John Romeril's Wars: The Dissenting View

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Abstract
A variety of major works treating the experience of war have emerged in Australia. Usually they have been concerned with the experience of going to war, with the existential realities encountered there. Or, alternatively, with the decision to go to war.1
A variety of major works treating the experience of war have emerged in Australia. Usually they have been concerned with the experience of going to war, with the existential realities encountered there. Or, alternatively, with the decision to go to war.¹

John Romeril’s plays dealing with war are unique in that their concerns have not been primarily with the existential experience of conflict, but rather with its socio-political consequences for the individual Australian, for Australian society at large and for the future relations of Australians with the world outside. This statement may seem odd to those familiar with Romeril’s best-known work, The Floating World,² which, at one level at least, seems strongly concerned with the existential consequences of the Second World War on its ‘hero’ Les. The climax of the play is the destructive outbreak against the crew of the cruise-ship taking him and his wife on their Women’s Weekly ‘Cherry-blossom Cruise’ to Japan and the catatonic state into which his inability to reconcile his memories of his past imprisonment under the Japanese with the changing relations between Australia and Japan in the post-war world finally drives him. Nevertheless I want to argue that this element is not the only, or even the major, concern of even this work, and that, when The Floating World is set against the rest of Romeril’s works dealing with war, most of which have not been published in script form, the central concern of this writer can be clearly seen to be with the vision of war as the product of the economic forces of capitalism, and with the cost of this in human terms on those who experience the social and political pressures of wartime, on the home-front as well as in the front-line. Only when read in the light of these larger concerns can we make sense of the framing device of the opening scene of The Floating World and understand why the play constructs the scenes of Les’s breakdown (interior monologues) in a style which externalises and objectifies their cause, refusing the escape into an existential epistemology and embracing a social and political context for the personal crisis of the protagonist.

It is useful to list the main works in which Romeril has dealt with the issue of war, since the general absence of available editions of many of
them has seriously hampered attempts to place the work of this very important playwright in any serious context. Apart from the collaboration in the APG devised street plays during the sixties, the earliest work is also the most available, the only one of Romeril’s war-pieces to be published to date – that is, *The Floating World* (1974). But the next major foray into this area has never been published and, indeed exists only as a successive series of scripts worked in different formats and on different occasions. The origin of this piece is in the work listed in bibliographies as *The Dudders* and dated by Peter Fitzpatrick in *After the Doll* as 1976. The script I have, entitled *The Dud War*, was obtained from Newcastle University drama department where it was part of the material collected for a new show devised for students during a writer in residency by Romeril. I shall be looking at *The Dud War* in detail and the notes contain a fuller history of the evolution of this show from its inception. The next major work concerned with war is the section dealing with women munition workers of the show Romeril devised for the centenary of the South Australian Union movement in 1983 under the title *The Centenary Dance*. This comprised about a quarter of the show and explored the concern, first exhibited in *The Dud War* (using that title as a convenient catch-all for the complex of scripts referred to above) for the effects of the war on those left behind, especially on the families of the soldiers and the vast social changes they experienced as a result of the conflict which so altered their lives. Later on, the musical play *Jonah Jones*, performed in Sydney in 1985 and representing the beginning of Romeril’s recent return to working with mainstream subsidized companies, in this case the Sydney Theatre Company, and finally *Top End*, Romeril’s play dealing with Australian reactions to the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, also deal substantially with war-related issues.

With regard to *Jonah Jones*, it might be noted that the source novel, Louis Stone’s *Jonah*, deals exclusively with the period immediately before the First World War and that the play Romeril developed from it consciously extends its coverage from 1911, when the novel was published, to 1914 and the outbreak of war, a war which it represents as an extension of the violence and competition of the worlds of the street-push and cut-throat entrepreneurial capitalism through which the hero has already successfully passed. To *Jonah*, the war opens up fresh markets; it is an opportunity to sell thousands of pairs of army boots:

**Jonah:** I got a hunch that war is in my biz
what’lI put me through the roof
**Chorus:** ‘Cos armies march in armies march in
armies march in armies march in boots.
**Jonah:** It’s horses for courses
Let’s call a spade a spade
When nations clash
There’s a lot of cash
To be made
Talk all you like about the balance of forces
Me I’ll think about the balance of trade!

