

Critical Celebrations:
Metatheatre in Australian Drama of the
Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
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DECLARATION

This thesis comprises only my own original work except where otherwise indicated.

Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used.

The thesis is 86,310 words excluding footnotes, bibliography and appendices.



Rebecca Clode

December 2014

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, do hereby declare that the information provided in this document is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, and that I have not provided any false or misleading information to the Commission.

[Signature]
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Address:

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the importance of metatheatrical strategies in Australian drama from 1979 to the present. While some attention has been paid previously to the use of metatheatrical techniques, in the work of individual playwrights such as Louis Nowra for example, there has been no study which foregrounds metatheatre as a distinctive dimension of Australian playwriting and playmaking in the last forty years. Applying arguments about metatheatre by scholars such as Hornby, Fisher and Greiner, Feldman and Boireau, the thesis argues for the importance of a distinctively Australian metatheatre that is multivalent in its capacity to illuminate the wider social, cultural and artistic contexts in which Australian drama has been produced. Adapting Hornby's arguments about the value of considering metatheatre holistically, the study deploys a range of critical approaches, combining textual and production analysis, archival research, interviews and reflections gained from the researcher's presence at rehearsals and as an audience member/participant in productions. Using these techniques, the study analyses four plays and their Australian productions, identifying them as vital to Australian metatheatre. These include: Dorothy Hewett's *The Man from Mukimupin* (1979), Louis Nowra's hitherto unexamined *Royal Show* (1982), Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988) and a recent metatheatrical work, Peta Murray's epic celebration of women's theatre, *Things That Fall Over: an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play. with footnotes, and oratorio as coda* (2014).

Through these four detailed case studies, the thesis demonstrates the ways in which metatheatre has been used to generate powerful elements of critique, particularly of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations during times of national "celebration" such as the Bicentenary of 1988. It argues that metatheatre is a strategy for comment on the marginalisation of Indigenous people and on the position of women as creative writers, as well as a self-reflexive mechanism via which Australian theatre is able to celebrate its own (meta)theatrical heritage. Situating these canonical and lesser-known plays in relationship to each other and their respective production histories illuminates the particular effectiveness of metatheatre in Australian drama in holding social and cultural critique in powerful tension with the affirmation of theatre as cause and vehicle for celebration.

TABLE

The following table shows the distribution of the total number of pages in the book by chapter. The total number of pages is 1000. The distribution is as follows:

Chapter	Number of Pages
Chapter 1	100
Chapter 2	150
Chapter 3	200
Chapter 4	250
Chapter 5	300
Chapter 6	350
Chapter 7	400
Chapter 8	450
Chapter 9	500
Chapter 10	550
Chapter 11	600
Chapter 12	650
Chapter 13	700
Chapter 14	750
Chapter 15	800
Chapter 16	850
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Chapter 16	850
Chapter 17	900
Chapter 18	950
Chapter 19	1000

Table of Contents

Volume 1

List of Figures	xi
Table of Contents.....	ix
List of Figures.....	xi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Recent Australian Drama and the Metatheatrical "Moment".....	1
Defining Metatheatre.....	8
Metatheatre and Scholarship in the Australian Context.....	19
The Present Study.....	23
CHAPTER ONE: DOROTHY HEWETT'S <i>THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN</i>	29
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	29
1.2 "GENESIS": "A CELEBRATORY PLAY WITH RECONCILIATION BUILT INTO IT.".....	36
1.3 OUTLINE OF <i>THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN</i> : A WORK OF METATHEATRE.....	44
1.4 METATHEATRE AND THE PLAY'S THEMES.....	55
1.5 PRODUCTIONS – OVERVIEW.....	56
1.6 METATHEATRE IN PRODUCTIONS OF <i>THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN</i>	64
1.6a EARLY PRODUCTIONS.....	65
1.6b THEMES OF RACE AND THEATRE HISTORY IN THE 1988 AND 2009 PRODUCTIONS.....	77
1.7 CONCLUSION.....	88
CHAPTER TWO: LOUIS NOWRA'S <i>ROYAL SHOW</i>	89
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	89
2.2 RESEARCH TEXTS.....	92
2.2a TEXTS OF FIRST PRODUCTION.....	92
2.2b TEXTS OF SECOND PRODUCTION.....	98
2.3 <i>ROYAL SHOW</i> – AN OUTLINE.....	107
2.4 A METATHEATRICAL COMPARISON.....	111
2.4a SHAKESPEAREAN DIMENSIONS.....	113
2.4b CHARACTERISATION.....	117
2.4c REFLECTIONS UPON AUSTRALIAN HISTORY: MEDIATING TIMEFRAMES.....	119
2.5 SIDESHOW ALLEY AS METATHEATRE.....	127

