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Abstract

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INTERVIEW

David Williamson was guest professor at Aarhus University in the Spring term of 1978. The interviewers were post-graduate students and members of staff.

You have spoken of an 'Australian uniqueness'. What do you think this is, and what has it meant for your writing?

Well, Australia is a relatively new country and was first founded dubiously, if you could use that word, because it was originally a convict dumping ground. Then there was a gold rush in the 1850s in which every greedy person came flocking across to find gold and so we've had an obsession with material gain and money ever since, I think. I'm joking, there are a lot of really good things about Australia but it is a strange country in a lot of ways and I didn't realize it was until I started travelling abroad seeing other countries in action.

Does it affect your writing?

Yes.

A lot of us knew that the writing coming from Europe and even from America was interesting and arresting but it didn't capture us. We knew that there was something different about Australia so we felt a sense of frustration at only seeing or at mainly seeing the work of other countries. And we felt a drive to say, 'No. This is not what we are like'. We appreciated that it was good writing, but we were different and we wanted to explore the sort of ways in which we were different. Because although there has been a lot of poetry and to some extent Australian prose writing, drama has been very late in getting started. Australian drama has in the past tended to flare up a little and then die away. This meant that at the time in the late 60s when we started writing there was very little Australian drama going on, we felt a great lack and wanted to fill the void.

When you write a play, how do you work? Do you have clear cut ideas before you start or do themes, plot, and characters develop as you write?

I tend to look for arresting dramatic situations. I wait until a sort of bell rings in my head to use a crude analogy, perhaps a snatch of a story I've heard. *The Removalists* started when a removalist told me a story. It seemed very gripping, but he didn't particularly think it was anything out of the ordinary, it was just a day in his life. But when I started to hear the story I thought, 'My God, that's dramatic'. So I'm rather looking for dramatic situations initially, I think. I tend to start from character rather than theme, I find if you start with a theme and say, 'I want to point out that something is wrong with something', then the characters tend to fit into the theme and don't have a life of their own.

Is there a difference in writing for the stage and for the screen?

Yes, I think that on stage you can still investigate language and the way people use words to achieve their ends, but I think that film is so much tied up with the visual image that you can't afford the same density of language on the screen. So usually when I've converted a play into a film, which I've done twice with *The Removalists* and *Don's Party*, the general trend is less words. The screen just won't take the number of words that the stage will, because the audience is looking for visual images. They want to see the camera doing something interesting, they just don't want to see heads talking.

How do you explain the theme of human aggression which dominates a lot of your plays?

Well, it's quite an aggressive society under the surface of friendly mateship as we call it. Everyone is supposed to be everyone's friend in Australia, and we are all good mates. We don't talk about religion, we don't talk about politics, we don't talk about sex or anything that's likely to cause a discussion, because once a discussion gets going in Australia it's likely to be very heated, indeed. In fact some social clubs have rules on the wall that say, 'When you are within these walls you will not discuss politics, religion or sex'. So there is a lot of potential social aggression. You're not likely to get murdered in Australia, or you are seventeen times less likely to be murdered than you are if you're in America. But there's a lot of social aggression just underneath the surface. People love arguing and shouting at each other.

Have you ever considered writing in a different genre? Novels? Poetry?

Well, I never considered poetry, but I certainly started off in my early days wanting to be a novelist, but it wasn't my scene. My prose wasn't great and so when I got involved in student theatre I suddenly found the area I wanted to be in. I used to write sketches for student reviews and I experienced the feeling that an audience

was responding directly to your work. You could be there and see whether they were liking it or hating it. It was a good feeling, a very direct sort of feeling, you know. So I decided I'd rather write drama.

Is anything new coming up? Have you for instance been inspired by your stay in Denmark?

Yes, my stay in Denmark has really forced me to think quite a lot, and the thinking is still going on, because they are such vastly different societies in a way. We are such a new country and I think there's a fundamental difference between the new countries like America and Australia and the old European countries. I was telling you today that I went into the Danish farm house which had been in the hands of the family for four generations. There was a family history going right back, and that sense of permanence and solidity just doesn't exist in the Australian environment. There is a certain calmness, common sense attitude to life, I think you could summarize Denmark as 'common sense', not being rude but very rational, very matter of fact. So I've been very interested in the stay here. I've really enjoyed it and loved the country, but you couldn't come to a more different culture in a way. It's quite an extreme opposite.

