put you out.” The scenes between Freddy and Nilma as they tentatively explore the boundaries of their mutual attraction were deeply understood by the writer-director and the actors, and remarkably touching. They had an element of witty self-irony which prevented them from becoming too coy and precious.

The play ends in violent confrontation when Cecil finally comes home. It takes a while for him to realise what has happened and he even asks Nilma, who has hastily wrapped a dressing-gown around her, why she isn’t wearing a nightie. But when the realisation hits, his thought processes are swift and predictable. They fight when Cecil attacks Nilma, and Freddy has his revenge on the man whom he always cursed for saving him.
“The play . . . desperately requires startling and muscular treatment, which it didn’t receive”


Lady Sneerwell, Sandy Gore; Snake, Robert Hewett; Manservant, Peter Dunn; Joseph Surface, Gerard Maguire; Maria, Sally Cahill; Mrs Candour, Irene Inescourt; Crabtree Edward Hepple; Sir Benjamin Backbite, Gary Down; Sir Peter Teazle, Simon Chilvers; Rowley, David Ravenswood; Lady Teazle, Natalie Bate; Mardservant, Anne Reddin; Sir Oliver Surface, Frank Thring; Moses, Bruce Myles; Trip, Robert Hewett; Charles Surface, David Downer; Careless, Barry Hill; Manservant, Roy Baldwin; Guests and a Sailor, Roy Baldwin, Gary Down, Peter Dunn, Anne Reddin.

March in most of the capitals turned out to be a time of exhilarating openings for Australian theatre-goers — Queensland Theatre Company with Hobson’s Choice, Tasmanian Theatre Company with The Sound of Music, South Australian Theatre Company with The School for Scandal, and The School for Scandal yet again by the Melbourne Theatre Company to mark their occupation of the Athenaeum Theatre, which has had its stage modernised and re-equipped. Reliable bums on seats, rather than imaginative innovation, seems to be the name of the game for March this year.

These are hard times, or unprogressive times, for local, indigenous drama. Never has the Englishness of Australian . . . Republic at its worst, in the likes of transvestite histrionics and kitsch foppery; a sad paradise for the fetishist and frotteur.

The Australian Performing Group with its exuberant homespun entertainment, The Hills Family Show, finds it difficult to win handsome houses on its interstate tour. So tenuous and insecure is the situation at the moment, that new writers with a new angle or even perspective are immediately elevated to the status of a cult. The movement of the seventies has rather depressing failed to make qualitative or profound inroads on conventional es-

L to R: Down, Inescort, Hepple.
false manners, an expose of hypocrisy and self-serving. It furnishes conventional trusty talents with easy material. The play is so well known, so well tried, it desperately requires startling and muscular treatment, which it didn’t receive.

For all its intricate twists and cynical wit, The School for Scandal ultimately anatomises itself into the good and the villainous, the former vindicated, the latter rebuked. These simple divisions cry out for some ironic qualifications: an element of parody in the happy ending, some recalcitrance in the nastiness, a whiff of the incurable in the profligacy.

Ray Lawler’s production is somewhat stock; few of these evil yet authentically comic possibilities are entertained — we are tempted to believe that the characters will have learned by their experience. The sense of an ethical journey was certainly there. What was lacking for me was a final comic edge — a hint of some intractability in human behaviour to vinegar the oil of the end.

Nevertheless, the production precipitated some good performances, particularly that of Irene Inescourt as Mrs Candour — stylish and comprehensively alert to all the ramifications of character ... all the pitfalls of anti-semitism in his Moses, and indeed created a most agreeable little grafter from the East End.

Simon Chilvers once again showed what an excellent deadpan farceur he is with his droll realisation of Sir Peter Teazle.

David Downer also shone within the limits of the interpretation of Charles Surface — he seemed untouched by the ravages of degenerate conduct. The Melbourne Theatre Company has always been in difficulty with violence and moral squalor on stage — to wit the tepid fight in the recent production of The Doll and the tentative antics of Charles and his friends in this play. We had the usual few token drunkards tottering about, a bawdy song, and naturally the wanton gypsy flashing some calf here, some bosom there, and dancing, you guessed it, on a table.

Frank Thring, who is not so nimble as he used to be, appeared marvellously incongruous as the successful English merchant from the East, Sir Oliver Surface. Somehow he contrived to look like some reckless Puritan from the Mayflower, or have wandered in from a nearby production of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible. His performance, a rather exhausted and lacklustre one on opening night, failed to exert much magic on the audience, the type of audience who over the years have extended to Mr Thring more affectionate indulgences than the Pope could ever supply.

The rest of the large cast, either coped without imagination and flair, or were plain inadequate. The members of the School for Scandal itself, much more than a mere menagerie of goffs, were never tough, acrimonious or manipulative enough for me. Behind the affectation and squalor sit some horrible little minds; I didn’t really see them; there was no real threat to the decent and honourable in the play.

Snake, a gift of a role to a physical actor, was given a stiff and fairly predictable rendition by Robert Hewett. Sally Cahill’s Maria was the submissive stereotype of the winsome beauty. Similarly, Natalie Bate’s Lady Teazle, who also displayed an inconstancy of accent on opening night, something that will surely be ironed out as the run proceeds.

The set seemed cramped and stodgy, overpowered in addition by embracing huge walls of wood panelling. The costumes, as usual, were exquisite and the envy of every fashionplate. The theatre itself would be immeasurably improved by one thing: a bomb. Doubtless the MTC will do pretty well with the Athenaeum. It has a superb central location, emanates an old-world atmosphere, and will provide the public with a palatable fare, plays of traditional worthiness, the kind that regularly appear on a HSC syllabus and either alienate teenagers from the theatre or condition them into effete good taste.

It is two hundred years since The School for Scandal was first performed in London. At the risk of sounding overharsh for once, I wouldn’t really care if it were not performed in this country for the next two hundred years, unless of course some unconscionable dog of a director, with a rabid cast, came along and gnawed at its vitals, ignoring all the poodlelike conventions of the past.

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“Linda Aronson is . . . an accomplished playwright, and I look forward to seeing more of her work”


Jack, Norman Kaye; Gordon, Terence Donovan; Hughie, Mervyn Drake; Sean, Stephen Oldfield.

A critic said of Linda Aronson’s play The Fall Guy that there was “a good play trying to get out”. Another said of Jack Hibberd’s A Toast to Melba that it would have been better if it had been a one-act play like his Les Darcy. Romeril stands accused of writing sprawling, undisciplined plays. Williamson is compared unfavourably to exponents of the well-made “naturalistic” play and at the same time is thought to be a mere reproducer of “naturalism”.

There is, it seems to me, a dissatisfaction with an absence of what might be called “craft”, and a none-too-positive attitude to the psycho-social experience called “theatre”.

Craft, of course, exists in many different forms. A craftsman who makes a chair impossible to sit on is falling down on the job. However good it might look, sitting is its prime function. We might admire the beauty of its nail-less construction, its superb finish, its carved legs; but if it falls over it’s not a chair. That is, if it doesn’t work it’s no good.