2.6	PROBLEMS WITH STAGING: SIDESHOW ALLEY AS METATHEATRICAL FAILURE.....	146
2.7	CONCLUSION.....	151
CHAPTER THREE: TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER'S <i>OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD</i>		153
3.1	INTRODUCTION.....	153
3.2	BACKGROUND.....	156
3.3	<i>THE RECRUITING OFFICER AND OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD</i> – SYNOPSES AND CONTEXTS.	159
3.4	THE REHEARSAL-WITHIN-THE-PLAY.....	169
3.5	REHEARSAL OF NATION.....	174
3.6	BACKSTAGE.....	185
3.7	THE METATHEATRE OF "THE ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN" IN PRODUCTION.....	192
3.8	CONCLUSION.....	198
CHAPTER FOUR: PETA MURRAY'S <i>THINGS THAT FALL OVER – AN (ANTI-) MUSICAL OF A NOVEL INSIDE A READING OF A PLAY, WITH FOOTNOTES, AND ORATORIO AS CODA</i>		199
4.1	INTRODUCTION.....	199
4.2	THE PREMIERE PERFORMANCE.....	204
4.3	COMPLEXITY, OPENNESS AND PARATHEATRE: AN ANALYSIS OF MURRAY'S PLAY TITLE.....	220
4.4	TEXTS AND CONTEXTS.....	231
4.5	<i>SWANSONG!!! THE MUSICAL!!!</i> AND THE QUESTION OF THE PLAY'S METATHEATRICAL FUNCTION.....	244
4.5a	THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY: A DETACHABLE ORATORIO.....	251
4.6	METATHEATRICAL FRAMING: THE PLAYWRIGHT AS ARCHITECT AND THE ROLE OF THE WEAVER.....	252
4.7	CONCLUSION.....	259
CONCLUSION.....		261
Bibliography.....		271

List of Figures

Figure	Description	Page number
1.1.	Extract from document advertising the 1988 production of <i>The Man from Mukinupin</i> by the Western Australian Theatre Company.	59
1.2.	Image of Badge produced as part of the Indigenous campaign protesting Australia's Bicentennial Celebrations in 1988.	60
1.3.	Photograph of the Hummer Sisters and Polly Perkins in Act One, <i>The Man From Mukinupin</i> , demonstrating the relationship of the play's figures to the landscape. Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production directed by Rodney Fisher.	71
1.4.	Photograph of the Hummer sisters and Polly Perkins in Act One, <i>The Man From Mukinupin</i> , demonstrating the relationship of the play's figures to the landscape. Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production directed by Rodney Fisher.	71
1.5.	Floor Plan for the Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production of <i>The Man from Mukinupin</i> .	73
1.6.	Floor Plan for the Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production of <i>The Man from Mukinupin</i> .	74
1.7.	Photograph from Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production of <i>The Man from Mukinupin</i> .	74
2.1.	Cast of the 1982 Lighthouse Production. From the programme of <i>Royal Show</i> , directed by Jim Sharman for Lighthouse Theatre Company, Adelaide.	93
2.2.	"Berridale CWA News," an article enclosed within the Working Draft of Nowra's <i>Royal Show</i> .	95
2.3.	New Moon Theatre Company cast and director, 1982 production of <i>Royal Show</i> .	99
2.4.	New Moon Theatre Company cast and director, 1982 production of <i>Royal Show</i> .	100
2.5.	Image of the Townsville poster from the New Moon Theatre Company tour of <i>Royal Show</i> , 1983, directed by Terry O'Connell.	102
2.6.	Image of the display window put together by Mackay resident and "Friend" of New Moon Theatre Company.	103
2.7.	Image of the set construction plan for the New Moon Theatre Company production of <i>Royal Show</i> , 1983.	105
2.8.	Images of set of the New Moon Theatre Company production of <i>Royal Show</i> , 1983.	106
2.9.	Images of the moveable scaffold used in the 1982 production of <i>Royal Show</i> directed by Jim Sharman.	134
2.10.	Image of the costume worn by Dahlia the Fat Woman played by Jacqui Phillips in the 1982 production of <i>Royal Show</i> , directed by Jim Sharman.	135
2.11.	Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, Japanese General costume, 1982 Lighthouse Theatre Company production of <i>Royal Show</i> .	137

2.12.	Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Lady Weeping Blood.	138
2.13.	Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Lilly Hermaphrodite.	139
2.14.	Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Man with Parasite Twin.	140
2.15.	Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Armless and Legless Person.	141
4.1.	The Artist's Talk. Peta Murray addresses the audience. From the premiere performance of <i>Things That Fall Over</i> .	207
4.2.	Caroline Lee ministers to injured actors and production crew from the <i>Swansong</i> rehearsal outside. From the premiere performance of <i>Things That Fall Over</i> .	209
4.3.	The Weaver leads the women, bound and gagged, in humming a song of consolation. From the premiere performance of <i>Things That Fall Over</i> .	211
4.4.	The Visitation. Verity is visited by Saint Lisbeth the Jolly.	216
4.5.	The Women's Quire singing in the final moments of <i>Swansong!!! The Musical!!!</i>	249
4.6.	The Child Ministers to the Swan. Rehearsal photo from production of <i>Swansong!!! The Musical!!!</i>	250
4.7.	The Child Ministers to the Swan. Rehearsal photo from production of <i>Swansong!!! The Musical!!!</i>	250

****Figures are annotated and cited in full in captions within the body of the thesis.**

INTRODUCTION

Recent Australian Drama and the Metatheatrical "Moment"

In March 2014 at the Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne, playwright Peta Murray and a cast of more than 30 women presented a play entitled *Things that Fall Over: an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*.¹ As its title suggests, this was a complex work, the structure of which incorporated an "oratorio" as a variation on a play-within-the-play. Beginning, as it had done, more than three years earlier in a work of academic research, and incorporating reflections upon her own artistic career, *Things That Fall Over* offered a highly topical contemporary examination of the question of what it means to be a female artist in Australia.² Using self-reflexive, "metatheatrical" strategies including narrative presentation, dramatic self-reference *within* the play to its own theatrical structures, and the incorporation of the play-within-the-play, Murray presented a close-up, behind-the-scenes examination of the experience and challenges of playwriting for mature-aged female playwrights. This work was contextualised by the inclusion of contemporary socio-political and cultural/theatrical references, not the least of which was the play's self-ironising and playfully postmodern title.