With which of your plays have you been most satisfied?

Well, most writers say the last play, because to them they've learned from the plays that went before. Certainly, I think technically *The Club* is more polished than the early plays because you do learn a bit from every play, but whether it is important in terms of its theme and statement is another matter which is very difficult for a writer to judge. A writer can look back on his early plays and say, 'That was a rather crude technique I was using there', but people will still say that was a more important play, because it was saying more important things. So often the writer is

wrong about which of his works is the best. I just think *The Club* is the best piece of technical writing I've done. But whether it's the most important play I've done I don't know.

Do you have some specific message in your plays, and does the person Williamson crop up as a commentator in the plays or are you completely detached?

I'll answer the last bit first. Some of the plays have been too autobiographical and retrospective, I think. *What if you Died Tomorrow* was too close to the bones. Two of the characters in the play were fairly obviously closely drawn from life. Luckily my parents accepted it. Their friends kept going along and recognising them, and ringing them up and saying 'That was a really good portrayal of you', and Kristin felt she was in it too. That was very close and I didn't want to do that again. And I certainly have had characters that I've drawn partly from my own experience.

Now to the first part of the question. What I'm trying to say is that perhaps a lot of middle-class life in Australia is faintly ludicrous. I think I have got a slightly ironic stand in the play and am saying I've done these things, people I know have done these things, but if you look at it for a long view, behaviour as well is rather farcical or funny in some ways because there are societies that do have real problems, like India where most people are starving, and I think that it's a little bit self-indulgent in a bourgeois society to think that you've got problems.

We would like to discuss the question of naturalism, satire and farce. You have said:

*My writing career was greatly helped by the unrelenting and faultlessly naturalistic production given to *The Coming of Stork* at La Mama which reproduced the atmosphere of flat-sharing males with gripping authenticity . . . the occasions when I have been most disappointed with productions of my plays have been when the playing style has degenerated into the farcical.*

Likewise John Bell in connection with his direction of The Removalists:

We decided on stark naturalism, exploiting the play's comedy only where it seemed absolutely appropriate and spontaneous.

Could we begin by discussing this point in connection with The Removalists? We have talked about Kenny's dying, resurrection and dying again. How much of that pattern did you have from the original story?

The original story was very simple. Nothing about a person being killed. It's purely my own dramatic invention. I thought of it as good irony. One has the impression that Kenny is now finally on top of the police. And then he dies. It usually works very well with audiences. They laugh right throughout this which is rather satirical surrealism. It's the first panic scene of the play and the audiences laugh. It is in the genre of black satire rather than straight naturalism. I think that none of my plays is strictly naturalistic. The characters are all larger than life in the tradition going back to Aristophanes who treats larger-than-life characters for satirical effect.

But that means that the characters are types not fully developed.

That's the same with Aristophanes and Ben Jonson. You need fully drawn characters only if you want to give a naturalistic picture. I try to get into that area between naturalism and satire so that the audience never quite knows what the characters are.

But your plays were successfully staged 'in a strictly naturalistic way'.

The text itself tends towards larger-than-life characters and satire, but when the players also lift their style to high farcical levels, the cumulative effect is overplaying. The comment you refer to is related rather to the acting than the play itself. I don't think that my plays need much more than a naturalistic playing style. If you get the satirical text and the overplaying style then you move into

the farcical.

You don't feel any discrepancy between writing style and playing style when they are different?

No, I think within the written structure of the characters there are enough indicators of the fact that they are larger-than-life characters without an exaggerated playing style. This may be detrimental to the play, e.g. the playing time of *Don's Party* lengthened by some twenty minutes during the run because the actors found more and more ways of getting longer and longer laughs.

*Did you intend the effect in *The Removalists* to be strongly physical or subduedly ominous?*

John Bell who did the Sydney direction opted for fairly direct and physical effects. Fairly energetic people were in a real panic state on the stage. It creates a rather comic effect if you see two policemen chasing each other across the stage as hens with their heads cut off. But the possibilities in direction are infinite. So an ominous Pinteresque Simmonds is a possible interpretation, yes.

