

# *Falling Between Stools: The Theatre of Janis Balodis*

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JANIS BALODIS is widely known in Australia for his much-performed play *Too Young for Ghosts* (1985). This play, a respected theatrical achievement, is the only one of his seven theatre works to date to have received post-performance circulation via publication<sup>1</sup> but remains little commented upon in academic criticism. Hence not much general discussion has been generated about Balodis's drama, which is exciting, theatrically rich and accomplished, and in the context of recent Australian theatre, innovative in both themes and treatment. His work is of discursive as well as intrinsic interest, not least because of his ambiguous status as a NESB (person of Non-English-Speaking Background) whose first language is English and who writes for the mainstream theatre. I wish to problematize the ideological and structural factors by which the critical discourses of the work of an Australian playwright are constructed. In the case of Balodis, the principal ones of interest are those of multiculturalism, stylistic questions of "naturalism" and gender.

Balodis's appointment in 1988 as Associate Director of the Melbourne Theatre Company is, from the point of view of script publication, a mixed blessing. It provides a secure financial base for his writing; however, the MTC has an extensive programme arrangement with Playbill. Hence Currency's valuable Playscript series, which was not in operation at the time of Balodis's first play *Backyard* (1980) and which would be ideal for *Wet and Dry* (1987) or *Heart for the Future* (1989), is not a possible publication outlet at present. Without published scripts, dissemination via the "ideological state apparatus" of education is out of the question, despite the hope of one reviewer of *Too Young for Ghosts*

that its concentration on European migrants (rather than the Irish or Aboriginals, whom the writer believes are fairly well covered), might “address the imbalance” if used in school curricula (McGovern 6). Given the straitened plight of Australian small-press publishing, theories of hegemony or conspiracy are not necessarily required to explain the comparative neglect of one of our most significant playwrights. Yet neglected he has been, in terms not only of sustained critical comment but of follow-up productions of plays whose quality and relevance to postcolonial theatre are considerable. The question of discursive boundaries seems of decisive importance: whose precisely is the responsibility, within current discourses, for commentary on Balodis? Is he to be classified as a “migrant writer” or as a “mainstream Australian playwright”? Despite, and indeed because of, the currency of discussions about Australian multiculturalism, these definitions appear to impose as many restrictions as they do opportunities.

The main source of present evidence for Balodis’s critical fortune is journalistic criticism, a source of far from negligible value given the vividness and immediacy of these responses to the performance event and to circumambient cultural concerns. They form the primary theatre-historical archive, the first step in the process of constructing the public persona and received agenda surrounding a writer’s output. After that comes — hopefully — academic criticism, of which Tony Bennett writes:

. . . literary criticism is not an expensive luxury. To the contrary, as what has proved to be the most potent vehicle for the peddling of all sorts of ideological wares and mythologies, it is money well spent. The uses to which literary texts are put within the social process constitute the most privileged mode of reproduction and social relay of the bourgeois myths which disperse men and women . . . into a frozen world of idealist and essentialist categories. Myths of creation, of genius, of man’s essential nature, of the eternality and universality of the forms by which we express ourselves are all strongly supported in this way. (169-70)

Thus, journalism is not alone complicit in promoting consolatory or admonitory myths, although mainstream Australian press critics have certainly engaged in this task in some notable cases. In Tony Mitchell’s study of the critical construction of Michael Gow, he

demonstrates the press reaction to Gow's plays which worked to foreground both their engaging and celebratory naturalistic textures and their bold intertextuality with Greek and Shakespearean theatre, read as bourgeois-approved "high art." One could counter these consensual readings with others which point out the dystopic and entropic thrust of his plays since *The Kid* (1983): the persistent motif of the death of the young — whether of Aspro of *The Kid* or of Lynch of *1841* (1988) — or the ruthless clearing of native vegetation whether by the invading forces of suburban niceness (in *Away*) or of thuggish profiteering (in *1841*). However, as Mitchell demonstrates, the press critiques thrust on the playwright's shoulders the ponderous weight of the main theatrical burden of 1980s' frustrated utopian hopes. Hence *1841*, which, as I have said in "The Melodrama of Defeat," flaunts its dystopic project rather blatantly, was judged a disappointment not only for theatrical shortcomings but because it did not obey criteria which had been protectively assembled to ward off the stresses and contradictions of Australia's post-deregulation era. Criticism, especially when it strives to know something of its own ideology, is entitled to situate theatre in the arena of public debate; however, less concentration on Gow as a proponent of "Shakespearean" harmonies and exquisite paradoxes may ultimately have been more enabling to his public perception as a writer.

