



1980

Experiments with Form in Recent Australian Drama

Gareth Griffiths

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Griffiths, Gareth, Experiments with Form in Recent Australian Drama, *Kunapipi*, 2(1), 1980.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss1/10>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Experiments with Form in Recent Australian Drama

Abstract

Despite the tremendous strides made in recent years by Australian theatre and despite the dozen or more dedicated and professional playwrights which this has helped support there is nevertheless a greater sense of expectation than achievement in most public response to the plays and playwrights which have emerged. Distinctive, even distinguished, plays and writers can be found but there still seems to be a feeling that Australian theatre has not emerged from the age of promise into the age of fulfilment. This response is even more strongly reflected in the disappointed response of much literary criticism which still seems to feel that drama lags behind poetry and prose fiction both in the level of achievement and in the comparative lack of distinctive and innovative forms.

Experiments with Form in Recent Australian Drama

Despite the tremendous strides made in recent years by Australian theatre and despite the dozen or more dedicated and professional playwrights which this has helped support there is nevertheless a greater sense of expectation than achievement in most public response to the plays and playwrights which have emerged. Distinctive, even distinguished, plays and writers can be found but there still seems to be a feeling that Australian theatre has not emerged from the age of promise into the age of fulfilment. This response is even more strongly reflected in the disappointed response of much literary criticism which still seems to feel that drama lags behind poetry and prose fiction both in the level of achievement and in the comparative lack of distinctive and innovative forms. Such criticism is valid in many ways, but it also exhibits a certain innocence about theatre and about the conditions in which the art flourishes and grows.

The theatre is a public and social form. Unlike the novel or the poem it is the product of an active collaboration of writer, performer and audience. Without skilled and informed interpreters the writer must restrict the range of effects he can hope to achieve successfully on stage; without an audience responsive to the conventions the play employs the writer cannot hope to communicate effectively, since in theatre all communication depends upon the evocation of and manipulation of audience response. The pace and speed at which an action proceeds on stage often precludes an audience from absorbing unfamiliar techniques readily and willingly, and even the best and most informed audience can be easily alienated by performers striving unsuccessfully to cope with skills and methods with which they are ill at ease. It is in the context of this reality that the Australian theatre's lack of ex-

perimentation must be seen and it is against this awareness that we must view the literary critic's disappointment. Nevertheless it remains a fair criticism that, viewed in a world context, recent Australian plays have often seemed unadventurous in technique and form. For the most part they have been content to remain within the naturalist conventions and to restrict their innovation to the subject matter they handle. At its worst such theatre deserves the label of animated social journalism which has been levelled at it; but, at its best, it has served to provide Australians with insights into their special conditions which have heightened their awareness of themselves in a significant way.

As I have implied, this lack of experiment has not necessarily been a failure on the part of Australian playwrights. Often it has been a recognition, conscious or intuitive, that the audience for Australian plays and the performers who realise them were not ready for a violent and abrupt rejection of realistic convention. Yet these same audiences and performers were more ready to accept and play works from overseas in which the most radical techniques were displayed. It is an odd fact of life that audiences will more readily accept innovative treatments of the unfamiliar and distant than of the immediate and well-known, as if the psychological shock of viewing the familiar through the spectacles of art constitutes in itself a sufficiently radical perceptual leap, at least in the initial stages.

In this sense the revolution in Australian drama over the last ten to fifteen years parallels the revolution of the mid-Fifties in Britain, where the commercial theatre was challenged by plays of essentially the same dramatic form but which violated the conventions of what constituted acceptable theatre subject matter. Just as *Look Back in Anger* or *Chicken Soup With Barley* asserted that the working classes were suitable cases for theatrical treatment, so *Don's Party* or *White With Wire Wheels* replaced the traditional, usually rural, stereotypes of Australians with portraits of the real, urban modern Australia, middle-class, affluent and conformist.