PLAYERS OPERATE AS A CHORUS
INTO THIS VIRTUALLY EMPTY SPACE LARGE WHEELED CRATES PILED WITH ARMY BOOTS ARE PUSHED CRATE AFTER CRATE

Chorus/
Jonah: armies march in bomp stomp clomp bomp
so stitch the thread and punch the holes
armies march in bomp stomp clomp bomp
so build the heels and shape the soles ‘cos
All: armies march in
armies march in
armies march in
bomp stomp clomp bomp
BOOTS!

Romeril’s texts form a crucial if dissenting coda to the usual Australian representations of the theme of war. Often his texts do not seem to be overtly concerned with war at all. So, for example, the ending of the script of The Dud War (as presented at Newcastle University in 1977) raises a problem in the light of the play’s overt concerns. On the surface the play deals in a light-hearted way with the wartime world of black-marketeering, good-time girls spending the inflated wages produced by the munitions factories, and the clash between local petty criminals and the Americans over duty-free goods, army goods-scams and the local women. Yet the final moment of the play is explicitly an anti-war moment. The 1977 Newcastle text reads:

Apocalypse when? Apocalypse then?
Apocalypse now?
Apocalypso apocalypso
Apocalypse NEVER

The final stage-direction which follows reads, ‘A fist in the air/Fade (it is an anti-war play)’. This last overt statement of intent is puzzling. Who is it directed towards? The young actors (students from the Drama department) who staged the piece had worked with Romeril for about six weeks prior to the staging and must have been aware of his intentions. This final stage-direction suggests a certain worry on the author’s part about the effect of the material. When the whole piece is read this is understandable, because much of the material The Dud War deals with is not ‘anti-war’ in the conventional sense, and might be open to misinterpretation. There is a celebratory quality which in the
hands of exuberant and undisciplined actors could swamp the subtler message in a life-enhancing ‘survival of the little people amid the horrors of war’ style (not unlike the kind of worry provoked in Brecht by the initial reactions of post-war German audiences to Mother Courage, which they read as a play in praise of the endurance of the ordinary man and woman in the street). Nevertheless, despite these worries, which the ending of the existing script reflects, there is a subversive quality to Romeril’s presentation of the lumpenproletariat world of wartime Newcastle, and in the hands of a subtle cast this subversive quality could be easily sustained. The final stage-direction is like an admonishment, a guiding reminder to the young cast who helped create the piece to anchor their exuberance to the larger rhetorical purpose, to the presentation of the scams, the sexual manoeuverings and the calculated cowardice, as a realistic portrait of the process of a people’s war and the response of many of those people to the political pressures engendered by war as well as to the liberating economic opportunities which it produces, the opportunities to feed on the crumbs dropped from the table of capital’s wartime expansion. Romeril’s concern to strengthen the message of the play in the final moments is also much more comprehensible if one goes back to the scripts and performances from which this version was generated. The 1975 version, The Dudders, which was only produced once, is far less overt in its message. To contrast the ending, The Dudders finishes on a political note, but one which stresses the post-war disillusion of Australians with the neo-colonial dominance of America in Australian economic life (a theme which echoes the opening sequence of the earlier The Floating World). The Dudders’ final chorus is as follows:

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

The final stage-direction in the 1975-6 version is simply ‘Repeat etc ... Circling Clapping’; there is no mention of Apocalypse or of an anti-war
gesture with raised fists.