In the case of Balodis, his critical fortune is complicated by the proliferating definitions of ethnicity and multiculturalism which may be as equally disabling as empowering in situating his theatre. The tangle of frequently compromised political interests implicit in the "multiculturalism" debate are summarized by Stephen Castles and the other authors of *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*, and this article will do no more than allude to some of the intricacies of their argument. Briefly, the current term "ethnic" solves little, being a logical nonsense in having no antonym. As a recent euphemism for people who in the 1950s' wave of European immigration were termed wogs or reffos, "ethnic" is considered, at least by Dimitris Tsaloumas, as "objectionable, silly and offensive." He continues: "The term 'ethnic' distinguishes between the classes of citizens in this country . . . it's the Aborigines, Us, and the Wogs" (Cas-

tan, "Interview" 13). "Multicultural," since the mid-1970s the bureaucratic favourite, ambiguously advances the debate, being another attempt at a marker distinguishing certain groups of Australians from others. Many observers would probably not consider an anglophone white British or New Zealand migrant as "multicultural," thus revealing the ethnocentric biases of the term. The generally unmarked groups, moreover, supposedly form an unproblematic monolith called "Anglo-Celts," thus the multiculturalism discourse also works to occlude significant and endemic race, class, and ethnic tensions of post-settlement Australian history. Does the argument attempt to distinguish, in an essentialist sense, who *is* "a multicultural" (that is, not an "Anglo-Celt") by language, ethnicity, or by culture? "Multiculturalism" cannot decide, nor does it consider those other determining factors like class, gender, region, or religion which enter into the discursive construction of all citizens. Consignment of Aboriginal peoples to this category obliterates their specific history by classing them as just another "ethnic minority," and so they vigorously contest the "multicultural" ascription.

Older white Australians may long for the 1950s when migrants of all backgrounds were called "New Australians," and their impatience with classification manias which threaten to atomize (endlessly) is understandable. This, of course, is a comfortable opinion when (like the present writer) one is not oneself of that group deemed to require periodic re-definition. On the contrary side, Manfred Jurgensen argues a telling case against the collapsing of all writers into the false universal of "Australian Literature," a project which pretends to speak for all but in whose construction non-Anglophone writers played little part. He compares it with feminist arguments against "universal" and "eternal" (meaning androcentric) literature, which aspires to speak for all but which suppresses the female voice. Arguing for the use of the term "multicultural writer," he states that "... the specificity, the cultural uniqueness and individuality of artists are brushed aside, ignored or destroyed in the name of an 'Australian Literature' which previously had no place for them" (Jurgensen 84-86). This anti-canonical stance argues that, discriminatory and confused as these terminologies may seem, the need to mark out this particular area

of writing will probably endure for some time to come. But if, as Con Castan argues in his study of the writer Vasso Kalamaras, one defines the two enduring traditions of Australian writing as the settler and the native, then migrant literature can be fairly called "Australian" (*Conflict* 42-49),<sup>2</sup> while avoiding the totalizing project which Jurgensen decries in some usages of this term.