In the theatre “craft” seems to have taken on another meaning. When critics talk about it, they are not referring to the quality of the writing, or the imagination, or even what happens between text, actor and audience, but something more mechanical: construction. This is more or less a hangover from a concern with the values of narrative fiction, transposed into the “well-made play”. Unfortunately, the whole trend of 20th-century theatre has been away from feats of construction, towards a kind of truth and effect in performance. A kind of functional craftsmanship.

And in Australia, what’s more, the use of forms derived or starting from Brecht, Expressionism, the Absurd, melodrama and anything else that seems useful at the time, proceeds apace. Australian playwrights seem to be great collectors of styles, using any device that makes a moment work. Fortunately, there are a few directors, including the playwrights themselves, letting the plays stand up and be counted.

Linda Aronson’s The Fall Guy is episodic in structure and presents a set of character types and situations as a demonstration. It is very much concerned with appearances: the surfaces of the characters and how they perceive they fit into their little societies, how they speak. It is not concerned with the historical realism of the characters so much as the emotional truth of episodes between them. And even these realisations are a long way from sentiment.

For me it was something of a relief to see a distanced attitude to characters and situations that could easily have become mawkish. Aronson’s style is perhaps closer to Romeril’s in The Floating World than anyone else’s, though on a more modest scale and subject. I was glad to see something that concerned not only old variety artists and the theatre, but also gay liberation, made unsentimental.

The Fall Guy is Jack (Norman Kaye), an old variety artist. He sings a bit, dances a bit and tries to get laughs. In truth his act, as we see it, is not very good. His time has passed, if he ever had one. Success has eluded him, and his partner of 28 years Gordon (Terence Donovan) is sick of playing the poof, as he has to in the act’s latest incarnation. Gordon walks out on the partnership.

Norman Kaye’s Jack: not very smart, but an enthusiast. Likes people a lot, easily gullled. A perpetual optimist, a drunk, a survivor with a paralysed arm. Not a real comedian, he has no sense of place in the world and is unable to turn his loser’s personality into anything funny. Not aware of himself, but self-pitying. A fall guy, a patsy.

Gordon, on the other hand, although he has a lingering sense of friendship for Jack, wants out and up. But all his half-hearted efforts to help Jack only leave him dangling on the end of his rope.

Counterpointing Jack’s decline — the distance from having an act and then not having one — is a pair of gays. Sean, an insipid student, and Hughie, a manic, game-playing manipulator also have a relationship in trouble. Sean (not well played by Stephen Oldfield) is a serious-minded gay libber wanting to do his MA and get on in the world like Gordon. Hughie (energetically performed by Mervyn Drake), though in love with Sean, doesn’t let that interfere with his flights of fun.

One of these games is his playing along with Jack in a pub where they have just met. Gordon comes to see Jack: Jack pretends he already has a new partner in Hughie. Hughie keeps up the facade until he sets up Jack with a date at a gay cabaret. Jack thinks this is his big break; really it’s another step on the way down. Gordon’s attempt to help is a spot on an important club show. Jack’s realistic and final response is to abuse everyone he thinks has brought him to this pass. The management turns off the lights, leaving Jack on a dark, empty stage, taking the fall.

Mick Rodger allows the play to do its own job, aided by terrific performances from Norman Kaye and Mervyn Drake. The setting is simple and the sole bit of gimmickry, on the occasion of Jack’s performance to the gay libbers, is very well realised. Here Rodger has Jack perform in event of a curtain as if to an audience downstream, with his “friends”, and us, behind it. His triumphal return backstage with the growing knowledge that he has been had is a fine moment. Linda Aronson is already an accomplished playwright, and I look forward to seeing more of her work. I don’t suppose either the effete or the political wing of the gay lib will like The Fall Guy a lot, for the same reason that sentimentalisers of The Tiv (etc) won’t. Both have been used as symptoms of a culture in decay in a play that left me feeling a bit depressed, but appreciative of a new talent. May many more drop from the flies.
"Bright entertainment . . . geared to the talents of Jill Perryman . . ."
Australia's most successful producer and director of films in the 1930s was Ken G. Hall, whose book, Directed by Ken G. Hall: The Autobiography of an Australian Film-Maker, will be published in June by Lansdowne.

In addition to newsreels, Hall made 17 feature films, almost all of which were resounding box-office successes.

Three extracts from the book are published here. The first extract tells of his meeting with the actor Bert Bailey - a meeting which led to the making of On Our Selection, the first of the famous series of "Dad and Dave" comedies. In the second extract, he talks about Thoroughbred, one of his more ambitious films. In the third, he reveals reservations about recent policies of government aid to the film industry, a subject which is developed controversially in the later chapters of the book.

It was a firm knock and the man who followed it into the office was tallish, spare, with a thin face and a strong, hooked nose. I had not seen him before. At least, I had not seen him as himself.

Yet his unexpected entry to my office that morning late in 1930 changed the whole course of my life.

He had friendly, humorous eyes and as he held out his hand he said, "Ken Hall? ... I'm Bert Bailey. I believe we're going to make a picture together."

If he had said he believed we were about to climb Everest together I could not have been more shaken. "That's great! But I wish someone had told me about it." "You'll hear," he said. "I just left Stuart and it's all fixed."

Stuart was Stuart F. Doyle, managing director of Union Theatres, Australasian Films - and a flock of subsidiary companies. I was officially assistant to the managing director and ensconced in a rather sumptuous carpeted office on the eleventh floor of the State Theatre building in Sydney - not because I rated it, but because it was previously the office of a director of the company who had died.

Sensing my confusion, Bailey said, "You're interested, aren't you?" I assured him I most certainly was interested. "What are we going to make?"

"I thought you'd have guessed that."

I was not doing very well. I had yet to learn actors are 'different' people, even the very good ones.

"Oh, the Selection of course! Bert Bailey in On Our Selection ... I saw you in it at the Palace a couple of years ago. You were great, Mr Bailey, and it was a tonic to see a house fall about laughing like it did that night."
He grinned confirmation, "Yes, the old Selection. It's been good to me."

I knew from trade gossip that it had been more than good to him. He'd made a small fortune from it since, in collaboration with Edmund Duggan in 1912, he had adapted it from Steele Rudd's best-seller. They bought the dramatic rights from Arthur Hoey Davis, who was of course Steele Rudd. The play opened at the Criterion Theatre, Melbourne, on 11th October 1912, under the management of Bailey & Grant with Bert Bailey as Dad (and producer) and Fred MacDonald as Dave. Those two for the first time projected Rudd's characters up from the printed page, and the public immediately accepted the images they created. They have long since gone into Australian folklore and endured as no other Anglo-Irish characters creations have been able to endure. The play immediately became, and for many years remained, a box-office smash in the cities and the country in constant tours.