One feels considerable sympathy for David Williamson's complaint that most theatre critics have attacked his plays because he insists on writing plays which his audiences can understand and

respond to. Unlike his critics, as a working playwright he is only too familiar no doubt with the truth that in theatre what you are able to say depends largely on whom you are saying it to, at least if you wish them to listen. This does not imply that the playwright accepts and flatters the prejudices and ideas of the audience he addresses. It simply means that the responses of the audience, not the words on a page, are the vocabularies through which an effective theatrical statement is made. The rhetorical aim of the playwright is to shape these responses, to alter and extend them through the juxtaposition of familiar situation and unexpected reaction. By varying the elements, placing the devices in an unfamiliar order, creating fresh interplays between characters and stock situations, the audience can be lured from its accustomed cover and forced to consider itself and its surroundings in a new and unfamiliar light.

In *Don's Party*, for example, the crude hedonism which characterises so much Australian suburban life is wedded to a study of the social and political effectiveness of the liberal, middle-class elite who usually see themselves as insulated by their intelligence from the values which surround them. By observing how the two intertwine in reality the writer can show us and them (if we allow such a distinction) how the pursuit of the good life has debilitated people whose moral feelings and intellectual ideals cry out for some more testing form of open and public action. The bitterness and disappointment this produces and which pervades the world of the party is highlighted by the cheerless energy with which the characters like Coolie pursue the dream of pleasure, whilst the television chattering out the failure of liberal Australia to make its impact felt at the polls links the action to the wider social conditions of which these people are the product.

Don's Party is not a didactic play, and any brief attempt to articulate my response to its ideas does less than justice to the humour and understanding which it brings to its presentation of the characters. There is a vigorous acceptance of the characters not as ideals but as the reality which Australian society has to work with. Precisely because of this realistic portrayal it has a radical purpose, to insist on the need to see Australia as it is before

we can change it. The audience must accept what it sees as credible and, deny it as they may, a mirror which reflects many aspects of themselves. For such a task naturalism is the appropriate form and in theatre no form which is appropriate to the playwright's particular aim is intrinsically wrong.

Unfortunately, perhaps, the literary critic approaching plays of this kind is searching less for an appropriate theatre style than for one which is innovative for its own sake. Theatre everywhere has suffered more than any other art-form from the obsession of twentieth century European aesthetics with the new and the innovative. As an art-form which addresses a group it has special problems. In the two to three hours a play takes to perform the audience must be able to 'read' the special languages of the performance. It must be able readily to understand the givens of the exercise. For this reason much innovative theatre in the early part of the century, and even more recently, has taken as its subject matter precisely this problem of changing in the course of the play the audience's understanding of the rules of its own response. The classic in this respect is, of course, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; in many ways it would be more appropriate to substitute Audience for Author in the title, since it is the changing of the built-in response of the audience to the events on stage which the play aims at. Unless this is the primary concern of the play an anti-illusionist convention may be as inappropriate as any other. There are no absolutes of form involved in the judging of a play. Thus for Australian playwrights of the late sixties and early seventies the critical demand for a theatre which reflected the new techniques made fashionable by French Absurdist plays might well have seemed only a self-indulgence, inappropriate both to their purposes as artists in the society and as men trying to communicate with the existing audience and alter its consciousness in an effective way. Significantly, in conversation, David Williamson has told me that when he began to write as a student he wrote in the Absurdist style and that he came back to naturalism as a more appropriate form for what he had to say and the audience he was trying to reach.