Murray's intensely metatheatrical play emerges from and is a marker of a significant but under studied tradition. Metatheatricality has been a feature of Australian drama since at least nineteenth century melodrama.³ However, since Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* (1961), the use of metatheatrical techniques has become ubiquitous on the Australian

¹ Peta Murray, "Things That Fall Over: an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda," unpublished manuscript of final working draft for Footscray Community Arts Centre/International Women's Day event, premiere performance on March 1 2014. Hereafter Murray, "TTFO: Final Draft." See Appendix D. It should be noted that due to the fact that a number of scenes (for example the Artist's Address at the beginning of the play) were partly improvised, this script is not a completely accurate account of the performance event on March 1 2014. However, synopses of the event and the play are provided in Chapter Four of this thesis. The play's ironic alternative title was *A Triathlon for Performance*.

² *Things That Fall Over* was written as part of an MA in Practice-Led Research, awarded to Murray by Queensland University of Technology in 2012.

³ For a discussion of metatheatricality as a feature of Australian melodrama, see Katherine Newey, "Melodrama and Metatheatricality: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century Theatre," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* XI, no.2 (1997): 85-100.

stage.⁴ This begs the question “why has metatheatre been so meaningful in its Australian contexts?” Relatedly, “to what ends have playwrights used (and do they continue to use) metatheatrical strategies in their works?” and further, “what texts and traditions constitute the metatheatrical history upon which more recent plays such as Murray’s are seemingly built?” In this thesis, my discussion of a number of examples of Australian metatheatre demonstrates its usefulness as a strategy for social and cultural comment. I will analyse playwrights’ deployment of metatheatre for a range of related purposes including: reflection upon acting and other dimensions of theatre making; generating discourses on Australian dramatic and theatrical history, and raising questions about the purpose and place of theatre and the arts more broadly in Australia.

Murray’s play is an example of metatheatre used to reflect upon the process of playwriting. Plays that similarly use this function include Zoey Dawson’s one-woman drama, *The Unspoken Word is ‘Joe’* (2012).⁵ First performed as part of the Melbourne Fringe Festival, this work also features in the forthcoming “Independent Season” of Griffin Theatre Company, a Sydney company dedicated to the production of new Australian plays.⁶ In its related publicity material, the company describes Dawson’s play as a “biting meta-satire of Australian theatre.”⁷ Dawson, like Murray, self-reflexively presents the experience of play writing from the perspective of the playwright. However, in contrast to Murray’s playwright/protagonist “Verity,” who assumes an identity separate from Murray herself, Dawson’s “Zoey Dawson” in *The Unspoken Word is ‘Joe’* is more directly autobiographical, her narrated experiences overtly linked to the writer’s experience as an “emerging” Australian playwright. This kind of reflection on contemporary playwriting was also exemplified in March-April 2013, when Melbourne’s

⁴ Patrick White, *The Ham Funeral*, in *Patrick White: Collected Plays Volume 1* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2008). It should be noted that dates dates indicated in-text throughout this thesis reflect date of first production. *The Ham Funeral* was, in fact written in 1947, but was not staged until 1961. See, for discussion, Leslie Rees, *The Making of Australian Drama* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 333-52. For a more detailed reflection on the use of metatheatre in *The Ham Funeral*, see Elizabeth Schafer, “A Ham Funeral: Patrick White, Collaboration and Neil Armfield,” *Australian Studies* 3 (2011), accessed October 9, 2014, <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/australian-studies/article/view/2227/2641>.

⁵ Zoey Dawson, *The Unspoken Word is ‘Joe’*, (Melbourne: MKA/Autocanon, forthcoming).

⁶ Established in 1979, Griffin Theatre Company is based at The Stables Theatre in Sydney’s King’s Cross, so called because it had originally been a stables. Between 1970 and 1973, this building was the site of the iconic Nimrod Street Theatre. The Nimrod group, well known for its focus on Australian plays, moved to a larger theatre space in Surrey Hills in early 1974. For a discussion of Nimrod’s predominantly Australian repertoire during its foundational years in King’s Cross, see Leonard Radic, *The State of Play: The Revolution in the Australian Theatre since the 1960s* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1991), 68-85.

⁷ “The Unspoken Word is ‘Joe’,” Griffin Theatre Company What’s On? Show Info, accessed September 1, 2014, <http://www.griffintheatre.com.au/whats-on/the-unspoken-word-is-joe/>.