Despite all this, I had mental reservations about making On Our Selection. I was young enough, and still lacking in practical showmanship background enough, to want to 'do something better'. But at least I had the common sense to shut up about it at that point. If I had not what developed into a warm, personal friendship from that day and endured until Bert's death in 1953 at the age of eighty-two, might never have happened and I, far more than he, would have been the loser. And I would very likely not be writing this book. We made not one but four feature films together in the next nine years.

There are vital lessons to be learned by young directors and producers at the very outset, long before they get involved in actual production. The lessons are not taught. Despite all this, I had mental reservations about making On Our Selection. I was young enough, and still lacking in practical showmanship background enough, to want to 'do something better'. But at least I had the common sense to shut up about it at that point. If I had not what developed into a warm, personal friendship from that day and endured until Bert's death in 1953 at the age of eighty-two, might never have happened and I, far more than he, would have been the loser. And I would very likely not be writing this book. We made not one but four feature films together in the next nine years.

In my immaturity I would have opted for the vague 'something better'. Doyle and Bailey were older and wiser men and went for the sure-fire material the passenger would have been the loser. And I would very likely not be writing this book. We made not one but four feature films together in the next nine years.

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On Our Selection.

On the benefits of those unused to production parlance, the term 'assistant director' is a misnomer. The big directors overseas often had three or more assistants ('Yes sir, Mr Doyle, what do you say?'). They do not assist the director to direct. Their job is organisation ahead of the director, first with the script breakdown and preparation of the shooting schedule in consultation with the director, then making sure every detail is ready, actors know their lines and are on the set on time.

George Heath, in my opinion, was the father of the modern style of black-and-white photography in feature films in Australia. Diametrically opposed to Hurley's style, Heath cut down sharply on the amount of light used and opened up the lens to compensate. His methods produced attractively lit figures against soft appealing backgrounds. Where Hurley was shooting generally at 5.6 or 6.5 in the studio, Heath's exposures were usually around 2.8 to 3.5. The often 'hard', critically sharp look had gone and now we had rounded, beautifully warm images like those produced by Gunther, James Wong Howe, Gregg Toland, Karl Freund, Hal Rosson, Rudyé Mate, Ernest Haller and so many of the highly expensive cameramen of Hollywood's heyday.

The elevation of Heath and the arrival of George Kenyon — professionally J. Alan, but a warm, friendly and highly talented man who was George to everyone — were two events which had a far-reaching effect on Cinemasound's rapid technical development. Technically we'd always been ahead of our competition. For instance, the sound coming from Arthur Smith's Australian-made recorders was superior to that being achieved from the virtually 'gold-plated' American RCA gear imported by Frank Thring and used of course on all Eftee features. It was not that Smith's gear was better or even as good as its imported competition. The fine technical precision given to the recordings themselves, and their treatment in the laboratory was responsible for the sound 'edge' we had both on Eftee and the British-equipped Pagewood plant at National studios.

George Kenyon, an Englishman and an artist of considerable quality, had been a set designer and scenic artist for J. C. Williamson. Doyle was closing down the Union Theatres workshop and we must of necessity set up our own art department workshop. Kenyon seemed to be the man we needed because of his personnel talents, he was potentially right to head the special effects division which I wanted to set up as soon as possible. He got that responsibility reasonably soon after, when an Australian architect, Eric Thompson, who had spent some some years as an assistant in the art department of MGM in Hollywood, returned to Australia and we took him into the team.

The new man in was Ronald Whelan, the assistant director I'd allowed myself. He'd had some experience in England and from then on our script breakdowns and our shooting schedules were much better organised. For the benefit of those unused to production parlance, the term 'assistant director' is a misnomer. The big directors overseas often had three or more assistants ('Yes sir, Mr Doyle, what do you say?'). They do not assist the director to direct. Their job is organisation ahead of the director, first with the script breakdown and preparation of the shooting schedule in consultation with the director, then making sure every detail is ready, actors know their lines and are on the set on time.

Cecil De Mille, with his huge spectacles and thousands of extras, had up to six assistants. This was because another important part of their job is the control of movements of extras on the set while the director is concentrating on his principals and the vital foreground action.

With Thoroughbred we were using back projection for the first time and learned pronto that it was full of snags. But Kenyon and George Heath, with Stuart Ralston, projectionist, combined especially well to get this most important innovation on the ground.

There was a great deal of trial and error before we got it working satisfactorily. The early experimental shots looked all right to the eye, but when we saw the film projected, the background screen was dark on one side or the other. Reason? The eye of the camera was not looking directly, and mathematically correctly let it be said, into the eye of the projector and we got 'fall off'. Use too wide a lens on the projector, or camera (for that matter, and you get 'hot spot', a hot centre to the image and fall-off all round it. The lens eye-to-eye bit was and is fundamental, but no one had thought to tell us. To get the excellent results later achieved on the so very precise back projection, we found it necessary to call in surveyors, who worked out the precise angles and distances. These were permanently marked into the studio concrete floor with special studs. There was no margin for error.
A horse-racing picture seemed to be a natural for most audiences, particularly Australian, and *Thoroughbred* in the theatres proved that the theory was not wrong. But getting it on the screen was not all that easy because the film was big in size and scope for our limited resources.

It had an American writer, Ard lud, to have an American star. John McCormick had found that Helen Twelvetrees — a name to remember! — was willing to come to Australia at the price we were offering but would be bringing her husband and baby with her. Husband? ... Baby? ... We didn’t like the sound of that part at all. Helen and thirty female stars were not supposed to have husbands and certainly not babies.

Twelvetrees was, from her photographs, still beautiful and we knew her to be a sound actress. She had been leading woman in a number of major studio feature films and had starred in numerous ‘B’ movies of a good general standard. She was as good a name within reasonable bounds as one could hope to get. Cinesound’s costing was always based on a figure formulated on the basis of a sum invested in the home market, Australia and New Zealand.

We had a publicity conference with Herb Hayward and his boys and decided to keep the baby secret. We knew we could get tremendous publicity for the film with the arrival of a real live Hollywood movie star and we certainly did with the show those boys put on for the arrival of Helen Twelvetrees. Half Sydney was at the docks.

The husband they could play right down and perhaps no harm would be done to her image as a beautiful and highly desirable, though unattainable, young woman. But the baby? Film stars just did not have babies. If they did they never talked about them, another fallacy long since blown out, but a hard fact then.

So it was decided, and Helen knew all about the plan, that the child would be taken off the ship by a specially engaged nurse before the ladies and gentlemen of the Press got to talk with the couple. It worked. Helen, her husband and child lived in an apartment at Darling Point and no one disturbed them. Helen’s daily working and social life was abashed with publicity, but her private life was strictly private. There never was a publicity campaign like the one behind Helen Twelvetrees. It had hundreds of facets. My good friend Bill Stack, at the time starting up as General Motors major Sydney outlet, provided a Pontiac with liveried driver to transport Helen anywhere she wanted to go. And wherever she went she stopped the traffic. She was mobbed outside Farmer’s when she went to shop and it took a phalanx of police to clear the decks. But the highlight was the Lord Mayor’s civic reception at the Town Hall. It was a big show with notables of the town and their wives crowding to talk to Helen.