To further illustrate the conscious politicization of the script between 1976 and the new version in 1977 one can examine this McDonald's image, transposed in *The Dud War* to an earlier position in the piece and expanded to include a denunciation of multi-national capitalism and an explicit linking of its methods with those of international organized crime. In the final scene of *The Dud War* the Americans 'reveal' themselves as secret agents on a mission to rid Newcastle of its criminal elements, but the sub-text tells a different story. Fudd, the crooked Australian officer deeply involved in the local black market, introduces the Americans.

Fudd: Perhaps some introductions would not go amiss
Mars: Marshall B. Dexter – graduate Harvard School of Business – company director – witnessed the fall of Wall St. – managed to cushion the blows.
Hank: Hank the Yank – real name Dwight graduate Harvard School of Business – company director – witnessed the fall of Wall Street – managed to cushion the blows.
Fudd: Prohibition was kind to them.
Hank: The war’s been kinder.
Bob: Bobby
Fudd: What’s life if you can’t have a laugh
Bob: Sox. Real name Angela Ford-Browne with an e, company director.
Fudd: Beautiful but bribable.
Bob: And definitely not to be trusted.
Sago: You administer prices – same game as me
Bob: So we noticed
Fudd: Very fastidious about the company he keeps.
Brad: Bradley Fischetti – I’m a very religious man.
Fudd: All currently doing time in the United States army

There follows a long list of the activities they are involved in from copper to coal, from ice-cream to lingerie, from slot-machines to steel. What is significant about the list, which takes up about a page and a half of the script and which, in the live sound recording of the Newcastle performance held by the Drama department, seems to evolve into a sort of swinging chant, is that it explicitly mixes together the commodities traditionally associated with organized crime and the interests of big multi-national business corporations. The link with the earlier version is provided in the item which concludes the list:

Fudd: Chickens, Coop – working on an idea. Nothing much to it. Your chickens your mouths only with our know-how.
Coop: Eh?
Fudd: Mind like something coming out of the wrong side of a sieve.
Hank: We see your fascinating country as one with limitless horizons.
Thus there is clear evidence of a conscious intent on Romeril's part to strengthen the political and anti-war element of the piece within the special sense of the term in his work. And this is clearly related to the opportunities provided once Romeril had released the initial script from the commercial, clubland management's demand for populist and non-ideological dialogue (the night-club show version was entitled *Over Here, Over There*). Nevertheless there is an issue raised by the rhetoric of the work and it is that Romeril's idea of presenting anti-war material is not the usual anti-violence, 'war-is-hell', account. For him to write a play against war is to write a play against the underlying causes and consequences of war in relation to the global economic systems which generate conflict for their own profit. The manipulation of people and the power afforded to governments over their lives is as much a feature of his writing on war as the horror of combat and the waste and futility of front-line deaths which has occupied much of the literature of war in this and earlier times. In an interview with me in 1986 used to prepare this article he said:

one does anti-war material or does war-material rather, fairly carefully, I think. The great danger is, of course, the pornography of violence, that in attempting to develop anti-militarist material you end up not really achieving your end.

In response to a question as to whether *The Dud War* was an anti-war play he responded:

It's anti-war in terms of war as a process of economic and political manipulation of people ... not focused on blood and guts ... apart from simple first-base aims, to create a show that would celebrate a locale and the people and stories of that place in a fairly value-free way, some attempt was made to look at social relations in war-time.

It is this sense of treating war as part of a continuity with causes in and consequences for the society at large which characterizes Romeril's view of war in his plays, and the radical nature of his analysis of society clearly affects his reading of war.