How serious are you as a social critic?

I never claimed to be a social realist. You can be a satirist criticising society without being a social realist. The audiences are forced at some stage to review and examine their responses to a play. I think that the impact of *The Removalists* in Australia was such that it created introspection about society. The stereotypes seemed true and close enough to the audiences' feelings of aggression. Thus it caused a self-searching atmosphere in the audience which is always the satirist's aim. Actually when the play was first in rehearsal they wanted me to change it into a social tract with Kenny as the good and victorious working class hero.

But shouldn't this play bring about a change of attitude in the audience by showing alternative values which you also mention in your play: reasonableness and humanity? These are not dramatized in the play.

I think – or at least I hope – that the alternative values were inherent in the audience rather than in the play. I didn't want little 'angelic' portions in the play showing what you should do.

What possible pun is there in the title of Don's Party and the disintegration of the Labour Party and the party held at Don's place? Didn't you just take the election night as a frame for the action which is concerned with something quite different?

Yes, I think one of the points in the play is the relative indifference to the political event and the election results. Actually none of the party are going to be materially or psychologically affected to any great degree by the election results. Perhaps a few days of depression, similar to the effect of their football team having lost. It's not a crucial concern to their life styles who wins.

And that is your criticism of the society: It's your own fault that things are so bad, you say.

There is no direct parallel between their lives and the political system. I don't know whether you can lay the blame on the political system for their particular way of behaving at the party. The intention I had was primarily to have a look at the interesting social patterns of behaviour. It's not a play of revelation of character, of tracing down antecedents of their present behaviour. It's just a description of the situation. My plays are of ongoing social interaction rather than naturalistic revelation of character. I think one cannot give a clear-cut character description on the background of so many current psychological personality analyses. And the political life is in a state of total confusion, too.

To what extent would you like to be your own director? Do you write the play as a kind of short-hand feeling that this is the way ideally the play should be acted out?

I wouldn't mind sometime to direct one of my own plays, but I have no great urge right now, because the directors who do my plays in Australia – two of them – are very good and I trust them so that I don't even go to rehearsals. They are more inventive than I could be.

Do you believe in group inspiration?

No, I've seen bad productions, but it's a question of finding a good director.

How much room for interpretation do you write into your plays? You make it fairly obvious what reactions the characters should show and what lies behind them.

In the two early plays about 1970 I had just been through a period of alternative theatre with a Maoist group and I was a bit defensive during that period. Directors had suggested that I shouldn't put any stage direction into the text, but having seen rather gross productions, I decided to put in how *I* felt that the characters should react and behave. I don't think I would do it the same way today.

What do you mean by alternative theatre?

Well, I was a member of an APG Collective and they were ideologically Maoist and believed that every decision should be made by the group and that there should be no roles and no directors and no writers. It was a harrowing experience and has probably soured me against the Maoist view-point for all times. Because there were power-plays going on in that group, and yet the ideology was that there weren't any power-games!

Was ideological censure also applied to the content of your plays?

Yes, they re-wrote *Don's Party* for me. That nearly finished it and nearly finished me as a playwright for all time. They took out all the dramatically good stuff and made it clear that I could just provide four lines of dialogue now and again. There really were the most brutal and primitive power plays going on, so I withdrew very soon.

Some critics still regard your plays as socially engaged and political plays.

Yes. I think it's true that the plays can give impetuses to self-examination of the society. Any satirist can do this through his writings. I keep going back to Aristophanes for to me his plays are just as contemporary as they were 3,000 years ago. The way he attacks pomposity and the other ills in his society. I think strictly political plays don't get anywhere in Australia whilst indirect attacks achieve their goal much more effectively.

Another question in connection with satire. It has been said that satirists are basically conservative in outlook. What is your opinion?

They possibly are. I believe that satire is basically ambivalent. You really don't know what the answers are

My plays are a celebration and criticism of Australian society at the same time. The theatre is basically a place where people should enjoy themselves for a few hours. This has always been the case with Anglo-Saxon Theatre in contradistinction to the Germanic type of theatre where the theatre is a shrine of relevance that people must come out better people than they entered.

But here you show your basic ambivalence. You want to have your cake and eat it.

Yes.