But, of course, just as there is nothing intrinsically wrong about

employing a naturalist technique where it is appropriate for the theatrical aims so there is nothing specially and significantly permanent about the Australian audience's response to naturalism. As I tried to argue earlier the very unfamiliarity of seeing themselves and their surroundings on stage in a realistic way might have constituted a sufficient perceptual gap for the audience in the beginning, and may have alienated them from accepting distorted and stylised images of this reality. But the sophistication of audiences grows rapidly. Many people who were won back to a sense of the relevance of the theatre because for the first time it was presenting an art directly relevant to their own time and place were also embracing, perhaps unconsciously, a more general impression that theatre could be a place where a serious and important artistic activity was possible. Theatre was ceasing to be what it had appeared to be for a long time, a place where a few went to discover culture and was again becoming a place where they went to discover themselves. The old truth was being renewed that no theatre, however vigorously it pursues technical excellence, or however effectively it communicates the great classical repertory can ever have a sustained and powerful artistic effect on its audience unless it also treats seriously the images and ideas of its own time and place. As a result a new seriousness and concern for theatre form as such was generated, as is witnessed by the many radical and experimental plays performed to the evident delight of the audience by groups such as the Pram Factory in Melbourne or the Nimrod in Sydney. Likewise this new concern with theatre was reflected in the challenging new responses to the classics of young directors and actors like John Bell, Richard Wherrett and Rex Cramphorne. In such a climate change and innovation in Australian plays was bound to follow. Now the possibility existed to develop from this rich mixture of writers, performers and audiences, bound together in a mutual excitement at the rediscovery of the importance and relevance of theatre, experiments with form which would be more than a copying of conventions from other traditions, a dressing up of themes in borrowed robes. The chance was there for young writers and directors to experiment with forms appropriate to the special concerns and responses of the

audiences they had won. This second round of Australian theatre is just beginning and it is with this process that I want to concern myself in the second half of this paper.

It is not my main purpose to award accolades, to single out the best or most successful plays to date. An honest appraisal of innovative work in recent Australian theatre would have to conclude that as far as most of the work is concerned it has been less than satisfactory. Nevertheless a start has been made and one can begin to discern certain directions which this is taking.

The most obvious, and earliest, break with naturalism, and one of the most complete to date, was Bob Ellis' and Michael Boddy's *King O'Malley*. The show has few subsequent rivals for the exuberance and spirit with which it blended music, mime and anecdote into an irresistible mixture. Yet O'Malley finally has the quality of a one-off event, and suffers from the limitations as well as excellences intrinsic in uniqueness. Its effect on Australian theatre was incalculable, showing as it did that plays did not have to be linear in structure, reliant on verbal exposition and realistic in mode in order to work in the Australian theatre. But it has not, nor by its nature could it, serve as a model for later writers except as a compendium of technical possibilities.

What then are the main kinds of play other than the naturalist which can be discerned at this point in time? Two major forms seem to me to be emerging. First, there is the play centrally concerned with the exploration of the inner world of a single character. Secondly, there is the play concerned to articulate some central metaphor for our society and to explore the dominant images which shape Australian consciousness. Often these two come close together and intermingle in a single structure, as some examples will show, so that distinguishing the two is rather like differentiating between two profiles of one face. The metaphor is appropriate since, as one would expect, the overriding concern of both is to delineate the special Australian identity and to assert its uniqueness and relevance.

In the first case, the naturalist theatre provides a clear starting point in plays like Kenna's *A Hard God*. The heart of the play is the exploration of Jo Cassidy's growth into an awareness of the

problem of identity forced on him by his inability to reconcile his feelings of love for his friend Jack Shannon and his Catholic upbringing. The vividness with which Kenna re-creates the family life of the Cassidys and the realism of touch he brings to character and incident should not obscure the fact that essentially the play seeks to articulate the growth of an inner awareness, and one could envisage the play written in quite a different mode in which this fact would be reflected in the form as well as the content. In *A Hard God* the effects on Jo of his Catholic upbringing are the conditions of Jo's presentation and of our concern with him, not the concern of the scene as such.