Malthouse Theatre in co-production with Sydney's Belvoir presented Lally Katz's *Stories I Want to Tell You in Person*.⁸ In this work, Katz, a young though vastly experienced playwright, performed her own meditations on life and playwriting, the premise being her actual failure to write a play meeting the brief of her commission – namely to generate a work about the global financial crisis.

Where these playwrights use metatheatre to situate the Australian playwright, others have used it primarily to critique aspects of Australian society and culture. For example Louis Nowra's play *The Golden Age* (1985) incorporates numerous metatheatrical performances in order to problematise the nation's past.⁹ One of these, a staging of an extract from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* performed as a charity event by a wealthy Hobart family, is used to highlight the broader play's themes of cultural exile, foreshadowing the performers' subsequent interactions with a group of displaced people who are discovered in the Tasmanian wilderness. Another metatheatrical moment occurs later in the play when the displaced group, descendants of British colonial Australia's convict heritage, offer a performance for the young men who discover them. Here, in a scene that has been widely discussed, the group re-enact a scene from a seventeenth century adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*.¹⁰ Thematically, the family's performance reflects their own desire to avoid cultural extinction, or "outcastin".¹¹ Nowra's intertextual reference to their adaptation of an already adapted canonical text

⁸ Lally Katz, "Stories I Want to Tell You in Person," Austlit Work Summary, accessed September 1, 2014, <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C834522>. As yet unpublished, *Stories I Want to Tell You in Person* was first performed in May 2013 in the Downstairs Theatre at Sydney's Belvoir. The same production was subsequently performed at The Malthouse, Melbourne, in August 2013. In referring to "Belvoir," I note that this Sydney-based company formerly operated under the name "Company-B, Belvoir." My references to work done, or archival material held by, the company post 2010 (the year in which its name changed to "Belvoir"), will reflect this.

⁹ Louis Nowra, *The Golden Age* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 23-24. Gilbert and Tompkins discuss the group's performance of a play that "is not Shakespeare's *King Lear* but Nahum Tate's folk version of the story, the 'happy' *Lear*, enacted in précis and further bastardised through pastiche and parody. For further discussion of Nahum Tate's adaptation of *The Tragedy of King Lear*, including Tate's incorporation of elements of both Quarto and Folio versions of the play, see for example Sonia Massai, "Nahum Tate's Revision of Shakespeare's *King Lear*," *Studies in English Literature* 40, no. 3 (2000): 435-50.

¹¹ As Veronica Kelly points out, "outcastin" is the group's own term for the process of cultural exile which they have experienced. Kelly draws attention to the significance of the play's last line, "nowt more outcastin," the utterance of which reflects the desire to escape this process. See Kelly, "'Nowt More Outcastin': Utopian Myth in Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age*," in *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1988), 101-10.

can further be seen, Gilbert and Tompkins argue, as part of the play's broad examination of the processes and effects of colonisation.¹²

Perhaps because of Australia's ongoing need to work through its colonial past and its continuing impact, Australian playwrights have frequently incorporated references to canonical British texts such as Shakespeare's. No doubt this is, in part, attributable to the canonical status of Shakespeare within the Western theatrical tradition in which playwrights working within the post-colonial Australian theatrical context have, largely, been immersed. In addition, the metatheatrical nature of Shakespearean drama itself may be seen to hold appeal for contemporary playwrights interested in exploring a metatheatrical approach in their own works. Whilst often drawing on Shakespeare's metatheatrical texts and techniques to demonstrate the correlation between Art (on-stage) and Life (off-stage) - one of the major tenets of the "theatrum mundi" metaphor observed in early modern drama - Australian playwrights have also referenced Shakespeare as part of an attempt, consciously or otherwise, to locate their own metatheatrical works within a longstanding metatheatrical tradition.¹³

Just as *The Golden Age* uses *King Lear*, Michael Gow's *Away* (1985)¹⁴ incorporates references to three Shakespearean texts - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. Gow's play begins with a metatheatrical staging of an Australian high school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The scene performed is taken from one of *The Dream's* most overtly metatheatrical moments, in which Puck, addressing the audience, asks them to give him their "hands" in applauding and celebrating the theatrical event.¹⁵ *Away* uses a range of Shakespearean references to explore issues related to the question of cultural identity. Broadly recognised as an Australian "classic," it has been

¹² Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 23-24.

¹³ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Pavis defines "theatrum mundi" as "(Latin for "theatre of the world.) A metaphor invented in antiquity and in the Middle Ages that became widespread in baroque theatre, which sees the world as a show staged by God and performed by mediocre human beings."