No other Australian playwright has shown an interest in the theme of war and the social conflicts it generates over such an extended period. Significant, too, is the continuing preoccupation in the work with the idea that war is to be seen as the extreme form of a socio-economic process in which Australia's involvement has to be seen within the paradigms of her colonial and neo-colonial relationship with first Britain and, subsequently, America, and of the network of political relationships which Australia, through her defence system and commitments, is locked into by virtue of the economic pressures exerted by such trading partners as America and Japan and by the multi-national companies who have been deemed necessary by successive governments of both parties to the effective economic
the whole effect of the man-power act, for young girls in particular, on wage-rates, things of that sort ... where, if you had the luck to be in some strategic industry then your wage-levels were sort of bumped-up to that of male rates; but if you were stuck in traditionally badly-paid areas, like textiles and so on ... you continued to suffer these appalling disparities ... labour legislation in wartime was, of course, especially harsh, amounting to dragooning of the workforce ... one presumably can understand that when a society is attempting to fight a people’s war ... but the harshness of all that, the consequence of that for someone who’s perhaps into having a good time ... there’s an interesting dialectic occurs in those circumstances where you have the strictures of a highly sectionalisued and planned economy and at the same time a social psychology of ‘live now, tomorrow, it may never happen’—it’s quite an interesting dialectic in its way.

This dialectic Romeril sees as having its roots in the effect of war on women’s roles. In the early work this is associated with such effects as the ‘swing era’ and the post-war demand during the fifties for consumer goods and the earned ‘good life’, a theme which The Centenary Dance takes up by tracing the effects of the struggles of the women workers within trade unionism through the lives of young people in the fifties in South Australia. In Romeril’s own description on the interview tape:
It's an account of, essentially, the politicisation of a young girl who got into munitions in SA (during the Second World War) and became a union organiser and remained one basically in [the] Iron Workers [Union] until 1949 ... when the number of organisers dwindled and got down to two for the state and she relinquished the post in favour of the man after a lot of pressure from union leadership and so on...and shifted her industry to eggs ... [laughs]. It was part of the Centenary Celebrations of the South Australian Union movement ... It started with ... it had four biographies ... hers, that took us from the second world war into the fifties ... that was her story ... then one for a kid growing up in the fifties ... one for a child of migrants who arrived in the fifties ... it was essentially a fifties show ... basically, as a spectrum it went from big-band swing to the arrival of rock and roll ... and a little social history I guess of post-war Australia and the economic development of SA as a state ... it was done by Troupe [an Adelaide based theatre company] in 1983, and the munition workers and the munition workers' club in Hindley Street, Adelaide figured largely in that ... the same kind of material handled in Dudders and The Dud War.

As Romeril indicates here, much of the material of both The Dudders and The Dud War is concerned with these social effects of war on women: here, from the earlier version of The Dudders is Coral describing her attitude during the war and the consequences afterwards for her life ...

The grey backbone of Australia's effort. It was a dump – but it had its moments.
LIGHTS WIDEN TO TAKE IN THE SCENE.
CACKIE STIRS. NONE OF THIS [sic] THREE TAKE COGNISANCE OF CORAL

Cackie: Jesus! Do I need a glass of Vegemite. What happened.
Delma: We danced the night away.
CACKIE SEEKS A COKE

Coral: You had a choice. Eight hours a day at a lathe – and two hours afterwards getting the muck and grime out of your hands and hair.
Or you could do what I did: drift from party to party, from champagne glass to champagne glass: a damned whore.

Delma: You got your certificate
Cackie: I did
DELMA FINDS IT FOR HIM. HE READS

Coral: Everyone had a pass. You were all supposed to work. I only got picked up once. A compulsory VD check at the hands of some bum who read me the Bible. I told him to stick it up his Sodam and Gomorrah.

Coral: Homer went down at Iwo Jima
Cackie: Like in the old days
Coral: Delma got married
Cackie: Remember the Roxy
Coral: Had seven kids
Cackie: Coral wasn’t in it
Coral: Enough said
Cackie: Just like the old days
They stop. Look frightened. Will run one way then another.

Coral: Me? My old man turned up in 1946 – after being reported missing. There wasn’t much to say. We tried. He’d go bananas every now and then. Health foods. Encyclopaedias. A fish bait business. We went our separate ways.