The Lord Mayor, Alderman McElhone, made it a great day for the Irish and for us. At the end of his speech of welcome, he grabbed Helen and planted a smacker fair on her mouth. The Press cameramen were caught flat-footed, “Again please,” they pleaded, “We weren’t ready.”

But they did not have to plead. Milord Mayor could hardly be restrained and obliged again and again.

Herb Hayward recalls that Jack Woody, Twelvetrees’ husband, gurgled in his ears, “What’s with this guy — he got hot pants?” Which Hayward avers was the first time he ever heard the expression.

The Lord Mayor’s osculatory adventures with the beautiful Hollywood star made a field day for the Press round about Australia.

The story that Helen was a mother with a child never did break, but others, far more serious, almost did.

Just where do we stand in all this? In five years no sign of a constructive plan has emerged. It does not appear that there ever was a real, significant, well-considered concept laid down from which an industry might grow. The ‘new-era’ production has been a series of individual, wild, catch-as-catch-can, experiments. Get yourself a script, get it approved, get some money from the Film Development Corporation, scurry round and on that promise rustle up the rest from private sources, get together a production crew from here and there — and off we go! It’s hardly the way to make successful motion pictures, to build an industry.

From the outset, it was necessary to take a long, hard look at any plan of Government assistance to an ailing film industry wherever such a plan has been implemented. Few indeed have been successful. When did you last see a Canadian feature film?

The most notable casualty has been the British film-production industry, now at perhaps its lowest ebb. And yet the British have had ‘quotas’ and ‘plans’ and devices of various kinds since the early thirties. None of these has worked effectively including the much-vaunted Eady Plan, now in disrepute.

I quote from an article in the authoritative trade paper *London Screen International* of 27 September 1975 under the heading ‘LABOUR PROBES INDUSTRY’.

It presents (in part) the report of a study group, chaired by Mrs Renee Short, MP, and working for the Labour Party’s national executive committee. It begins by saying it views the film industry “... not only in commercial terms but also in its contribution to the culture of Britain”.

It goes on: “The feature film industry is now in serious decline and the whole industry is in need of immediate fundamental change. There is no doubt in my mind that high-budget films, on a risky, insecure market, are not a safe foundation for building an industry.

I firmly believe Australian producers should stay with conservatively budgeted films. They should not be carried away by any overseas distributor’s financial pretensions. Most films made in Australia have worked effectively including the much-vaunted Eady Plan, now in disrepute.

There is no doubt in my mind that high-budget films, on a risky, insecure market, are not a safe foundation for building an industry.

The figure each must earn before black ink shows in the ledgers will be high indeed. The risks are too great. I do not believe we have the right to take them — yet.
Bogdan Gieraczynski is a widely respected Polish theatre journalist. His standing is indicated by the fact that he alone of all his profession was recently granted an interview with Ryszard Cieslak, leading actor in Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre.

Polish theatre owes much of its fame to its variety. Besides the classical theatre, the avant-garde as well as the experimentalists have established themselves so consistently as to puzzle theatre-goers all over the world.

One might well ask why. Well, it seems to me that the form of the classical, the traditional, theatre has become largely outmoded, and this is an objective fact in a great many countries. It is possible that the situation is temporary, a result somehow of the appearance of experimental groups. The theatre of the avant-garde, which was beginning to take shape in the late fifties, overcame almost all the classically traditional conventions; it made away with most of the scenic components so characteristic of the traditional setting; it laid the main stress on bodily expression; it...
simplified, and quite often excluded elements of scenography and costume; finally, it abolished the division into stage and actor, on the one hand, and audience and public on the other, thus provoking spectators into active participation in a performance as part of a theatrical happening.

The appearance of these challenging "theatre experiences" has to some extent drawn the attention of a large portion of the public away from the classical theatre — while the spiritual leaders of the newly-fangled theatres were prophesying a none-too-distant doom for the traditional theatre. As everybody knows now, this has not happened.

Some avant-garde theatres, mainly from third-world countries, have been concerned with politics more than with artistic inquiry. They have attempted to influence human minds and work on human emotions with the political content of their performances. Some of their ideas have, indeed, been quite edifying and ennobling, and yet it is difficult to resist the impression that they have been wrongly based. In my view all art, including the theatre, ought to remain outside the political framework. The theatre is not a parliamentary rostrum, although the reverse is quite often the case.

Polish theatrical art has had long-lived traditions, both as a classical and an experimental form. The Polish avant-garde is rich in experience which has inspired artists all over the world. I think this reputation is largely due to the fact that Polish experimental theatres have managed to rid themselves of current, everyday human concerns to concentrate exclusively on technical and aesthetic aspects. All these elements — setting, direction, ac¬tor-ship and so on — it is, in other words, due to its interest in the purest art.

The phenomenon of Tadeusz Kantor's CRICOT 2 Theatre, of Cracow, has become quite an event on the world's theatrical map, ... framed. A plastic work thus transformed acquires unequivocal topicality. Staging is so conceived as to preclude any misinterpretation of the work performed.

If, in some countries like, for instance, France, there is a decline due to people being fed up with the theatre around them — in the street, at work, in the shop, in the government and so on — why should one then go to the theatre? In Kantor's view, precludes such a possibility. The antinomy of indifference and engagement, death and life ... Both directors have managed consistently to realise their respective designs.

The Dead Class has been the most important, most impressive and most original of all the recent performances on Polish stages. One can well assume that it will have a long-standing, world-wide career like Apocalypsis cum Figuris. A stepping-stone to universal success was the first prize awarded to the theatre for the performance at the 30th Edinburgh Festival. Michael Billington wrote in The Guardian that if The Dead Class was not a masterpiece, then the word was devoid of meaning.

— GROTOWSKI — WHAT NEXT?

It is often said that life is a theatre and theatre is life. In spite of its being as old as the hills, this saying is relevant and apt today. Instead, the theatre not only finds inspiration in everyday life, but it also aims at interpreting its form and content, thus of all branches of art coming closest to life. Contemporary life is made up of all the components to be found in the theatre, such as games, humbug, pretending, putting on a mask, competing etc.

If, in some countries like, for instance, France, there is a decline due to people being fed up with the theatre around them — in the street, at work, in the shop, in the government and so on — why should one then go to the theatre?

The formula that life is a theatre (and vice versa) has been challenged by the artistic production of, among others, Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. If, in Grotowski's view Apocalypsis made it possible for the spectators fully to identify themselves with the performance, The Dead Class, in Kantor's view, precludes such a possibility. The antinomy of indifference and engagement, death and life ... Both directors have managed consistently to realise their respective designs.