The same fundamental distinction applies to Buzo's *Coralie Lansdowne Says No* where, despite the themes of liberation and the social pressure on women, it is with the special growth of Coralie herself that we are concerned. Despite its naturalistic framework, the language of Buzo's play presses outwards towards dramatic monologue, towards a direct articulation of the inner flow of Coralie's thought to the point where the realistic setting is sometimes overburdened with the weight of it. In Scene Four of the play, for example, when Coralie returns from the party to the waiting Stuart the naturalistic framework is a mere device to disguise an inner monologue in which verbal image replaces action as it must in any naturalist play which reaches out from social analysis towards an attempt to symbolise inner states.

SCENE FOUR

Late that night. STUART is asleep on the sofa, the book on his chest. Silence. CORALIE appears in the right doorway. She stands there very still. She carries her shoes in her hand. When she starts to speak, STUART wakes up and looks at her.

CORALIE: Night makes it better, you know. The whole area seems reasonably beautiful, the whole palsied landscape seems tangible when you're down by the beach looking up and you walk through the shadows of the bananas and there aren't all that many lights. The freaks are asleep. All the moaning has stopped. It's silent, like a ship in the night. I've been down on the beach and among the bananas. I've been there for hours. I left the party, left all the creeps to drink and talk and line up screws for the night. I left my 'escort', he was far too charming, and he frightened

me a bit because he really is serious and he does seem to want me for something I can't face at all. So I left and walked and walked and sat on the beach and looked at the outline, the rocks and gums, the cracked shells and clustered droppings with very few lights and the freaks within and I surged up inside because I wasn't really part of this design, this conspiracy. And the surging peaked and then sank inside and I lay on the sand and I thought of the party and him and what he wanted me to do and the more I thought and the deeper I got into the night the more blurred the landscape became and the hill seemed like floodlights through a skeleton and the humming got louder so I went for a paddle in the sea. And I tried to think and my thoughts were physically painful and I walked through the rocks and the trees, through the bananas and heard the odd snatch of freaky life as I hauled up the steps to the top, where the most frightening thing of all was that this house seemed almost comforting.

(She is by now sitting on the sofa beside STUART. They kiss.)

You'll have to treat me well. I must be treated well.

FADE OUT.

The pressure toward a more direct expression of a character's thoughts so obviously present in a scene of this kind, and so clearly at the heart of the playwright's concern, obviously requires a dramatic form which can more openly and readily accommodate the articulation of inner feeling and state. As an example of the kind of experiment towards accommodating this need that Australian writers are now conducting we might consider Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous*. Hewett has chosen to acknowledge openly in the setting and dramatic structure that she is principally concerned with the psychic growth of her central (strongly autobiographical?) character Sally Banner and through an exploration of her growth as a person in search of her own needs and values to explore the difficulties Australian society still offers to a woman who demands equality in sexual as well as economic and social terms. Her solution, and it is an intriguing one, is to frame the action as a pilgrimage, employing the image of the quest and drawing on this for symbols which can be directly translated into settings on stage. Thus, for example, the opening scene against a stylised version of the school chapel provides a

schematised way of identifying locale and frames the action by an image of that Chapel Perilous, the inner sanctum of herself, which will be the lifelong goal of Sally's search. The shaping forces of parents, church, education etc. which in a naturalist play would need to be drawn in time-consuming detail are schematically presented as three life-size masks which remain throughout (symbolising the continuing presence of their influence through life) and from behind which the actors playing these characters emerge. These actors, in turn, take on other roles as the action unfolds, suggesting again that such early embodiments of social pressure and rigidity are in their turn only masks which other figures fill as one's life changes and the patterns into which the past sets one alter with circumstance and situation. The long prologue which forms essentially the first act of the play is followed by the nominal Act One and here the flexibility of the setting is illustrated, the masks of authority remain but the altar becomes a kind of tiring rack from which characters obtain costumes as needed to play the multiple scenes which illustrate Sally's search for an effective relationship which can satisfy her needs. At the end of that Act when she has moved in with the communist agitator, Thomas, the same set can be used to represent the political platforms from which Thomas speaks, and around which Sally waits, the whole, significantly, surrounded by neon-lit fairground signs. The flexibility of this set can therefore be seen to be not only practical in a play which depends on a very swift flow of scenes to accommodate its episodic and fragmented nature but to lend itself to metaphorical extensions of the central theme, identifying as it does the 'liberal' creed of Thomas with the 'reactionary' creed of the church, since pulpit and platform are one and the same. In a play structured in this fashion, much of the action will be clearly symbolic and Hewett embraces the freedom this affords her to compress and allegorise freely and frequently. Sometimes the effect of this can be overdone, for example here is the section where Thomas catechises Sally in her new faith.