The same theme is more fully developed in the subsequent version *The Dud War*. Here Delma addresses the AWOL Australian soldier Cackie (the nominal ‘hero’ or ‘good soldier Cack’ of the show). The scene opens with a cross-fade to Delma – in overalls and seemingly pregnant – in a spot (in more ways than one).

Delma: Two days ago I’d have said Sunday June the 7th would be just another Sunday. I’d go to my job as a bolt-grinder and work until 4. Then I’d go to the canteen and work until 10. Then I’d go roof-spotting and scan the night-skies until six, knitting socks to give my eyes a rest...

OTHER CHARACTERS ARE HURRYING TO WORK...

... If you don’t tire yourself out by staying up late on the last day of a seven day 56 hour day-shift you’re not in the groove for the five-day night shift that starts on Monday and when you’re fighting fascism being alert on the job really matters. Just another Sunday? It wasn’t shaping up that way. Six months and you’ve written once.

Cack: Thanks for turning up.

THE LIGHTS HAVE WIDENED ALREADY – DEL IS WAITING BY A LARGE MOVIE POSTER. IT’S (sic) OUTSIDE A CINEMA. EDI IS CROSSING.

Del: I dunno why I’m doing this.. what’s it for.. what’s it all about..

Edi: Whatcha doing?

Del: Checking what’s on at the flikks

Edi: Babes on Broadway

Del: Yeah. Judy Garland sings: Chin Up, Cheerio, Carry On – that oughta help the war-effort; and Mickey Rooney impersonates Carmen Miranda. Dunno what they’ll do but its the biggest song and dance show of all time.

Edi: Yeah sure and life’s a bowl of cherries. We should be making the instruments of death.

Del: I’ll catch up with you Edi.

Edi: Goddam bike [pencil addition to script].

Goddam overalls. Goddam iron filings that get in your hands.

Goddam grease that gets in your hair. Goddam life – it’s a case of rotten tomatoes

CACK STICKS HIS HEAD OUT; HANDING DEL SOME MORE CLOTHES [he is disguising himself having gone AWOL with Del’s help]

Cack: What’s her grouch?

Del: She’s pregnant.

Cack: No kidding.

These latter texts can be seen also to deepen and extend the presentation of the effects of war on women, an issue only marginally
present in the much less sympathetic early portrait of Irene in *The Floating World*. But *The Dudders* and *The Dud War* have a wider level of concern. The central image of both is the war within the war, the economic struggle of ordinary people to survive the manipulations of the rich and powerful. This is a theme developed in both scripts (but especially in *The Dud War*), where a clear indictment of capitalism emerges and a Brechtian-style parallel between big business and organized crime is made explicit. The stress in this later version, as I have said, falls on the incursion into wartime Newcastle of an advance guard for American organized crime, who find the army a useful cover for their activities, as this 1977 version plays with the multiple vernacular meanings of the word ‘dud’, which in Australian usage can mean variously to cause someone to fail or to misinform someone deliberately (‘to dud someone up’) or a thing or person that proves a failure (‘a real dud’). The war as viewed from Newcastle’s perspective is a ‘dud’ in both senses – the only shell fired at the town in anger, from an off-shore Japanese submarine, proved to be a dud, while the real conflict between the home-grown crims and the invading American mafiosi leaves the Novocastrians (as they grandiosely term themselves) dudged indeed.

