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THEATRE IN THE LUCKY COUNTRY

The author, drama critic for Tribune and an actor and producer with Sydney New Theatre, discusses the situation in Australian theatre against its historical background.

OUR TENNIS PLAYERS dominate the world's courts; our golfers more than hold their own on international fairways; our jockeys rapidly make their run on the rails on European racetracks; Jack Brabham burns the bitumen at Minneapolis and Monte Carlo. As Donald Horne might have it, for 80 years or more sport has been the symbol of the Australian national ethos, the highest claim which we, a remote historical and political accident in the South Seas clinging desperately to the European tradition, might lay to international equality.

The remarkable development in recent years has been the recognition accorded to Australian artistic and cultural achievement throughout the world. Twenty years ago John Manifold could lament that Australia failed to export two of her best products: wine and poetry. In both of these civilised commodities, that position no longer obtains, and if you add to the poets the popularity abroad of artists like Nolan, Boyd, Dobell and Drysdale, singers like Joan Hammond and Joan Sutherland, dancers like Kathleen Gorham, musicians like the violinist Beryl Kimber and novelists like Patrick White, Hal Porter and Randolph Stow, you have a success story extraordinary for such a small and Johnny-come-lately nation.

The problems and pressures besetting the arts generally in Australia which force the writer to publish overseas and the painter to seek foreign patronage are worthy of separate study. But the fact remains that in recent years there has been something of a cultural renaissance in Australia, symptomatic of the country's increasing sophistication and maturity—a quite exciting process in which theatre, perhaps the most underprivileged and least esteemed of all the art forms, has shared.

Its development—in qualitative terms at least—over the past decade has meant that theatre has at long last come of age. Acting
and production standards have improved tremendously; coming back to Australia after four years’ absence, I was immediately struck by the level of the first two productions I saw upon arrival — the Melbourne Union Repertory’s version of Peter Schaeffer’s *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and Edward Albee’s *Tiny Alice* at the Old Tote in Sydney, both of which I felt would have compared favorably with anything to be seen overseas — certainly with several productions I saw in the West End and also with some of the best in Moscow. Australian actors have always been noted for their natural attack and virility — but this has now been tempered by a greater polish and poise, especially evident, for instance, in the elegance of Robin Lovejoy’s stylish production of Sheridan’s *School for Scandal* at the Old Tote earlier this year. Individual names spring to mind as being synonymous with quality: Peter O’Shaughnessy, Ron Haddrick, Edward Hepple, Mark MacManus, Ron Graham, Brian James, Dinah Shearing and Brigid Lenahan. There is also a considerable battery of younger actors of quite exciting potential — Ross Thompson, John Krummel, John Norman, David Turnbull, Carmen Duncan and Jennifer Hagan, to name but a few. And even that most conservative of managements, J. C. Williamson’s, traditionally prone to rely more on imported stars than local talent, has come to realise that we can supply the wherewithal ourselves to cope with overseas musicals following Jill Perryman’s success in *Funny Girl*.

Interest in the theatre has also increased proportionately, at least among certain strata of the community. The growth of world communications has meant a far greater familiarity with contemporary trends. Australian theatre-goers — now much more sophisticated and discriminating — no longer have to wait years — or maybe for ever — to see a new English, American or continental work. Many more young people are turning to the stage as a career, assisted — despite its substantial limitations — by the two-year course at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney, and encouraged also by the greater opportunities offering through the expansion of television. For the average professional, however, acting remains the same precarious and smell-of-an-oil-rag vocation it has always been; the acting trade perpetually resembles the waterfront during a bad season, without the benefit of appearance money. Playwrights, too, suffer the same disabilities: if the number of plays being written and submitted to theatrical managements were any barometer, Australian drama would be booming, but opportunities for the performance of Australian plays are tragically limited. Nevertheless, ever since the success of Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in the 1950’s, a number of local playes of merit have seen the light of production and helped to lay the basis of a contemporary indigenous drama.
The significance of *The Doll* as a turning point in the development of Australian drama cannot be overestimated. It was written and performed at a time when there was a resurgence of interest in things Australian and re-assertion of the Australian spirit and tradition in the face of growing economic, political and cultural domination by the American influence. In the theatre the groundwork had already been laid by Dick Diamond's *Reedy River* — first produced by New Theatre in 1953 — and in *The Doll* was a play equally Australian in its setting and yet universal in its simple yet poignant theme of the necessity of facing up to reality — a play which marked perhaps the most successful representation of ordinary working people, without condescension or self-consciousness, in Australian drama. It was followed by a spate of plays — all performed by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, in its best period — which, though varying widely in standard, dealt with aspects of contemporary Australian reality in a new and more sophisticated way: *The Shifting Heart, Curly on the Rack, The Bastard Country* and *The Slaughter of St. Theresa's Day*. Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* marked a new point of departure: the most accomplished of all these plays, it brought under searching examination not only the hallowed myth of Anzac Day.
but the conflict of attitudes between generations occurring at a time when Australia was just beginning to feel the complex effects on human relationships of the new technological age.