... it's Thomas Sally, you remember Thomas.

SALLY: (*without turning*) Doubting Thomas?

THOMAS: Believing Thomas. I've come to save you Sally. Repeat after me: I believe in Marxism-Leninism.

SALLY: I believe in Marxism-Leninism.

THOMAS: The dictatorship of the proletariat.

SALLY: The dictatorship of the proletariat.

THOMAS: To serve the working people.

SALLY: To serve the working people.

THOMAS: And promote the cause of peace.

SALLY: And promote the cause of peace.

Comical as the effect is here it is a device which Hewett often overworks and which labours to make a point already effectively made by the juxtaposition of event and setting. This dialogue perhaps reflects the writer's fear that the audience will not 'get' the message implicit in the structure unless it is reinforced verbally. The playwright is still unsure of the audience's easy familiarity with these techniques and worries herself into dramatic overkill.

One major advantage the technique must afford, however, is to dispense with the illusion of natural conversation where this is clearly a scene of direct exposition of thoughts the character's have or have had about the events described. Unfortunately, Hewett often ignores this possibility, even when it would clearly serve her purpose. For example, in the following 'conversation' between Sally and Michael, whom she has left for Thomas, a more direct form is clearly crying out to be released from the 'conversational' strait-jacket.

MICHAEL: I could always remember the shape of your face. I could draw it like a heart in the dark. And yet there'd be times when I couldn't remember you at all. And suddenly, you'd be up and betray me. You were a bitch, the things you'd do to me.

SALLY: What things?

MICHAEL: There was this Canadian nurse. I was in bed with her. You're jealous?

SALLY: Yes.

MICHAEL: I had all her clothes off. She was lovely, and suddenly I said, 'I love you, Sally', just like that. It was fatal. She froze. 'Who's this Sally?' she said, getting dressed. So I told her. 'You'll go back home and marry her after the war', she said. 'No', I said, 'Sally and I weren't geared for marriage'.

SALLY: I thought if I tore you out of me I'd be deformed in some way. I'd need plastic surgery. So after you left I lay down anywhere for practically anyone who asked me. I wanted to destroy myself, because I didn't exist any more. Not as a whole, loving, complete human being.

The result, as in the final line, is often a verbal banality that does less than justice to the central dramatic meaning of the scene as the audience's credibility is stretched along with the natural tone of the 'conversation'.

There is still a great deal of unsureness in this experiment, and the play as a result fails to make the clearest and most effective use of its techniques; but, at its best *The Chapel Perilous* recognises that it is the exploration of character through explicit dramatic device which is at the heart of its fresh technical conception. When this is accepted Hewett is able to bring together in stage images an action, a presentational style and a language which dramatises rather than imitates those moments of human insight which are her concern.

Here for example is Sally's discovery of Thomas the fiery revolutionary's sexual impotence.

SINGERS...

O it's friggin' in the riggin',
It's friggin' in the riggin',
It's friggin' in the riggin',
And there's fuck all else to do.

(They throw Sally and Thomas on bed, dance round in a ring. THOMAS in army issue woollen underpants, is drunk, holding on to bed head. SALLY is crouched on end of bed, crying, stripped to bra and panties.)

THOMAS: I can't do it, Sally darling. I can't consummate our conjugal rights (*sic*). (*Touching her awkwardly*) Piss off you bastards. Sally and I can't consummate our conjugal rights.