Balodis could thus be seen as a playwright in the "native" Australian tradition. No attempt has been made at present to situate his plays within the growing body of theatre work most identified with "ethnic" writing — plays written in a mixture of English and other languages whose subject is frequently the migrant experience — but a case may eventually be made for reading his work within this context. In this tradition, there are, for example, Tes Lyssiotis's women-centred plays *I'll Go to Australia and Wear a Hat*, *Hotel Bonegilla* and *The Forty Lounge Cafe* (1990), which examine the experiences of her mother's generation of migrants. Sydney's Sidel-track Theatre, with its informed social awareness, has produced incisive plays such as the 1983 *Out From Under* and the 1987 *Kin*, which address the daily and workplace concerns of its inner-urban audiences in popular styles with dialogue in English and various community languages. Antonietta Morgillo's bilingual *The Olive Tree* (1990), written with and for Adelaide's Doppio Teatro, combines English and Italian dialogue in a story involving three generations of women. Perhaps because of their community theatre industrial base, their working-class and feminist themes and their multilingualism, these scripts, respected and popular with audiences though they are, seem consigned to the hallowed ghetto of "multicultural writing" and have found only impermanent homes in Australia's mainstream theatre repertoires. Balodis, on the other hand, after some community and collaborative writing in the early 1980s, has subsequently situated his own work in the context of mainstage theatre, a position which entails its own risk of marginalization and misreadings.

In the last few years, as a tentative and maybe provisional solution to the terminological problem, there has emerged the acronym "NESB." So Balodis jokingly calls himself a Nesbian ("Projecting the Inner World" 8), since although North Queensland-born and Anglophone from birth, he is the first-generation descendant of

Latvian migrants. He has responded to the question whether he intended his plays to educate and create political awareness, as well as to entertain: "What probably I am more concerned with is self-definition" ("Interviewed" 83). Given the discursive cross-currents in which his position as playwright is constructed, this response may be construed, not as a symptom of run-of-the-mill bourgeois narcissism, but the locating of a central, compelling and structurally-imposed ambiguity:

I started writing as a way of defining how I fall between stools, in a cultural sense, and in a search for some place and identity in Australia. For the first twenty-six years of my life I always thought of myself as a foreigner in Australia, even though the foreign community I came from was very tiny: two Latvian families and half a dozen hard-drinking bachelors in a population of about two or three thousand people. . . . Maybe thirty or forty per cent of that population was a cultural mix: Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs and Finns. So it wasn't as though I was part of a minority; although the Latvians themselves were very few, there was a large migrant mixture. I guess I thought of myself as belonging to the migrants rather than to the Australians. And then I went to England in 1976 and discovered that I was very, very Australian. After spending three and a half years in England I came back, and even part of my decision to return was somehow to sort out what I was; was I a wog or was I an Australian?

("Projecting the Inner World" 7)

Self-definition is in fact the central quest of the character Maaruf the Cobbler in his 1984 play *Summerland*, written in collaboration with Brisbane's TN Company. This broadly theatrical piece uses the metaphor of a life transformational seminar, with the *Arabian Nights* celebrity Sindbad as Master of Ceremonies. It employs a delightful and possibly over-exuberant use of farce, with the device of a life-sized puppet figure as Maaruf's alter ego. There is nothing of consoling bourgeois naturalism in the formal encoding of *Summerland*, nor in his previous TN play, *Happily Never After* (1982), in which various characters from Grimm's fairy tales, marooned on an island and in justifiable trepidation at the grisly fates and mutilations their authors have in store for them, re-enact the stories in an attempt to re-inscribe their history with more hopeful outcomes. This particular postcolonialist style exercise in "writing back" to the hegemonic narratives (Ashcroft 6-7)

turns, however, into black farce, with generic parodies of *film noir* and of the “whodunnit,” as all the characters in turn fall prey, in various outrageous ways including exploding wooden legs, to a mysterious killer in their midst.