Thus, in these later texts, just as in the earliest of the texts dealing with war, *The Floating World*, the stress is on the need to view the past not as a series of distant historical events but as a continuing force shaping the attitudes and policies of contemporary Australia. Read and produced in this way even *The Floating World*’s centre is not the final moment of existential despair, but the dialectic between that moment of personal agony and the play’s opening, with the ‘boardroom cowboys’ busily selling Queensland to the international businessmen (who happen ironically to be Japanese, but who might just as well be American, Singaporean or West German). So in these later texts there is powerful evidence of Romeril’s essentially political reading of the war tradition of Australians. For these texts war is a post-colonial and neo-colonial phenomenon nurtured deceptively within a nationalist concern with culture and identity which can disguise how the rulers of these societies are manipulated and ’dudged’ by international economic and social forces beyond their control. Such a politicized reading of war places Romeril squarely in opposition to the more Romantic and nationalist visions of even the consciously anti-war tradition in Australian writing. The existence of this powerful dissenting view has been obscured by the lack of interest shown in gathering and publishing the scripts of this neglected writer, a lack of interest reflected in the relative absence of productions of his work outside university campuses. Unfortunately there seems little chance that such work as the complex of scripts surrounding *The Dud War* will be published in the immediate future, so that they join the many scripts
from the less-well-known Louis Esson early pieces, through those of writers such as Mona Brand, Oriel Grey and many others, to have been ignored by recent accounts of our theatre.\(^5\) Playscripts suffer in this respect far more than even prose-fiction and poems, being deemed less marketable to a general public. As a result our history is the poorer and our perceptions of ourselves the less.\(^6\)

NOTES

1. Australia was unique in having a volunteer army for all of its conflicts up to the time of its involvement in the Vietnam War, with conscripted militia troops used only for Home Defence and, briefly, in the extension of this during the defence of New Guinea, itself then an Australian territory, during the Second World War.


3. The show was based loosely on this material, revised and altered to form a substantially different play which the students at Newcastle Drama Department performed during the writer-in-residency period Romeril spent there in 1977. The earlier version, *The Dudders* (written in collaboration with APG administrator John Timlin), a copy of which I also obtained from Newcastle Drama Department, was only performed in its entirety in Melbourne in December 1976 in association with the APG. They used the same theatre restaurant style they had developed with Jack Hibberd’s *Dimboola* and designed it like that show, to be popular and raise money. A shortened version under the title of *Overpaid, Oversexed and Overhere* had received an unpaid-for club performance in Sydney in late 1975-6, in a club owned, as Timlin suggests, by Geoffrey Edelsten (and which, Romeril gleefully relates in my 1986 interview with him, subsequently burned down; though not as a direct result of the show). As Timlin’s essay in the collection referred to in Note 6 makes clear, this was the first piece to deal with this material. Though Timlin recalls it as being titled *Over Here, Over There*, it is almost certainly the same piece to which Romeril refers in his 1986 interview.

4. War features in at least four of his major works (five if one counts the significant series of texts called *The Dud War* as a neglected major work, which I feel it is).

5. Evidence is increasingly emerging of the suppression of the extensive tradition of radical writing in Australian theatre during the pre-war period, especially in the thirties and forties. This is only part of the general neglect of the extensive body of texts for theatre produced during this period which the overworked emphasis on the New Wave of the 1960’s has obscured. Recent attention to such major collections as the Campbell Howard collection at the University of New England has questioned the assumption that the thirties and forties were fallow periods for Australian playwriting. In addition, the revival of the fortunes of the New Theatre in Sydney, the oldest theatre in Australia and one founded in a conscious program of political and committed theatre, has fostered an awareness of the neglected tradition of committed writing in the inter-war period. A pioneer study of the dissenting tradition in Australian cultural history such as David Walker’s *Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1976) sets the scene for this revision. Recent collections and articles on theatre have begun the necessary
process of re-assessment. See, eg., *Australian Drama 1920-1955*; Papers presented to the Campbell Howard Conference at UNE, Armidale, 1984; Dept. of Continuing Education; University of New England, Armidale, 1986; Ken Harper 'The Useful Theatre: The New Theatre Movement in Sydney and Melbourne 1935-1983' in *Meanjin*, 43, 1 (March 1984), pp. 57-73. But a great deal of recovery and reassessment has still to take place if a full account of this period is to emerge.

6. This piece was originally commissioned in 1986 for this collection of essays. Due to unavoidable delays in issuing this volume, permission was given to print the piece in the collection of essays *John Romeril* which I edited and which was published as No. 5 in the Australian Playwrights Monograph Series, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993).