(Laughter. Figures dance and drink in dim light).

DANCERS: (*singing*)

Poor Sally, she never made it,
Not even suicide,

When she swallowed Lysol they gave her salt and water,
So she never died.

MOTHER: (*coming to bed*) Sally, here's your wedding presents: a copy of Marie Stopes and a Dutch cap.

(*Laughter; MOTHER returns to mask*).

DANCERS:

Poor Sally, she married Thomas,
They tried and tried and tried,
In the honeymoon suite of the Hotel Bohemia
They lay down and cried.

THOMAS: Sally, Sally, after the war is over we're going to change the world.

In the immediate following scene, Thomas goes behind the mask to play the Canon, reinforcing and extending the point made.

The Chapel Perilous is probably on balance a failure. Much of what Hewett attempts to do doesn't come off and she is often confused as to the appropriate dramatic form. The play seems often to overburden its central concern with Sally's development with a weight of social and political symbolism which drowns our response to the individual at the heart of it all. It is all too easy, given such a freeing technique, to employ a dramatic sledgehammer where a light tap would do. However, the central feature of the action remains that the writer is able to dispense with a machinery of background, of dialogue directed solely to establishing environment, of atmosphere, painting etc. ... and although the fact that she chooses to replace this discarded freight with a weight of over-explicit allegory and social analysis is unfortunate, it does not invalidate the central technique in which setting and action serve the exposition of inner response rather than the other way round. *The Chapel Perilous* is an attempt to find a dramatic style which can do openly what a more naturalistic play can only do covertly, to make the growth of an individual's response the ordering principle of a dramatic structure. As such it is an important and courageous experiment.

The second, and on the whole, more successful discernible line in recent plays has concerned itself with the exploration of Australian society through the use of some compelling central metaphor. Many of David Williamson's plays generate this kind of metaphorical density in the situations they explore, despite remaining essentially within the naturalist framework. *The Removalists* or *The Club* are only superficially plays 'about' police violence or Australian football clubs and serve as vehicles for a study of issues which go wider and deeper in Australian society at large. It is with an extension of this process coupled with an open acknowledgement of this at the level of form that the second group of plays of the second round are concerned.

One of the more successful recent productions at the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney, for example, *Brothers* illustrates how a play essentially 'about' a narrow and specific aspect of Australian society can generate for its audience a network of implications for the way in which Australians view authority and the relationship of the ideal and the down to earth. This play which is a monologue delivered by a Christian Brother teacher at the end of a long and wearing career teaching in a boy's school captures the difficulty in Australian society at large of maintaining a sense of the ideal in the face of a daily existence which has its values firmly rooted in the here and now, and yet which hypocritically insists on paying lip-service to the shells of religion, truth and the ideal. We feel pity for the teacher, aware of the emptiness of his ideals and yet clinging to the memory of his sexually-inspired reveries of the Virgin Mary summoning him from his adolescent bed to a life of service and worship. Yet this pity is eroded by the realism with which Kenna shows the sadism and cynicism which this disappointment has bred in him and which he passes on to his charges because of his own need to cling to the shattered remains of the dreams which in reality he has lost. Kenna avoids the problems of presenting interior action in a fully dramatised way. He employs the monologue as a device appropriate to his subject, a teacher droning on at his class, and so focuses our attention strictly on the figure himself and his metaphorical implications for the society he represents. Where an outside influence needs to be suggested a

gentle and effective mime supplies the need. The already great discomfort of former Christian Brother students in the audience must have been even further increased by the scene in which the teacher, addressing an empty chair, seizes an imaginary boy by an imaginary ear and sways him gently to and fro whilst talking in rhythm to the movement. The majority of the audience clearly felt as well as saw the imaginary child and suffered along with him. This play serves to show, too, how, as I said earlier, the two strains are not mutually exclusive, since Kenna's concern with the decayed old teacher as an image rich in implication for Australian culture at large does not preclude the play from exhibiting a deep concern with him as an individual and from reflecting his inner awareness of his growth to this plight through the rambling, self-justifying dialogue and the pointed and revealing anecdotes he puts into his mouth.