Interestingly, one reviewer of *Summerland* found its politics bankrupt, declaring that it “preach[ed] a message of self-improvement by individual action” (Dickson 23). Recently, Balodis maintains that *Summerland* is as much a creative exploration of the personal growth philosophy as a satire of it, declaring he found it richer theatrically to accept the idea and see where it took him. He also explains the genesis of *Summerland* in the conservative and deregulated political climate of Queensland during the Bjelke-Petersen government with its paper millionaires and Sanctuary Cove<sup>3</sup> mentality (Kelly, “Projecting the Inner World” 15-22). But *Summerland* does have serious ambitions — as Dickson correctly discerns — since self-definition cannot but attain political resonance in the career of a first-generation migrant writer. Features such as the rather carnivalesque appropriation of canonical texts (Grimms’ and the *Arabian Nights*) which occur in these two early plays, not to mention the classic topoi of the restless quest/journey (between the two countries of Summerland and Gastralgia), and of isolation and madness (*Happily Never After*), can be seen as operating within the central traditions of canonical “Australian literature,” and also to sit comfortably within existing models of Australian writing as a form of postcolonial writing.

One of the longest-running cultural-political battles in Australian dramatic criticism since the early 1970s remains that between proponents of naturalism and anti-naturalism, and Balodis has been in the firing line from both sides. The influential critic Harry Kippax set the agenda in his review of the premiere at Sydney’s Nimrod Downstairs of his first play *Backyard* (1980), writing that it dealt with “naturalism and low life,” and that the character Pencil was a throwback to male chauvinist characters of the kind that Katherine Susannah Prichard dramatized in the 1930s — presumably he has in mind her Lawrentian *Brumby Innes* (1980). Casting may have been significant in Kippax’s implicit reading of Pencil as the central figure, since the part was taken by Bryan Brown, who already carried a vast semiotic

cluster of “star” signs (see Dyer) to do with certain constructions of working-class Australian masculinity and heroic individuality. *Backyard* is set among working-class characters in a small town not unlike Tully in Northern Queensland, and does in part deal with gender conflict and macho behaviour, culminating in the pregnant Dorothy taking up Pencil’s rifle and firing four shots offstage, followed by a blackout. At whom she is firing, or to what effect, is left ambiguous.

It is arguable that from a naturalistic viewpoint *Backyard* portrays a biologically-overdetermined and blocked situation, in that Dorothy’s only option appears to be violence. This is to ignore its status as a constructed piece of theatre with a traditional — even Chekhovian — ending typical of a first work. Yet the script reveals anything but a lugubrious slice of life among the lowly which metropolitan theatre-goers might safely patronize. There are wit and irony in abundance, with insistent if slightly occult symbolism involving pigeons, a foetus, and a mysterious female tramp figure called Sandshoeboots (the first of the author’s Beckettian homages) who acts as, and may be, God herself. Despite the play’s sociologically cramped setting the dramaturgy is too allusive and sparse to be collapsed into a reductively naturalistic reading, although the Nimrod’s set design favoured this interpretation by its suburban material clutter, with an entire Holden car as centrepiece of its tiny playing stage. Balodis says he wrote *Backyard* on returning from England in 1979, while experiencing the hyper-real traveller’s vision of the long-familiar suddenly skewed at a slightly oblique angle: “It was about the things I loved and hated about Australia and about the relationships between Australian men and Australian women” (“Interviewed” 81). Pursuit of these two themes throughout Balodis’s repertoire would itself be a fruitful exercise, and indeed the discursive difficulties of dealing with gender will be dealt with below.

*Too Young for Ghosts* tightens and advances Balodis’s theatricality, employing time and character shifts which move the plot between Latvian refugees in a Stuttgart displaced persons’ camp in 1947, their migration as unskilled labourers to the North Queensland canefields in 1948-49, and Ludwig Leichhardt’s second expedition through this area in 1845 and its encounters with



the Aborigines. Thematic doubling aids in foregrounding the relativity of personality and history as the "ghosts" of past and present encounter each other in the unmapped "territories" of displacement and migration. While some of the migrants opt for survival and transformation in their new landscape, others cannot break the links with the past. Temporal and spatial boundaries erode, opening up the play with rich allusiveness. It is this play that most obviously places Balodis within a contemporary Australian tradition of mainstage poetic writing which opts for theatricality, intertextuality, fantasy, and mythical resonance; plays set usually in an outdoor environment which suggests the dominance — and influence — of landscape over character. Dorothy Hewett's *The Man from Muckinupin* (1980), Patrick White's *Signal Driver* (1983), Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age* (1985), Gow's *On Top of the World* (1986), and David Malouf's *Blood Relations* (1988) are other significant plays which refuse the closed textures of naturalism and bourgeois self-examination for a more resonant encounter with the ambiguities of Australia's history.