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— GROTOWSKI — WHAT NEXT?
Fantastic Scenes from the Legend of Mr Twardowski was a recent production of the Pantomime Theatre directed by Henryk Tomaszewski himself, and based on his scenario, and with his choreography. During the 20 years of the theatre’s existence, it was the 14th programme, which, in a way, is a summing-up of Tomaszewski’s experiments made thus far.

Though the performance was on the highest level, the viewer familiar with most of Tomaszewski’s previous productions is struck by one thing: the lack of elements that would allow him to regard it as a revealing or searching one. Tomaszewski has employed here all the conceptions and ideas he has exploited before, in this way becoming an imitator of himself.

Though I tried to obtain a photo of the performance, this turned out to be impossible. So the reader won’t find any photo of the ‘Fantastic Scenes’, because the directors and managers of the Pantomime Theatre are not interested in publicity; in fact, they find journalists and all publicity a pain in the arse! The ignorance of Tomaszewski Pantomime Theatre is bigger than its beautiful and great art, and I’d like to warn all foreign journalists and the public about it.

Fantastic Scenes is based on a Polish legend dating back to the Middle Ages. The legend tells of a famous astrologer, fortune-teller and magician whose name was Twardowski.

The most characteristic motif of this legend is the kidnapping of Twardowski by a band of devils and placing him on the moon.

The spectacle is full of profound artistic and aesthetic values, in contrast to Tomaszewski’s earlier performances in which philosophical and intellectual content was dominant.

In spite of its being alien to a foreign theatre-goer, this production would nevertheless be intelligible to him by appealing to his senses, since it is like a colourful fairy-tale.

This “realistically utopian” performance is filled with the content that makes it possible for the viewer’s imagination to play freely — the viewer finds many different words in silence.

ONE CLASSICAL PERFORMANCE

Outside my main concern, I would like to say a few words about the only classical performance that has caused much stir. I am thinking about The Wedding, by Stanislaw Wyspienski, which provided the 356th premiere of the Teatr Wybrzeze in Gdansk, and was produced for the 30th anniversary of this outstanding theatre.

The play is a Polish national drama depicting with dramatic realism the history of Poland, national drawbacks and the patriotism of Poles, thus becoming a synthetic picture of what is known as Polish. To a foreign spectator, the play is unintelligible in the way the Japanese Kabuki theatre is, simply because it originated in a cultural tradition different from the European or American ones.

However, in the above-mentioned production (director, Stanislaw Hebanowski; designer, Marian Kolodziej), the form seems to be so clear and so fabulously colourful as to become universal and more important than the content. Because of this, the performance is a great success in its appeal to foreign theatre-goers.

Even the theatre that is most deeply rooted in national tradition can speak a language intelligible to all people. This, I think, should be its aim in Poland, Australia, Africa, America — everywhere.
The Australian Dance Theatre

"Building a new company from scratch is extremely laborious and time-consuming"

When the old Australian Dance Theatre finally subsided under the waves late in 1975, after a rather disastrous Sydney season, some people thought that the group was better off dead rather than having to drag on its existence as it was. Others considered that the company was worth preserving, that it was severely dispirited at the time and that all that was needed was a replacement for the current artistic director, Elizabeth Dalman.

In 1973-4 there was a fresh breeze through the company in the form of former Nederlans Dans Theatre director Jaap Flier and his wife Willy de la Bye. Flier was appointed co-artistic director with Dalman, and, watching the company's performances from then on, was conscious of a rejuvenation amongst the dancers. Apart from being given some exciting and innovative choreography in the form of Flier's Hi-Kyo and Nouvelles Aventures, they were technically stronger thanks to the rigorous discipline of Willy, and seemed keener in performance. The whole tenor of the group was getting away from the near-enough-is-good-enough, obscurantist and portentous sub-Jose-Limon choreography that had been its staple diet when Dalman was in sole control.

The pinnacle of their endeavour was in their participation in the Australian Opera's Rites of Passage, of which Flier was director and choreographer. It was this work that brought them to the notice of the whole nation.

Flier left, however, soon after the Adelaide premiere of this work, instancing in his resignation speech occurrences of internal pressure, questions of authority and lack of support (for him) from the members of the board (a familiar cry in this country). He then became the artistic director of the Dance Company (NSW) and Dalman carried on alone right up to the final disbanding of the company.

Just what precipitated the closing of the company at this juncture (with its flourishing dance academy under Rex Reid) is not quite clear. There were rumours that the company was too far in the red to carry on, and that an artistic cabal within the Dunstan Administration had decided that Dalman did not quite fit the artistic image that it was trying to build up. But these are but idle rumours. As far as I can see (and I was dance critic on the Adelaide Advertiser for more than two years, so I do have grounds to speak), the dancers had simply outgrown Dalman's concepts and choreographic invention and were disillusioned after the shining future that seemed to be ahead of them after the notorious opening of Rites of Passage. Their performances were lacklustre, the guts had gone out of the company.

So the Australian Dance Theatre was defunct as an entity throughout 1976. But plans were still being made.

The absence of a professional dance company was embarrassing and quite unsatisfactory for the cultural pundits of South Australia, so, when former Ballet Rambert choreographer Jonathon Taylor came out to mount his highly strung (and highly impressive) Star's End for Ballet Victoria, strenuous and sincere requests were made to him to become the artistic director of the new Australian Dance Theatre.

He arrived in January of this year and immediately began auditioning dancers, contacting choreographers like Rambert's Norman Morriss, and Christopher Bruce, to come out and mount works for the company. He brought with him two ex-stalwarts of the Rambert company, Julia Blakie and Joseph Scoglio, as ballet mistress and co-director respectively.

Taylor's hopes for the new company are that it will be a small, dynamic group, firmly based in the Martha Graham technique; that is, basically a company of soloists, with diverging strengths and different talents.

Ten of the 13 members of the company are Australian — not bad considering that almost half of Ballet Rambert is Australian and that there are a few others sprinkled liberally through the London Festival Ballet, Royal Ballet and Nederlans Dans Theatre. (You can't tell me we haven't got the talent.) In fact,
Taylor himself has noted that Australians denigrate their talents unduly. He was quite impressed with the energy (albeit somewhat unfocused) that Australian dancers have: an innate desire to prove themselves, he told me, a drive for discipline, self-extension and assertion.

If he is aware of these strengths (and shortcomings), it augurs well for the development of the dancer in his new company. However, building a new company from scratch is extremely laborious and time-consuming. Apart from building up a repertoire for the company (of which more later), he has had to involve himself in such basics as getting proper facilities for the dancers, obtaining a good dancing surface, appointments of stage manager and lighting designer and having meetings with the Dunstan Administration to outline his policy and plans for the future. From what I gather, this has now all been completed and the company is hard at work learning the ballets for its premiere performance in the now state-owned Her Majesty’s Theatre in June.