More recently Steve K. Speirs' play *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* extends the same approach, taking once again a central figure and presenting him in a stage monologue which explores his implications for Australian society at large. The central figure is an old transvestite elocution teacher who is the victim of a precocious and sexually avid pupil, young Benjamin Franklin. He is also the latest in that long line of public sacrifices on the altar of Australian worry about its sexual identity. His plight, though, is also an image of a more general concern with the violence and institutionalised brutality with which Australian society reacts to the nonconformist and individual. This violence is exposed as a reaction to its own libidinous fantasies which it suppresses, and projects onto its scapegoats, turning the harmless old worshipper of Mick Jagger posters into the transvestite terror of Double Bay. Once again the play avoids the difficulty of a fully dramatised structure, and employs the classic devices of the telephone and the letter to communicate with the other characters who never appear. Despite the change of locale in the second act and the violent end to act one, when the police burst in to arrest him on immorality charges, the play remains essentially a monologue of the same kind as *Brothers*. It has a similar success, too, in focusing attention

on the central character, though its concern is less inner and reaches out by dramatic device to implied action and interaction with the other figures in the plot. It is precisely because much of the effect depends on the existence of these implied figures and on the central character's interaction with them that one may begin to question whether or not there is a certain avoidance element involved in this choice of structure. Although the result is brilliantly effective, as much is potentially lost as is gained by the decision to focus the action through a single figure. Since the heart of the play concerns a relationship is it ducking the issue of how to obtain this kind of intensity with a fully presented action? Whatever one feels, the play certainly avoids the diffusion of effect which a fully naturalistic treatment would have made inevitable, and so emphasises the dramatic rather than narrative implications of the action it presents. In this case the choice of technique has worked, but one may ask how many situations would lend themselves so readily to so sparse a treatment. In the end the problem of exploring character interaction cannot be avoided and the tendency for recent Australian plays to do this by some technical device or other may reflect the problems they have in finding forms which can handle fully dramatised situations without resorting to a surface naturalism which may be inappropriate to their purpose.

It is in this context that I want to consider one attempt at meeting this problem and at making important dramatic statements about Australian society without resorting to naturalist technique. This is in John Romeril's *The Floating World*. Despite weaknesses in construction and in the style the play, nevertheless, seems to me to be the fullest and most intelligent attempt to date to wed experimental form to content. Throughout the play one feels that Romeril is asking a series of very important questions about Australian attitudes to the past, to the contemporary world and to Australians' ability to change in a constructive and valuable way; and, more importantly, that the structure as well as the dialogue is part of this questioning process. Romeril is a young man, not of that generation whose social and economic lives still revolve around the debris of the Second World War, the RSL, the

Anzac Day Parade and the prejudice against 'Nip products'. Yet Romeril has chosen to take this group as representative of a persistent attitude to the world outside Australia. His play is not about the Australian fear of the 'Yellow Peril' but about the persistent isolationism and xenophobia of which this is just a local example, and which feeds and is fed by Australian cultural paranoia about the world around it. The Floating World (significantly, the Japanese term for the life of the pleasure districts) is the world in which Australians live, a place apart, protective and yet confining, a hedonistic prison in which enclosed prejudices flourish and persist and are flourished in the face of the future, not from genuine passion but from a fear of change. Les's fear of the outside world drives him into the past and from there into a violent attack on reality. Yet the play is not concerned to examine his special plight in isolation from that of his audience with whom he shares a much wider condition. In fact Les's reaction, misguided though it is, and the catatonic withdrawal from reality he endures reflects uncomfortably on the relative complacency with which most of us in the audience accept the conditions which have forced him to this juncture. This point is forced home by the images at the end of the play when he reflects on his state now and the state he was in when he returned from the prison-camp at the end of the war.