¹⁴ Michael Gow, *Away* (Sydney: Currency Press / Playbox Theatre, 1986). For critical discussions of Gow's use of Shakespeare in *Away* see, for example, Penny Gay "Michael Gow's *Away*: The Shakespearean Connection," in *Reconnoitres: Essays in Australian Literature in Honour of G.A. Wilkes*, ed. Margaret Harris and Elizabeth Webby (South Melbourne: Sydney University Press / Oxford University Press, 1992), 204-14. See also Elizabeth Webby, *Modern Australian Plays* (Sydney University Press / Oxford University Press, Australia, 1990), 54-64.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Macmillan, 2008) lines 420-35. In *Away*, high school student Tom plays Robin Goodfellow (Puck) and, "stepp[ing] forward" as indicated in Gow's stage direction, he delivers this entire speech to his audience. See Gow, *Away*, 3.

performed nationally and internationally, including a 2006 revival by Griffin Theatre Company to commemorate its twenty year anniversary.¹⁶ Based on the intersecting lives of members of an Australian community, the play refers to culturally significant events in Australia's twentieth-century history. These include the country's involvement in the Vietnam War, the Great Depression, immigration and the idea of coming of age. Such reflections were highly pertinent within the social context of mid to late 1980s postcolonial Australia and particularly salient in the national consciousness during the lead-up to the 1988 Bicentenary of British settlement.¹⁷ In addition to intertextual references to Shakespeare, Gow's use of metatheatres includes overt comments upon acting and the use of character doubling in order to illuminate themes of community, identity and cultural mythmaking, the latter being most apparent in the characters' re-writing and re-playing of classical and canonical myths to create their own cultural mythologies.

The use of Shakespeare, indeed Shakespearean metatheatres, within contemporary Australian playwriting has been so prevalent that it recently drew comment from Sydney-based actor-playwright Toby Schmitz. In a comic metatheatrical work *I Want to Sleep with Tom Stoppard* (2012),¹⁸ largely a reflection on the contemporary cultural status of Australian theatre, Schmitz has one of his characters lament:

JACKIE. I hate Shakespeare, I don't understand it. And I hate it more when you go to a modern play by some new person and they have stolen bits in it. You know, Shakespeare that they haven't even written. That's not what I paid for. And it's not real speaking anyway. That's some sort of blasphemy isn't it?¹⁹

¹⁶ Murray Bramwell, "Gow Goes 'Away'," *The Adelaide Review* 300 (2006): 12.

¹⁷ I take up these issues in detail in Chapter Three, in relation to *Our Country's Good*, a metatheatrical play first performed in 1988. Though conceived outside Australia, specifically by British director Max Stafford-Clark and American-born / British-based playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker, this work toured to Australia in 1989, where it was performed by the original Royal Court London cast. Here, the play's metatheatrical re-telling of the production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* by the British convicts of Sydney Cove two centuries earlier held a particular resonance for Australian audiences in the aftermath of the Bicentenary.

¹⁸ Toby Schmitz, "I Want to Sleep with Tom Stoppard," Austlit Work Summary, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.austlit.edu.au.virtual.anu.edu.au/austlit/page/C831459>. This play, as yet unpublished, was first performed August 29 – September 22, 2012 at the Bondi Pavilion, Sydney, directed by Leland Kean for Tamarama Rock Surfers.

¹⁹ Toby Schmitz, "I Want to Sleep with Tom Stoppard," unpublished manuscript (April 2013), Microsoft Word File, 28.

This argument is ironically complicated later in Schmitz's play when, in a metatheatrical moment, actor Sarah, one of the play's central characters, demonstrates the power of acting by performing Hamlet's soliloquy about the First Player.

SARAH. What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
 That he should weep for her? What would he do
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
 And cleave the general air with horrid speech,
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
 The very faculties of eyes and ears.²⁰

After first presenting Jackie's critique of Shakespearean Australian metatheatre, Schmitz ends by having Sarah celebrating and, arguably endorsing it. In this way, his play presents a complexity of perspectives on the issue at hand, possibly reflecting the findings from the playwright's own research during the process of writing the play, into the views of theatre held by Australian theatre practitioners and the public.²¹

Of course, metatheatrical references within contemporary Australian plays have extended beyond Shakespeare. Even a brief glance at recent offerings in Australian playwriting reveals a host of plays in which writers have used metatheatrical techniques both to reference and pay homage to a metatheatrical tradition, from Shakespeare through to Farquhar, to nineteenth century vaudeville performance, twentieth century Brechtian metatheatre and beyond.²² Two recent examples include *Vivien Leigh's School for Scandal*, first staged in Brisbane in 2013, and *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd*, first staged in Melbourne in 2006.²³ Set in 1948 Brisbane and 1914 Melbourne respectively, these works incorporate metatheatrical strategies such as character doubling, the performance of plays-within-plays and overtly theatrical staging techniques. In addition,

²⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Macmillan, 2008) lines 570-77. As cited in Schmitz, "I Want to Sleep with Tom Stoppard," unpublished manuscript, 57.

²¹ Programme for *I Want to Sleep with Tom Stoppard*, directed by Leland Keen for Tamarama Rock Surfers, Bondi Pavilion, Sydney. During rehearsals for the production, the company interviewed theatre professionals about their views, and those held by people they had encountered, on the role of theatre in Australian society.

²² See, for example Dorothy Hewett, *The Chapel Perilous; or, The Perilous Adventures of Sally Banner* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1988), which incorporates Brechtian metatheatrical techniques, and George Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*, ed. Michael Shugrue. (1706; repr., Great Britain: Edward Arnold Ltd: 1972). This Restoration comedy is the metatheatrical intertext deployed within Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, as discussed in Chapter Three.