Stylistic questions of naturalism, however, remain troubled ones for our critical discourse. Deviations from what is perceived as naturalism, and seemingly occasional adherence to it, are alike greeted with ambiguous acclaim. It is interesting that a later play by Balodis, *Wet and Dry*, whose cleanly-written and symbolic dramaturgy resembles *Backyard* much more than the exuberant popular theatricality of the two Brisbane plays (and of his 1982 Darwin play, *Beginning of the End*, itself dealing with a failed settlement in an intransigent environment), was judged by Paul McGillick as too naturalistic. In his account of the 1987 MTC production of *Wet and Dry*, McGillick finds the opening theatricality brilliant, but believes that the play's main action takes an unfortunate psychologizing turning. He would have liked to see "less emphasis on psychological truth and more on dramatic shape and rhythm" (McGillick 11). A critic reads within his own preferred mode of theatre; and McGillick's desire for non-mimetic theatricality is one nurtured by the work of many significant 1980s Australian playwrights — White, Malouf, Gow, Hewett, De Groen, Sewell, and Nowra. Production decisions have their volatile part to play in a critic's decoding, but Balodis's semi-epic and semi-

realistic writings seem to leave some observers stranded between two antinomial stylistic descriptions of naturalism or its supposed converse. Here again, the reception of Balodis's writing seems to fall between two stools: stools carpentered over the last decade and a half in the mainstream critical discourses on the new Australian theatre, and well-polished by debate about the ideological implications of stylistic choices in the plays of Williamson, the Pram/La Mama group of the early 1970s, the mid-seventies' New Wave, the political empowerment of "minorities" through community theatre, and sundry other concerns.<sup>4</sup>

The reception of Balodis's *Heart for the Future* (1989), commissioned as MTC's five-hundredth production, has further compounded the duality in his discursive positions. More insistently than any other recent Australian play, *Heart for the Future* foregrounds the society of the spectacle, the constructed nature of the image, the fictionality of narrative, and the instability of identity. Alma De Groen's *Rivers of China* (1988) broke into experimental formal areas in mainstage writing, and Balodis's play is if anything more adventurous. Rosemary Neill, referring to Tony Tripp's set, wrote that it suggested "the fracturing of self in post-modern society" (Neill 12), and her term "post-modern" enables some contextualizing and investigation for those who find our mainstream theatre formally and ideologically unadventurous. In a telling statement on Balodis's ambivalence she also finds the two stools unsuccessfully negotiated:

Perhaps my chief reservation about *Heart for the Future* is that in the second half, Balodis somehow sacrifices elements of human palpability on his philosopher's stone. For while devices such as stream-of-consciousness narrative and switching from live to video performance repel naturalism, other aspects of the play endorse it. (12)

It is interesting that she too cannot get stylistic formalism and what McGillick calls "psychology" out of a polarized relationship into some sort of common project. Helen Thomson, on the other hand, found the play and production "unadventurous and conservative" (Thomson, Rev. 10), so it is difficult to gauge within what common stylistic or thematic presuppositions these judgments are being made.