The company is intent on spreading its influence through three forms of performance: adult performances (such as the three-week June season), experimental or talent-finding workshop performances (as well as outright in-the-round seasons, for which The Space in the Festival Centre will come in useful) and an ambitious schools and university performance programme. It is a concerted effort to get the dancers before the public in exciting and dynamic works, and to attract young, critical and loyal audiences which no company can do without.

The question of company “image” and “style” cannot yet be discussed, naturally. That will have to wait until public performances are under way. However, because of Taylor’s long association with Ballet Rambert, it is expected that the initial seasons will be made up partly of works that have served that excellent company well over the years.

Taylor himself will reproduce his own ‘Tis Goody Sport (to music of the age of Henry VIII), a rollicking, bawdy work that never fails to entertain, Star’s End (seeing that Ballet Victoria is no longer) as well as mounting two new works. Onetime director of Rambert Norman Morrice will remount his Solo (described as a Women’s Lib work) and a new ballet, Seven Songs (music; the songs of the Auvergne; arranged by Canteloupe). One hopes that it might be possible one day to get Morrice to remount his masterly That is the Show (to Berio’s Sinfonia). Current director of Rambert Christopher Bruce has reproduced his ballets Weekend, Wings and They Die as Cattle.

Other works include new ballets by John Chesworth (also ex-Rambert), Julia Blakie (Night of the Four Moons; music by George Crumb), Joseph Scoglio, Sugihara and Australia’s Don Asker, who has recently created Monkeys in a Cage for the Australian Ballet.

This appears to be quite an embarrassment of riches. And who knows what exciting talent may come out of the company’s choreographic season in The Space in November as well as the company’s participation in Ballet 77 in Canberra later this year?

But a dance company is only as good as its dancers and, here too the Australian Dance Theatre is strong, with Blakie and Scoglio dancing, as well as Israel, Pamela Buckman (both ex-Ballet Victoria) and other Australian dancers recently returned from overseas like Cheryl Stock, Margaret Wilson (ex-Nederlans Dans Theatre) and Raymond Lewis. Teachers for the company include Blakie and one of Martha Graham’s star dancers, Yuriko Kimura.

All of this, of course, is under the guidance of Jonathon Taylor, but I don’t really have any qualms here. Taylor is an extremely talented and experienced man of the dance, having studied at the Royal Academy and undertaken major roles in the classical ballet repertoire, as well as in works by such modern masters as Glen Tetley. (Would that they could get him out to remount some works for them, Ricercare, say, or Embrace Tiger and Return to Mountain!)

Taylor is no slouch in other fields, either, having choreographed the musical The Good Companions and created film documentaries on Nijinsky, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill for the BBC. But it is with the Australian Dance Theatre that his work will be centred for the next two years at least, and if he can bring the same enthusiasm and energy (despite the troubles with money, audiences, venues, dancers etc.) to his new company, I think that Australia will witness the rise of a very potent force in contemporary dance.

Adelaide is now firmly in the control (culturally) of Englishmen: at the SATC, the State Opera, the Arts Council and the Festival Centre. This may be cause for concern for some (after all, there is some Australian talent on the administrative and directive level in Australia), but if the results are strong, dynamic and worth while, the worries can be laid aside for the time.
La Belle Helene

"... classic proof of the wisdom of concentrating production resources in quarters where they matter most"

One of the greater satisfactions of being a critic of the performing arts is that — just occasionally — one encounters first-hand something as effervescently bubbling over with enthusiasm, style, good humour and a sense of genuine artistic accomplishment as the production of Jacques Offenbach's La Belle Helene staged by the Victoria State Opera in March.

This Belle Helene has been hailed by those who ought to know as a milestone in the development of the Victorian company; not having encountered its work previously, I am unable to judge it within that most relevant of all contexts, the general performing standards of the VSO itself. But certainly it was at least the equal, all things considered, of any opera performance I have seen staged in Australia in recent years by anyone other than the Australian Opera itself; and in terms of sheer entertainment value, it will certainly linger fondly in my memory for many years.

Its success was many-faceted, the result of the sort of fortuitous coming-together of talents at their best that is the key factor of many stage triumphs, particularly where some of the performers are of semi-professional standard only and enthusiasm must make do, here and there, in lieu of expertise. Most obviously, there were the key performances of Suzanne Steele in the title role and Robert Gard as Paris: both must rate very highly among the resident talent available in Australia to undertake such actor-singer roles. Were the AO itself to put on La Belle Helene this year, it would be hard put to better them as an opening night duo — but then, both sing quite regularly with the national company, anyhow, Steele as a guest, Gard as a fully-fledged resident artist.

But the deeper successes of this production arose from the behind-the-scenes (or at least off-stage) efforts of the three-member production team; for absolutely the right tone was set for the VSO's Belle Helene even before Act I began: by the light-hearted front curtain with its central vignette of projections of characters, ancient and Victorian, related to the legend of Helen of Troy, including prominently Jacques Offenbach himself (an inclusion Offenbach would no doubt have approved heartily). This device was repeated during the overtures to the other two acts, so the audience was in the right mood for the crazy Offenbachian goings-on each time the curtain went up and the action resumed.

There was more visual humour to accompany the action itself, such as the staid sculptures on the portals of Act I which revolved to become lusty female torsos; and the dialogue was well translated and sufficiently updated by the odd contemporary interpolation so the attention of the audience never faltered. The ensemble acting and singing was of a high standard, too, though there were times when one could have wished either for a good deal more volume from the minor principals or for more restraint from the pit — at least from where I sat, though I gather that the Melbourne Princess has just as quirky acoustics as the Canberra Theatre with which I am more familiar.

No matter how you look at it, though, the individual triumphs of the Melbourne Belle Helene were Suzanne Steele and Robert Gard. Neither has absolutely the most beautiful operatic voice one can imagine, but in roles like these they are more than adequate; both act superbly and unfailingly get their lines, no matter if spoken or sung, across to an audience — a most important consideration in Offenbach, where so much of the impact comes across equally as well in the amateur production as the fully professional one.

That I rate Kenneth Rowell's designs least among the three facets that contributed to the success of this Belle Helene in no way reflects on their intrinsic merit. It merely emphasises that the designer of any stage production is, by and large, vouchsafed the immense privilege of being allowed to speak for himself without the intrusion of any intermediary: given adequate execution of sets and costumes, as Rowell had on this occasion, they can come across equally as well in the amateur production as the fully professional one.

This Belle Helene was classic proof of the wisdom of concentrating one's always limited production resources in the quarters where they matter most: the physical production was clever, workable and easy to look at without being wildly lavish of detail; the casting was strongest where it mattered most; the orchestral backing always spirited and enthusiastic, even when it sometimes lacked a measure of finesse and subtlety it would have been nice to hear.