Seymour's play in a way foresaw — even allowing for the vast difference in outlook — the work of Patrick White, who, as in the novel, has exercised the major influence on Australian drama over the last few years. In western drama generally today, two main trends may be distinguished: one of a theatre of "commitment", proceeding from the standpoint of being in Donne's phrase, "involved in mankind", displaying a positive set of values and regarding the human conditions as being basically improvable (instanced by writers such as Arnold Wesker, Arthur Miller, Max Frisch, Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Schaeffer, Peter Weiss, Jean-Paul Sartre, the late Lorraine Hansberry and Bertolt Brecht, who though 11 years dead, through his posthumous revival in the west remains the most vital force in drama) and the other — exemplified by Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett and, in a different sense, by the Absurdist like Genet and Ionesco — obsessed by the gulf separating people in an increasingly atomised world, by the breakdown of communication, and by the mutual terror and destruction in human relationships. Much as I disagree with this latter school from the moral and philosophical point of view, it seems to me that it has as much claim to validity as the other, in that, however pessimistically, it accurately describes the state of the western world at this particular historical moment, with man becoming increasingly dehumanised and estranged from both his fellows and his society, and life for increasing numbers of people assuming a greater futility and emptiness. To a great extent, White mirrors this latter school in an unmistakably Australian setting: his outlook is basically misanthropic and his attitude to people often despairingly cruel, but in plays like The Season at Sarsaparilla and A Cheery Soul, he has come closer than any playwright to dissecting the false values of the Lucky Country, with the insular existence forced on the inhabitants of its sprawling suburbs and its lack of adherence to a concrete moral system. His influence is plainly discernible on the work of several younger playwrights, particularly Rod Milgate's hilarious though somewhat incomprehensible spoof A Refined Look at Existence — interestingly the only Australian play taken back for possible performance in his native Estonia by the Soviet director Voldemar Panso after his visit here late last year — and, in a different way, the searching historical analysis of the early days of New South Wales, Halloran's Little Boat, by the gifted young Catholic writer Thomas Keneally.

This new development of the theatre, then, is a thing of ups and downs, but nonetheless it is a development — and all the
Spoofing the great Australian myth — two policemen (Michael Boddy and Helmut Baikatis) carry out the body of (Martin Herris) Penthouse Champion — part-Aborigine, soldier, Australian — in Rod Milgate’s “A Refined Look at Existence” at the Jane St. Theatre, Sydney.

The result is that today the theatre-going habit is primarily a function of only a small section of the community — the upper and middle classes and the professional strata. I am referring here, of course, to the regular audiences of “serious” theatre rather than of the commercial theatre: it is a disturbing feature of modern life that what should be a mass activity, because it represents such
an important stream of mankind's cultural heritage, is the preserve of so few. The theatres themselves have contributed to this; they have tended to retreat continuously into remote corners of the cities. In the centre of Sydney, for instance, there is not one non-commercial professional theatre; one has to penetrate the distant grounds of the University of New South Wales or the meandering streets of Milson's Point or the depths of North Sydney to get to them. For the average industrial or white-collar worker from the western suburbs, a visit to one of them is a safari in itself, and an expensive and forbidding one at that: the rather precious atmosphere prevailing in them would be sufficient to deter the average non-habitue from a second trip.

The reason for this depressing situation seems to me to lie in the nature of capitalist society itself. The existence under capitalism of "two cultures" — not in the C. P. Snow sense, but in that of one for the educationally and socially privileged and another for the culturally dispossessed — has become increasingly pronounced in recent years. A most dangerous polarisation of society is occurring with only a minority — admittedly a growing one, but still a mere fraction of the total population — having decent access to culture in its fullest sense, while for the vast majority a bread-and-circuses diet is intended to suffice. This inherent feature of capitalism has been accentuated by the rambling outwards growth of the cities, with the exigencies of paying off a home and the other personal comforts to which people are entitled precluding any real cultural enjoyment, whether of literature, art or theatre, through economic pressures alone. Television has dove-tailed neatly into this misleading "affluence": for millions of Australians it has become the only form of cultural appreciation, a form costing only as much as the licence and the monthly time-payment, and, despite the many good programs filtering through, its basic fare is as shallow and pernicious as the society which produces it. Add to this the influence of the "club sub-culture", as it has been called, as the only other means of suburban diversion, and you have a situation where any genuine form of cultural expression must of necessity fight a valiant but losing battle to penetrate the mass of the people and must eventually become the property of an exclusive and fortunate elite — not just in Australia, but in any other capitalist land.