*Heart for the Future* moves between live performed action on-stage, to (presumably “genuine”) video footage of the main character, Helen, a long-distance runner. There is also “faked” video footage of another character, the Actress, running as Helen to present to the viewers an acceptable public image of their adulated sportswoman. On one occasion, however, the Actress is seen on video playing Helen, but this time no longer acting but “running for her life.” When Helen has a breakdown while running across the Nullarbor and disappears, the Producer “retires” her — meaning the Actress — into a popular soap opera based on the incidents of Helen’s life: hence the Actress plays Helen playing herself. In one scene, initially readable as “real” action captured on a security camera, the Actress seduces the Producer into playing out what is in fact a scene, although he believes it is for real — she is prepared to manipulate image as much as he. The narrative jumps to and fro between these relativizing and alternative constructs, although more perhaps to make a thematic point about meta-fictionality and provisionality of identity than to itself cut loose entirely from referentiality. This may be what Thomson means by calling the play “conservative”; however, to many theatre-goers it proved too avant-garde altogether. Balodis has subsequently pondered why in televised sporting events audiences can accept the devices of screens within screens, fragmented action, instant playbacks, and alternative viewpoints, but not seem able to read them comfortably in the theatre (“Projecting the Inner World” 32-36). Since the play was originally a Bicentennial commission he decided to “go for broke,” but a critical fate awaited it, perhaps more respectful than Gow received for his own Bicentennial offering *1841*, but no less discomfoting.

This appears to raise the generic problem of what is variously permitted in, say, dance theatre or fringe experimentation (let alone rock, sporting events, television advertisements, cinema, performance art, video clips, or spectacular live performance), but frowned upon when essayed on mainstream stages. There is in fact a substantial, if rather tough and complicated, “literary” core in *Heart for the Future*. It deals with various themes: the British 1950s’ nuclear tests at Maralinga and their cover-up, and their impact on our culture and environment; the processes of grieving

and haunting by the dead and equally by the unborn; female ambition and friendship; mother-daughter relationships; male-female relationships (and how a woman's ability or inability to procreate affects these); the paradox of the actor; and the media society — a substantial number of what could be represented as impeccably liberal-humane topics. Yet the play is far from being over-literary, programmatic, or aridly thesis-ridden, being the mature product of one of our most visual or theatrically-oriented writers. It has in fact been said more than once that Balodis's main fault is that he has "too many ideas" (Malouf 12), a charge to which he replies in the words of Peter Shaffer's *Mozart*, "Well, which ones would you have me take out?" (Balodis, "Projecting the Inner World" 8-9). Are playwrights supposed to outgrow all interest in formal experiment and to "mature" by writing well-crafted literary-value plays? It is a very restricting and impoverished view of mainstream theatre's capability, if so. Whether or not the premiere of *Heart for the Future* succeeded in its aims, any venturing outside the formal bounds of naturalism appears to find that boundary still anxiously patrolled — by the naturalistic police and equally by those who would encourage dissenters to bolt across the border.

Balodis writes strong roles for women and usually more than one per play. *Too Young for Ghosts* has central female roles, and this play is, if anything, uncharacteristically weighted numerically in favour of the male actors (three women playing six roles as against six men playing twelve roles). It is more usual in his plays to find equal castings. Overall, he writes women characters with problems rather than women as *being* problems. A brief exemplary contrast out of endless possible options will serve to highlight how subtly different this practice is to those discursively naturalized in much mainstream Australian theatre. In its writing, and insistently in its publicity, Williamson's *Siren* (1990) inscribed the Liz character's supposed uncontrollable promiscuity as "the issue," rather than problematizing the competitiveness, tomcatting, and homosocial attitudes of the male characters. Rather than examine the central gender questions of the relatively accessible *Too Young for Ghosts*, this argument addresses *Wet and Dry*, one of the most exciting texts of recent Australian theatre, which deals with mature heterosexual relationships and dilemmas per-

taining to fertility in a manner which is serious without desiring to be programmatic.