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Despite the sort of reservations expressed above, one is tempted, when
emerging from a performance such as this, to gush superlatives as if they were going out of fashion. In the first flush of enthusiasm it is all too easy to hail the company responsible as the brightest star on the national operatic horizon, threatening all the other regional companies — and perhaps even the AO itself — with imminent eclipse. So I hope I will not be accused too vigorously of being an insensitive, humourless old cynic (or worse, a Sydney chauvinist pig) if I rein in my owlish enthusiasm a little and stop short of any such extravagant assertions. It is simply absurd to claim on the basis of one production — no matter how good — that a performing company has suddenly leapt from struggling adolescence to full maturity overnight: the hardest thing of all, in any of the performing arts, is to maintain absolute consistency of performing standards night after night, week after week. Without the invaluable chance to achieve ensemble cohesion which is afforded by a great many performances in each year — dozens at least, preferably a hundred or more — it is all but impossible to ensure that the next performance or production will be anything like as good as the last.

Particularly is this true, perhaps, of a repertory opera company, which must be very good — if not scintillating — at realising a wide variety of works in quick succession if it is to qualify as a fully effective cultural asset of the community it serves. Big money and sensible administration are absolutely essential to the establishment of an artistically satisfying opera company; but unfortunately, big money and sensible administration do not necessarily result in such a company.

Those who have been closely in touch with the fortunes of the Australian Opera, as they have ebbed and flowed during its childhood and adolescence, will be aware of the fact that it takes every bit as much time and effort and resources poured into preparation of a new production. If the thing doesn’t click right from the start, it has to be written off and chalked up to experience. We are only just now, this year, starting to see a little bit of inter-capital touring by the regionals: last year’s Adelaide production of Cimarosa’s Secret Marriage which went lock stock and barrel to the Perth Festival in February of this year, the Melbourne Belle Helene I have just been talking about, which was hailed sight-unseen by the Adelaide Festival Centre for five performances, there following hard on its eighteen-performance weekend seasons in the opera theatre or even the drama theatre, which has a large enough pit to accommodate chamber opera satisfactorily. The problems in arranging such visits are immense, but so are the potential rewards — for performers and audiences alike. And even if they can’t be arranged at Bennelong Point, there are other good venues available now in Sydney — the Seymour Centre, the new Her Majesty’s and the new Theatre Royal, for instance — which are not fully used. The costing must be done very carefully, and the big problem of arranging an orchestra solved: but surely there must be some imaginative and opera-minded entrepreneur with the guts to take up that gauntlet and bring such a project to fruition. Or perhaps the foolhardiness, but I rather think there could be financial rewards as well as those artistic ones dwelt on above.

Brief mention must be made also, this month, of Musel II, which presented a mostly fascinating music theatre programme for two nights at the University of New South Wales’s science theatre early in March (a third performance scheduled for the recording hall at the Opera House had to be cancelled because of an industrial dispute).

Three of the four works performed were by Australians, and the fourth by the laudably bizarre last American composer, John Cage; the Dance Exchange and the Sydney Percussion Ensemble combined to provide the performing forces required. Bill Fontana’s Sculptural Music No 1 and Alan Holley’s To A Lost Brother both had their moments of interest, but the highlights of the evening lay elsewhere.

The theatrical highlight was Jacqui Carroll’s imaginative realisation of the Cage Song Books, with the singer (Suzanne McLeod) carried in horizontal and bearing a megaphone by two stage “workmen” and the pianist and accompanist, dressed as Batman and Robin or their ilk, playing draughts in a corner as the music progressed. And McLeod’s exit gambit, carried off again horizontal by the “workmen” after she started backtracking on a single phrase ad nauseam but in that distant sound, even after she was off stage, provided a suitably bizarre climax to a thoroughly entertaining piece.

The final item on the programme, though, Robert Irving’s Gong Song, was the unequivocal musical highlight of the evening: thoroughly interesting in the progression of sounds it produced from a wide variety of gongs and drums; the music enhanced by some superb dance movements choreographed by Nanette Hassall and executed by Eva Karzag, one of those natural dancers who exude animal magnetism from every pore, and hence, are absolutely fascinating to watch.

Potentially, at least, music-dance-mime programmes such as this, ought to appeal to patrons of theatre, opera, ballet and modern dance; unfortunately, they often attract little or no audience at all. And where the ground is such that each segment of the potential audience is more repelled by the other art forms than attracted to its own. Or perhaps it’s just that there is, as yet, no true total theatre audience.

In this case, inadequate advance publicity no doubt, was a good part of the cause for the sparse audiences; but even the very best in this field, well promoted, is seldom a roaring box office success — as others have found to their chagrin.
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Records

Britten’s parables and the return to ritual

"The Prodigal Son is a work to be savoured with deliberation."

As all great drama traditions seem to come out of sung religious ritual — pause here for a belligerent or unbelieving response if you feel one coming on — it is probably inevitable as well as salutary that drama of all kinds should refresh itself at the springs of ritual from time to time. We have seen this happen in spoken theatre of the 20th century; and we find it taking place in a masterly fashion in the church parables of Benjamin Britten.

Opera is, by its nature, closer to ritual and, specifically, sung ritual than almost any other form of theatre except the church service itself. Yet it, too, has fallen from time to time into a sentimental realism which may be entertaining and touching but which ultimately would lead to the desertion of the very qualities which make opera unique and worth cultivating.

It would deprive it of that exaltation of moments of passion and heartbreak in human life which distances it effectively from realism and endows it with a capacity for bearing repeated scrutiny and hearing in which it far surpasses all spoken drama.

Britten has not attempted to write fake Japanese music in his immediate source of stimulus in embarking on his series of three church parables was the experience of seeing Noh dramas in Japan and, specifically, the famous medieval Noh play Sumidagawa. The first of the parables, Curlew River, is in fact a transposition of the basic story of Sumidagawa to a setting in medieval England. The processions and formal robing and disrobing of Noh drama are undertaken in this transferred context by an order of monks. The use of stylised half-masks, the disciplined employment of gesture and the convention of using male singers for both male and female parts are also in parallel with Japanese (and other) traditional practice.

Britten has not attempted to write fake Japanese music in Curlew River, even if it sometimes seems that he has. The resemblance, when it does occur, is due to the fact that he is using similar technical procedures, not similar material. In other words, he is using heterophony (simultaneous variation of a single basic melody) in the tradition of much Eastern music and he is using a melodic source which is a step or two close to having a pentatonic basis than the conventional major and minor modes. The melody which acts as a source for the piece in this way is actually a traditional plainchant, Te lucis ante terminum. It is intoned by the monks when they first appear and it follows them into silence at the end. The instrumentalists are part of the brotherhood of the production; and Curlew River abandons many of the familiar traditions of opera in order to return to the conventions which at one time were held in common by most cultures and religions.