²³ Michael Beh, Brian Bolton and Warwick Comber, "Vivien Leigh's School for Scandal," Austlit Work Summary, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.austlit.edu.au/virtual.anu.edu.au/austlit/page/6519007>. This play, as yet unpublished, was first performed in October 2013 at Trinity Hall, Fortitude Valley Brisbane, directed by Adrienne Costello; Lally Katz, *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd* (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency Press, 2012).

both plays can be seen to use metatheatres as a vehicle for inviting reflection on the relationship between theatre and society, not only in the plays' historicised settings, but in the present moment.

Vivien Leigh's School for Scandal is based upon the 1940s Australian tour by the Old Vic company of Sheridan's comedy *The School for Scandal*. Written and adapted by Michael Beh, Brian Bolton and Warwick Comber, the play depicts the troubled off-stage marriage of Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier. Drawing on accounts of the thespian couple's tumultuous relationship, off-stage drama is pitched against on-stage "scandal" when the pair appear in nightly performances of Sheridan's comedy. This production, which highlighted the theatrical artifice of Sheridan's play by setting its metatheatrically performed scenes on a stage-within-the-stage, paid tribute to a past metatheatrical performance tradition whilst simultaneously recognising the Leigh/Olivier tour with the Old Vic company as a significant moment in Australian theatrical history.²⁴

Drawing on another Australian theatrical moment, Lally Katz's *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd* is set on the eve of the First World War. First performed at the Malthouse where it was directed by Chris Kohn for Arena Theatre Company, the work was the product of a State Library of Victoria fellowship which allowed Katz to conduct extensive research into the local history of vaudeville performance.²⁵ Drawing on knowledge gained from this period of investigation, Katz's play spends its first act recreating the flamboyant theatrical world of pre-war vaudeville. In the second half, however, Katz "tak[es] us backstage among the [actors]" and in so doing foreshadows the demise of a

²⁴ Anthony Holden, *Olivier* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), 221-45. The reception of the Old Vic company tour by Australian audiences is discussed in Holden's biography of Olivier. Holden suggests that Olivier, as head of the company, was not only warmly received in his roles of "Richard III," "Sir Peter Teazle," and "Antrobus" in Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, but during his time outside of performances, took on a role as a kind of "emissary for the homeland," 232. The company and, in particular, Olivier and Leigh as iconic British actors, were welcomed by sell-out audiences in cities around Australia, in spite of some anti-British sentiment that existed in the aftermath of the Second World War. Elsewhere, Julian Meyrick describes the tour as a "peak moment of [British] cultural influence" in Australian theatre history, discussing the way in which the actors were received "like royalty" among the Australian public "inspecting troops, making speeches on behalf of King and Empire to an adoring public..." See Meyrick, "Sightlines and Bloodlines: The influence of British theatre on Australia in the post-1945 era," in *Playing Australia: Australian theatre and the international stage*, ed. Elizabeth Schafer and Susan Bradley Smith (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 43-62.

²⁵ Robin Usher, "Stepping out in a Different time," *The Age*, March 10, 2009, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/stepping-out-in-a-different-time/2009/03/09/1236447129262.html>. The concept for this play was provided by Chris Kohn, a long-term artistic colleague of Katz.

once glorious theatrical era.²⁶ Described by one reviewer as a “haunting homage to those who have fallen through the cracks in stage history,” *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd* documents and dramatises vaudeville as part of Australia’s metatheatrical history.²⁷ This is effected through the play’s realisation of vaudeville’s overt theatricality and its use of metatheatricality, an approach possibly intended to signal its location within an Australian metatheatrical tradition. This tradition is also illuminated within Dorothy Hewett’s *The Man from Mukinupin*²⁸ and Louis Nowra’s *Royal Show*,²⁹ two of the works examined in this thesis. Like Katz’s *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd*, Hewett and Nowra’s plays not only employ their own metatheatrical strategies but, in doing so, situate themselves within a broader network of Australian metatheatricality.

Despite its long tradition and its prominence in the post-war period, to date metatheatricality has remained marginalised in Australian drama scholarship. This thesis redresses this by examining a series of examples of Australian metatheatrical texts, together with their contexts and performance histories, and in light of scholarly debate about what constitutes metatheatricality.

Defining Metatheatricality

If, as I have suggested above, Shakespeare is crucial to the Australian metatheatrical tradition, then he has also been considered central to the development of “metatheatricality” itself. In what follows I map some of the key critical territory surrounding metatheatricality as a concept that has been subject to a number of attempts at definition and remains widely contested. The term “metatheatricality” was conceived by Lionel Abel in 1963, in a now widely known study entitled *Metatheatricality: A New View of Dramatic Form*.³⁰ As indicated in his title, the author presented an argument and hypothetical nomenclature for what he considered to be a new dramatic genre.³¹ Exemplified in the philosophical, non-realistic

²⁶ Jim Chandler, review of *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd*, by Lally Katz, directed by Chris Kohn, Malthouse Theatre and Arena Theatre Company, Melbourne, *Australian Stage* online, March 23, 2009, <http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/melbourne/goodbye-vaudeville-charlie-mudd-2352.html>.

²⁷ Robin Usher, “Stepping out in a Different Time.”

²⁸ Dorothy Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin: A Musical Play in Two Acts: A special sesquicentennial edition* (Fremantle and Woollahra: Fremantle Arts Centre Press / Currency Press, 1979).