Though socialism, I am convinced, is the only means by which culture can ever become a genuinely popular phenomenon, palliatives can and should be effected, and the socialist movement should fight tooth and nail for a meaningful program for the development of the arts. Apart from the aspects of content and quality involved, the major barrier is a material one: faced with burgeoning costs, the theatre, both professional and amateur, is in dire need of
extensive financial assistance. Government subsidisation in this field has increased greatly in recent years, but it is still painfully inadequate: large amounts of money are necessary to establish at least one full-time professional company, operating preferably on a repertory basis, in every capital city and some of the major provincial centres as well; to provide grants for Australian playwrights and to help underwrite productions — particularly amateur — of untried Australian plays, which, because of a peculiar pre-

Vietnam on stage: Parliamentarian Henry McKay (Michael Duffield, centre) and his family, including protester Tony (Dennis Miller, left) argue out the pros and cons of the war while a bewildered Yuk (David Turnbull, centre) listens — a scene from Private Yuk Objects, by Alan Hopgood, presented by the Melbourne Union Repertory Company

judice against the local product and its lack of "name" are a serious economic gamble for any management; to finance companies to tour the hinterland and to extend the still meagre facilities for the training of actors. Hand in glove with this should go a drive for funds to finance the production of Australian television drama and the training of local TV playwrights and directors, and, perhaps even more importantly, the establishment, under official patronage, of an Australian cinema industry, the lack of which is one of the country's most shameful deficiencies. With the spiralling of governmental budgets, there is nothing to indicate that these demands are anything but practicable and realisable, even under
capitalism, and it is by no means to beat a propagandist drum to urge that the $7.8 million per annum necessary to meet this total program could not be quite easily lopped off the mammoth "defence" allocation.

A thorough reformation of the agencies through which sponsorship of theatre is at present effected is also in order. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust is the major avenue through which government assistance to theatre is channelled, but since its establishment in 1955, it has largely disappointed the high hopes placed in it. In the first five years of its existence, under the imaginative leadership of Hugh Hunt, its progress was extremely promising, but since his departure in 1960 the Trust's effective contribution has diminished considerably: moving from its white elephant Elizabethan Theatre at Newtown, it failed to make any real impact with its part-time lease of the much more realistic Palace Theatre in the heart of Sydney and consequently retreated via a marquee in Rushcutters Bay to the 180-seat Old Tote at the University of NSW, together with an even more inaccessible 80-seat ancillary unit in Jane Street, Kensington, neither of which operates on a completely full-time basis. Its productions at these two theatres have been first rate, but the Trust is known to be riddled with serious internal conflict and bureaucratism which have vitiated much of its work. Its official subsidies from all sources have risen from something like $160,000 in 1955 to just on $700,000 ten years later, accomplishing a total loss in 1965 of $403,000, most of it on opera and ballet; losses on opera and ballet are only to be expected, but the proportion of its revenue devoted to these two forms vis-a-vis drama has been questioned, and in a prolonged controversy last year it was accused in responsible quarters of inefficient management. But the Trust's most serious weakness has been its remoteness from the community generally: its board of directors reads like a roll-call of captains of industry, knights and socialites, with a couple of academics and trade union leaders (Messrs. Albert Monk and Lloyd Ross) thrown in for good measure; its annual general meetings have often been quite ludicrous affairs, with its balance sheets and reports disposed of in half-an-hour or so. One feels that its structure needs complete reconstitution, to incorporate a more representative cross-section of society capable of providing more dynamic leadership, or, failing that, as has been alternatively suggested, its dissolution and replacement by a body akin to the Arts Council of Great Britain, with a greater degree of responsibility and lacking the self-perpetuating powers of the Trust. The announcement by the Commonwealth Government recently of the establishment of a national council of the performing arts under the chairmanship of Dr. H. C. Coombs (the present chairman of the Trust) is a welcome step in itself, but it will mean little if it is not accompanied by some re-organisation of the Trust itself.