No one who has seen Curlew River in performance will forget the theatrical-emotional impact it makes. Its success encouraged Britten (in partnership with the same librettist, William Plomer) to follow it with The Burning Fiery Furnace, which retells the biblical story of the three young men of Israel who risk incineration at the orders of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon rather than betray their faith. Although the specific source for the visual presentation of The Burning Fiery Furnace was the stained glass in Chartres Cathedral, the style and technique are essentially the same as those of Curlew River. The seven instrumentalists required for the earlier work (flute, horn, viola, double bass, harp, percussion, chamber organ) receive a single reinforcement: the player of an alto trombone. The alto trombone’s tone colour and attack reflect the colours of gold and flame inherent in the parable’s Babylonian setting and subject matter. As before, the instrumentalists work in concert with one another and with the singers with the responsibility and sensitivity of chamber players and, therefore, without the guidance of a conductor. As before, the vertical co-ordination of instrumental and vocal lines is loosened. Britten’s curlew sign (Y), which he invented for Curlew River, identifies these points of co-ordination in the score where a singer or player will wait for his colleagues when their natural pace has diverged from his.

Curlew River is a tragedy of the most austere kind; the chill, damp air of the fen country blows through it and matches the bleak endurance of its story of a mother’s search for the truth of her son’s death.

The Burning Fiery Furnace, by contrast, is a rich and warm-hued score and an appropriately splendid spectacle within the purposeful limits of the staging. It strikes less deeply, I think, but compensates for this with greater theatrical diversity and appeal.

The Prodigal Son, which has appeared again on disc recently (World Record Club reissue, R.03128, of an original Decca recording) is different again. Its visual presentation is drawn from Islamic art this time. Much more significantly, it is a combination of morality play and pastoral. A monastic brotherhood is again assumed to be presenting the parable. The ritual of the opening procession and invocation is broken into, however, by the figure of the Tempter. He is played by the abbot of the monastery. To an audience accustomed to the formal and symmetrical opening and closing of the two earlier parables it is a calculated surprise that this solo voice of temptation should assert itself before the frame of the work, so to speak, has been completely set in position. The Tempter has the trumpet as an attendant instrument. It plays agile, flickering music. The flute of the two earlier parables is replaced by an alto flute (but occasionally double piccolo), which accords in tone with the peaceful summer health of the pastoral scenes.

All the technical devices employed in Curlew River continue to be used in The Prodigal Son. Yet the texture is amazingly different in character. The Prodigal Son, like most pastorals, is less initially gripping in the theatre than its tragic and dramatic predecessors. Its subtle musical procedures and evolving characterisation are particularly suited to commemoration and re-hearing on a recording as fine as this one.

In addition, prolonged listening to the work reminds us of the complex moral and social issues, quite timeless in their application, raised by its perennially fascinating story. Even if we approve of the idea of reconciliation implicit in the parable, it is easy for most people to disbelieve that they can understand the resentment of the Elder Son that his favoured and wayward brother should be having his cake and eating it. Some parables are so obvious in the moral points they make that a dramatisation of them seems redundant. This one beckons towards a level of insight and wisdom such as few of us can expect to attain or maintain.

The Prodigal Son is a work to be savoured with deliberation. Ideally it should be approached through the two earlier Britten parables, which are also available on single disc recordings of comparable quality; but it will stand on its own, too. The English Opera Group performance under the composer’s supervision is not likely to be surpassed and will rarely be approached; the organisation and economies of normal opera presentation will mean that the parables are unlikely to be presented with the special preparation and competence they need.
Eliza Fraser

"... two of the most boring hours I have spent in a cinema ..."
Five Plays for Stage, Radio and Television

Australian drama study comes of age

The Drovers (first published in 1920) and ending with a TV play of the mid-70s. They also range across the three dramatic media of stage, radio and television. Beyond this, however, the editor, Alrene Sykes, has not compromised herself into choosing plays according to a fixed pattern or type.

In this respect the volume differs pleasingly from many other anthologies in which plays are linked artificially by theme or, as with the new wave of Currency publications, by similarities in sociological impact. Ms Sykes has come down firmly on the side of plays she considers very good, perhaps the writers' best. Without for a moment suggesting that theatrical or media viability are ignored in this book, I would say that the focus is primarily literary and verbal. The development of authentic Australian speech patterns is also a concern.

It is pleasant, within two issues, to be able to comment on the publication of two Louis Esson plays. QUP has done it this time with Esson's classical one-acter The Drovers, a play often compared with Synge's Riders to the Sea. Alrene Sykes challenges the readers to ask whether the fascination of this play mightn't just be the vicarious fascination of droving life for city readers. She also dares to suggest that Esson's carefully-wrought 'outback' language may not have the authentic ring of later Australian dramatists (and especially David Williamson). While I disagree with her that 1920s drovers wouldn't have used very polite expletives such as 'curse the jackaroo', 'struth', 'my oath', and 'blart them', (I have always been struck by the excessively old-world refinement of bushmen in fact), I think she makes an effective case against Esson's "big speeches" as being slightly false. In Aubrey Mellor's recent NIDA production of Esson's Mother and Son, mind you, the vivid purple passages and big speeches seemed to work very well. But if the language is questionable, The Drovers still remains the most "Australian" and the most laconic of Esson's plays — the finest straight dramatisation of the strong, silent outback myth. So peculiarly local is it that I was once told by some European students that the behaviour of characters in this play was "disgusting" and "callous". The drovers are cracking jokes as their friend Briglow Bill prepares to die in the desert, and to me the humour has always seemed absolutely true.

Stoicism and human endurance of the above kind do not seem much in evidence with The One Day of the Year, and What If, both of which illustrate the shift in Australian cultural emphasis from pastoral to city and from lower to upper classes. Certainly Seymour's play still reads well, and, indeed, as Ms Sykes points out, its conclusion in which the young hero capitulates, rings truer than does the end of The Doll. It is also a first-rate play to examine in contrast with the other stage plays. The account of theire raised initially by The One Day makes amusing if surprising reading. I would imagine that for students of Australian drama the move from Seymour's lower suburbia to Williamson's trendier environment in What If You Died Tomorrow will be worth examining, particularly as Seymour has attempted a North Shore character in his play with no great success.

The editor's justification for including Douglas Stewart's New-Zealand-set play The Golden Lover rather than the Australian Ned Kelly is quite persuasive — she thinks it is Stewart's best play. She uses the occasion, moreover, to point up the differences between radio drama and other kinds of play, and examines Professor Harold Oliver's contention that "the radio play has one great defect, that the characters in it must talk". I thought this was especially timely, coming as it does just when many people in the theatre are beginning to reject the Artaudian cult of non-verbal theatre. I think particularly of John Bell's recent programme notes to Louis Nowra's Inner Voices, in which he makes a plea for literate and articulate drama. The virtues of radio drama as analysed by Ms Sykes, are of course just such verbal ones.

In the light of her remarks about radio drama, Ms Sykes's special area of interest, it is a pity that she could not have dwelt at greater length on the special qualities of television drama. She does explain why she has chosen this Ted Roberts play, and points to the dominance of unspoken action and reaction, but since this section of her introduction will be the most provocative for school students studying the different media, some further analysis would have been useful. As it is, she does ask most of the significant questions about writing for the different media, and if I am right that the schools will find this an excellent text for such studies, then perhaps questions are more important than answers.
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