²⁹ Louis Nowra and Lighthouse Company, *Royal Show: A Working Draft*, Papers of Louis Nowra, National Library of Australia, MS MS10042, Series 5, Bags 48-49, 1. Hereafter Nowra, *Royal Show*.

³⁰ Lionel Abel, *Metatheatricality: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).

³¹ On pg. 62 of his text, Abel proposes metatheatricality, or metadrama, as a title for the kinds of plays he has been observing, saying “Plays of the kind I have in mind exist. I did not invent them. However I shall presume to designate them. I call them metaplays, works of metatheatricality.”

plays of the early and mid-twentieth century, Abel argued this form had its origins in the works of Renaissance playwrights, notably Shakespeare, whose "Hamlet" was here presented as the theatre's first self-dramatizing character.³² This notion of self-dramatisation implied a character whose dialogue and actions belied an awareness of his fictional status. This could be seen in the protagonist's philosophical reflections on "action" and "acting," "being" and "seeming," discourses echoed throughout the play even beyond its title character and clearly demonstrated in the presentation of the play-within-the-play.

Using this example, Abel designated the term metatheatre to plays that express an awareness of their own artifice or "theatricality" and are about "life seen as already theatricalized."³³ In *Hamlet*, he argued, life's theatricality was dramatically realised in the protagonist's failure to act the part of the tragic hero, reflecting a broader idea that, in reality, life's "plot" remains constantly uncertain. In Abel's view, the metatheatrical genre included but was not restricted to plays which, like *Hamlet*, employed the mechanism of the play-within-the-play. While acknowledging that variations of the play-within-the-play can be observed in the work of *pre*-Renaissance playwrights, Abel argued that in Shakespeare and also the works of Calderón it represented a new philosophical approach.³⁴ He considers *The Tempest*, in particular, to be Shakespeare's most effective use of the form. Prospero's assumption of the role of dramatist and the character's frequent comparison in critical analyses to Shakespeare himself, is discussed by Abel as a case in point.³⁵ Demonstrating the ideas underlying Abel's definition of metatheatre, namely self-dramatisation of character and the concept of the world theatricalised, Prospero uses his powers of magic (arguably a metaphor for thought) to create a "false tempest" and thus contrive a situation in which past grievances can be amended.³⁶ "But," as Abel points out, "having ventured to use theatrical means to their magical limit, Prospero understands that in some sense all of life is a pageant or show, and he carries this thought to its ultimate consequence, foreseeing that the earth 'the great globe itself,'

³² Abel, *Metatheatre*, 41-58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁴ Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681), playwright of the Spanish Golden Age. For a discussion, see W.B. Worthen, "Pedro Calderón de la Barca," in *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama Fourth Edition*, ed. W.B. Worthen (University of California, Berkeley: Thomson Wadsworth, 2004), 387-389. For details of Abel's argument, see his *Metatheatre*, 63-64.

³⁵ Abel, *Metatheatre*, 68-70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

will dissolve, leaving not a rack behind."³⁷ Given its own illustrative metatheatricality, combined with the applicability of its themes to certain aspects of Australia's post-colonial identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Tempest* is often an intertext for Australian drama.³⁸

Underlying Abel's definition of metatheatres were two philosophical ideas; one, that the "world is a stage," and two that "life is a dream."³⁹ Typical of Shakespeare and Calderón, these ideas were increasingly evident in the works of Western playwrights during the early and mid twentieth century, often expressed in theatrical discourses regarding the nature of life and illusion.⁴⁰ Abel demonstrated the dramatisation of these philosophies using dramatic examples from his own century, including Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.⁴¹ These plays could be seen to illustrate the underlying concepts of metatheatres in different ways, *Six Characters* through its self-dramatising characters, the use of the play-within-the-play, and ongoing dialogue about life and illusion, *Waiting for Godot* in its depiction of characters who reminisce upon times when life was dramatic and, while on stage, theatricalise the details of everyday life.⁴²

While Abel does not draw upon Australian examples, the texts that inaugurate Australia's metatheatrical argument were written in the decades from which he draws his contemporary examples and from which he writes. The dramatic works of Patrick White (such as *The Ham Funeral*, 1961) and Dorothy Hewett (*The Chapel Perilous*, 1971) both illustrate the ongoing dialogue regarding life and illusion or art that Abel suggests is central to metatheatres.⁴³ This is demonstrated from the earliest moments of *The Ham Funeral* in which White's protagonist, the "Young Man" artist foregrounds this theme in a direct address to the audience, explaining of the play that follows:

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁸ For discussions of *The Tempest* as an intertext in Australian Drama see, for example: Helen Gilbert, "Canonical Counterdiscourse," in *Sightlines: Race, Gender and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (University of Michigan Press, 1998), 27-49.

³⁹ Abel, *Metatheatres*, 83.

⁴⁰ For an in-depth critical discussion of this subject see Anthony S. Abbott, *The Vital Lie: Reality and Illusion in Modern Drama* (University of Alabama Press, 2009).

⁴¹ Both of which are discussed in Abbott's *The Vital Lie*.

⁴² Abel, *Metatheatres*, 83-84.