The play was aptly subtitled for the MTC production "A Modern Comedy of Manners." The action concerns Pam, who in her thirties is desperate to have a baby. She and her husband, George, who has a low sperm count, have been trying a long time for parenthood; George has given up the effort and their relationship is fraying. She asks his younger brother Alex (known as Troppo) to oblige. Troppo is not averse to the idea, since he is more than half in love with Pam, but ruins the crucial occasion by telling her so. Troppo moves to Darwin and becomes involved with Laura, who to her dismay has recently become fertile because of uninvited surgical intervention. On a visit of Pam and George to Darwin, an impulsive affair with Troppo procures the pregnancy. Pam persuades George that the baby is for them, that he is meant to be its father and that they can become a family. The confrontation of the two brothers is effected in the initial and penultimate scenes of the play. The stage directions give an indication of that resonant theatricality which McGillick singles out for praise:

Northern Territory. Bush. Night. *A high cyclone fence stretches across the stage. A clear night sky. Starry. What appears to be a lightning flash illuminates the fence. Another flash or two. The flashes are followed by the sound of metal tapping on the metal pipes of the fence. A hammer chipping at the weld. The welder enters down stage of the fence. His helmet is flipped up as he inspects the fence line with his torch. He flips down his helmet and welds a section of the fence. He finishes welding and by torchlight chips at the weld with his hammer. He turns slowly and then turns the torch on the audience, then turns it on himself, lighting up his own face under the flipped up visor . . .*

*Suddenly he is lit by a bright light and a helicopter closes in fast. It hovers above TROPPO. A MAN descends in a harness wearing goggles, snorkel and flippers. TROPPO has flicked his visor down against the brightness of the spotlight. When the MAN hits the ground he removes the harness which begins to rise and the helicopter to depart. The two masked MEN stand facing each other in the light. The light snaps out and the helicopter fades away.*

(Balodis, "Wet and Dry" 1-2)

The "Man" is George, who aptly identifies his brother as: "Ned Kelly. Outlaw. I arrest you in the name of Sidney Nolan" (64). The arrangement arrived at in the course of this confrontation is that Troppo will be the child's "uncle" and remain in the Territory in a form of exile. In the last scene, Pam, George, and the baby prepare to face the future.

Balodis claims that the ethnic background of the two brothers need not necessarily be read in the default position, as Anglo-Australian; they could, for example, be Greek, Italian, or Slavic migrant stock with anglicized names. He implicitly saw them as first-generation NESBs, a perspective which enriches the play with fascinating subtextual emotional dynamics, but claims he did not want to make this evident lest *Wet and Dry* be classified as another study of exotics in an alien landscape, as *Too Young for Ghosts* has frequently been read (Balodis, "Projecting the Inner World" 30-32). This appears an example of the discourses of multiculturalism being more enabling for a mainstage writer in a submerged rather than an overt encoding. Balodis observes that the "success or otherwise of plays is determined by different things, but at different times of my career, in fits of bitterness and paranoia, I've thought, would this play be better received if it was written by John Pigeon?" ("Projecting the Inner World" 7).

*Wet and Dry* could be represented as containing various thematics, since it is written in a formal and yet imagistic style which enables nationalistic mythic readings; McGillick, in the review cited, perceives its intervention in the infantilism of the male "bush myth." It centres visually and symbolically on its central design element, the fence, which is onstage in all but the love scene between Pam and Troppo. The fence comes to mean the barriers which the characters attempt to raise to keep at bay life's wet (tacitly, female-coded) elements. George in particular is proud of the fence around his Sydney house, under which, he is convinced, the neighbour's dog deliberately digs in order to urinate on his geraniums. But chaos cannot be neatly contained, and besides the regional climatic references of the title — northern Australia's two cyclic seasons are called The Wet and The Dry — there are sight gags where George steps into ice cream, dogshit, and other sticky messes. Conversely, Pam's first action is to cut through

the safety fence at The Gap (on Sydney's South Head), and to venture out towards the cliff's edge, showing that she cannot endure the blockage in her life and is firmly set on drastic solutions. An interview with the playwright elicits the interpretation that for him the basic throughline became George's learning to cross the fence and to deal with life's "wet" elements ("Projecting the Inner World" 29-30); if his final snorkelling costume is any indication, he is now prepared to confront them, but after his own characteristically masculine fashion — that is, technologically well-prepared.