LES: I lived in a dream – the ghost of a shoplifter from Myers, haunting the scene of the crime – time had stopped for everyone but me. When they left that night two-star Corporal Yomito lacked his vitamin B supply. I lived in a floating world.

Romeril's technique, with its fast movement from realistic scene to cabaret-style, and its employment of a group of actors exchanging roles as Les moves between 'reality' and 'fantasy' never allows the audience to relax into a comfortable distance from the action. They cannot escape from the implications of the action by pretending that it is a narrative of one man's inability to escape from his past nightmare experiences. In fact, instead of a narrative structure, Romeril holds the action together with a series of brilliant metaphors for those aspects of Australia which he wishes to

dramatise. The play is set on the liner carrying the 1974 Women's Weekly Cherry Cruise to Japan's symbol to all in the audience of that careful and tentative contact with Asia (and the world at large) which characterises the Australian tourist abroad. The liner, a converted troop-ship, and itself a floating world, a microcosm of that larger floating island world of Australia, moves slowly towards Japan, and for Les from the present towards the past. It is this past with its horrors and deprivations which symbolises the world Les fears and which he projects onto the present and onto any reality he encounters outside his Floating World. The floating world of a body swollen with beri beri was easier to escape from than the body he now inhabits, swollen with good living and too much of the 'old amber fluid'. As the liner draws away from the comforting world in which he has sheltered, and to which he has withdrawn as a refuge, the world outside becomes confused with the past as Les' intrinsic fear of reality asserts itself. Past and present join together into one image of the intolerable world outside, peopled with sadistic Nips or supercilious Poms, and it is this reality not the past from which he is unable to escape. Paradoxically, his return to the past is a retreat to a more comfortable world in which the enemy can be simply identified, mateship is a given thing and the need to adjust to new realities from day to day can be ignored.

Central to the play's effect is the breaking up of the expository, and narrative scenes by a series of illustrative sketches. The ship's cabaret, with its seedy Entertainments Officer, is employed for this end. The endless vulgar humour with which he bombards the passengers is, significantly, linked with the 'situation reports' of the Australian officer on the state of the war, or the new regulations and instructions for prison-camp life. Like the officer's reports, the clown's jokes serve only to dress up a hollow and vicious reality; dramatically, of course, they heighten our awareness of it by contrast.

CLOWN: As to Jap landings at places other than Kota Bahru (that's fancy dress this coming Sunday, fancy dress this coming Sunday) the Japs have landed at Kota Pahru and Kota Bahru only and if you don't believe me why don't you go there and ask them, ha ha ha!

The pathetic round of 'fun' on the cruise symbolises the energy which the society devotes to burying its consciousness of its own plight, and creates a reversed illustration of the old adage: Weep and the world weeps with you, laugh and you laugh alone. These people are laughing in an essential isolation on their floating, insulated world and the laughter in Romeril's images of them is bitter, hollow and redolent of warning and alarm.

In *The Floating World* Romeril has been at pains to make form and content fit. As with Dorothy Hewett the temptation to make the action too heavily symbolic has not always been resisted, though the effects are much more fully dramatised here and the moments of heavyhandedness are fewer and further between. The main flaw seems to be a crowding of effects which make them easier to conceive on a page than they are to realise on the stage, at least if we are to judge by the Nimrod production a couple of years ago. But, despite these flaws, and they are not major ones in a playwright who is at the beginning of his career, the play shows a powerful and directed impulse to explore form in the service of meaning and to experiment with technique to create effective stage images. Above all the play is almost unique so far in the frankness with which it conceives its events as image rather than as narrative and so points the way to an Australian theatre in which the narrative, naturalist technique will be used when it is dramatically appropriate and not, as has all too often been the case until recently, as the *sine qua non* of Australian dramatic technique.