The play then deals with wet and dry or fertility and sterility of the biological, emotional, geographic, or elemental kinds. Some of the Melbourne critics found it lacking in depth in its treatment of the politics of fertility,<sup>5</sup> which suggested that they had, or evolved, expectations of a topical problem play. (Melbourne's Monash University is a leading research centre for "test-tube babies.") However, while Helen Thomson discerned its main drive as being about "human infertility" and "biological clocks," she offers the comment: "However justifiably feminists may deplore it I doubt if gynaecology will ever become a popular subject, or even one thought suitable for ordinary, public discourse" (Thomson, "Sympathetic" 11). Granted her tacit acknowledgement of patriarchal fear, and marginalizing, of women's physicality, can it be that Thomson is correct about what is and is not deemed suitable for public theatrical discourse?

There is evidence for this in that observers appear to "forget" that *Wet and Dry* deals also, and as centrally, with the emotional consequences of male infertility, and the frustrations and embarrassments of George's attempts at test-tube fatherhood are described in the play in satirical but clinical detail:

I just naturally assumed I could father my children. A God given right and I did manage it once . . . and since then. . . . When I think of all the times I spent in those cubicles with the copies of *Penthouse* and *Playboy* in the top drawer. Trousers round my ankles, specimen jar in one hand. Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, change hands. And the nurse just as you're about to come, "You finished in there?" And the count. Those abysmal figures and the monthly disappointments. Till I couldn't bear another failure. (71)

Here again, what is — within restrictions of genre and venue — perhaps permissible for a woman playwright may be patrolled and policed if a male writer treats it with some seriousness. It appears permissible for women — deemed as physically-defined beings obsessed with carnal trivia — to write plays about their “gynaecology.” For example, Louise Page’s play *Tissue*, which is about breast cancer, was widely performed in Australia in the early 1980s but almost exclusively in small or alternative venues, despite its subject matter being of acute interest to 53% of the population. But for a male writer to be perceived to write about female or indeed male fertility in a mainstage play, outside the permitted generic areas of issue-based theatre-in-education or community theatre, appears a transgression of powerful if tacit conventions about what is and is not serious, political, “Australian,” or dramatically “suitable.” The “stools” set up here for the unwary writer are as old as gendered privilege and the mind-body split, and Australian cultural discourse seems to be panicked by attempts to reset these ancient pieces of furniture in any but their traditional polarized and hierarchical positions.

Balodis’s work forms an important part of contemporary Australian theatre, not merely for its aesthetic textures, theatrical proficiency, or humane sentiments, attributes which are nonetheless remarkable. His career points up fissures in the contemporary discourses by which theatrical criticism and multiculturalism have carved up their territories and allotted generic opportunities and boundaries. The projects of writing exclusively in English, for the mainstage theatre, about the first-generation migrant experience, appear at this moment to be in some sense an internally contradictory combination of enterprises. Dramatizing gendered sexual difficulties without the protective generic carapaces of educational or issue drama raises further problems, but arguably of a more traditional and extra-national nature. In the most optimistic outcome, this discursive “gap” between stools where the playwright perceives himself to be situated may eventually prove a potent position for reterritorializing some of the hegemonic mythologies and practices of what proclaims itself to be the mainstream “Australian” theatre. It may, furthermore, serve to interrogate the ambivalences



in the entire "multicultural" and "migrant writing" discourses as they are applied to contemporary dramatists.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The others may be consulted in the Hanger Collection (Fryer Library, University of Queensland), or by contacting his agents: Linstead and Associates, Suite 302 Easts Tower, 9-13 Bronte Road, Bondi Junction, NSW 2022, Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> Regardless of place of birth, for the "settler" the centre remains always elsewhere, while the "native" makes a home of the new country: a fourth-generation Australian could be a settler, and a recent arrival a native.
- <sup>3</sup> Sanctuary Cove is a private resort and leisure facility on Queensland's Gold Coast, built by a now bankrupt entrepreneur, whose advertising enticement to potential residents was to buy there "... because not all the animals are in the zoo."
- <sup>4</sup> See Burvill and Holloway.
- <sup>5</sup> See Matthews and Weininger.

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