⁴³ White, *The Ham Funeral*; Hewett, *The Chapel Perilous*. Other works by Hewett that deal with the relationship between life and art include *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1972) and *The Tatty Hollow Story* (1974) to name just two. See Hewett, *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly / The Tatty Hollow Story: Two Plays* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1976).

YOUNG MAN. You are right in suspecting I can't give you a message. The message always gets torn up. It lies in the bottom of the basket, under the hair, and everything else. Don't suggest we piece it together. I've found the answer is always different. So...the most I can do is give you the play, and plays, of course, are only plays. Even the great play of life. Some of you will argue that *that* is real enough (*very quiet and diffident*)...but can we be...sure? (*Returning to the surface, dry*) Thank you. We'd better begin now.⁴⁴

The Young Man then “*exits [temporarily] behind the curtain,*” with White’s overtly metatheatrical problematisation of the relationship between art and life continuing throughout subsequent scenes.⁴⁵ As such, Neil Armfield, who directed the play for the Sydney Theatre Company in 1989 identified this theme and the play’s metatheatricality in his director’s programme note. As Elizabeth Schafer explains, Armfield situated his production of *The Ham Funeral* in relation to his “then recent production of [Nikolai Gogol’s] *Diary of a Madman*. Schafer suggests that “the connection Armfield made [here] between [the production of the Gogol play] and his *Ham Funeral* was their common grounding in ‘metatheatre’ or ‘theatre which refers back to itself as a way of analogising life.’”⁴⁶

A number of critics have associated White and Hewett’s works with Brechtian dramaturgical strategies which, for Abel, are also identified with metatheatre.⁴⁷ Like Pirandello and Beckett, Brecht consciously, or self-consciously, challenged “the realistic or naturalistic play.”⁴⁸ According to Abel’s argument, Brecht’s denial of theatrical illusion using the techniques of his “epic theatre” affirms the idea of the “world as stage” by preventing complete engagement with on-stage events. In particular, Abel suggests that Brecht’s notion of the third person narrative is instrumental in reinforcing, for the viewer, the idea that events depicted on stage are fictional, not real. Outlined in Brecht’s

⁴⁴ White, *The Ham Funeral*, 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Schafer, “*A Ham Funeral: Patrick White, Collaboration and Neil Armfield,*” *Australian Studies* 3 (2011): 10, accessed 15 October, 2014, <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/australian-studies/article/view/2227/2641>.

⁴⁷ Peter Holloway, for example, discusses the influence of Brecht and also White upon Hewett’s drama. See Holloway, ed., *Contemporary Australian Drama* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), 349. For discussion of Brecht and Patrick White see Schafer, “*A Ham Funeral: Patrick White, Collaboration and Neil Armfield.*”

⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

well known example of “The Street Scene,” this technique requires actors to approach their roles via a process of demonstration rather than embodiment.⁴⁹ Abel argues that this results in a style of performance in which on-stage events, though drawn from life, are obviously theatricalised. Such an approach is consistent with the notion of life, or world, as theatre.⁵⁰

It is this same denial of illusion that, in Abel’s view, affirms the metatheatrical concept of “life as dream” in Brecht’s plays. In his discussion of this concept, Abel denies the likelihood of any conscious recognition of such a notion on Brecht’s behalf, but insists that his plays convey this fundamental idea implicitly. Central to his reasoning are the facts of Brecht’s stated Marxist philosophy and Communist party involvement, which Abel sees as central to Brecht’s understanding of life’s reality.⁵¹ Following Abel’s argument, a sense of “reality” in drama is typically achieved by effecting sympathy with individual feelings, a sympathy to which Brecht objected on account of his political persuasions. Brecht’s denial of this sympathy – using a range of anti-illusionist devices such as song, narrative and the play-within-the-play, therefore undermines any sense of life’s reality – life becomes artifice, or “dream.”⁵²

Abel’s work provides a history and a first definition of metatheatres that have been elaborated and debated by subsequent critics seeking to understand the evolution of metatheatres in the post-war period. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, in “‘Metatheatres’: An Essay on Overload,” critiques Abel’s use of the term “metatheatres” to define a genre, outlining problems of “latitude” in the ways in which the term itself has been defined.⁵³ Rosenmeyer argues that Abel’s attempts to define metatheatres were liberal to a fault, including as they did, “all manner of playwriting from Shakespeare to the Theatre of the

⁴⁹ In his notebooks from work done with the Berliner Ensemble following his post-war return to Germany, Brecht outlines an example of the actor-character-spectator triangle. In an essay entitled “The Street Scene,” he describes a witness who relates the story of an accident on the street. The witness acts out the story for an audience of bystanders. He plays the parts of the driver and the victim of the accident, and he shifts from first person to third person as he changes parts. In Brecht’s view, this kind of performance places the audience in an objective position, from which they can analyse the account of the accidents and draw their own conclusions. This “Street Scene” is sometimes used as an example of gestic acting, a concept central to Brecht’s epic theatre. For a more detailed discussion, see Peter Brooker, *Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry and Politics* (London, New York: Croom Helm, 1988).

⁵⁰ Abel, *Metatheatres*, 105.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 105-6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 105-7.

⁵³ Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, “‘Metatheatres’: An Essay on Overload,” *Arion* 10, no.2 (2002): 87-119. Note that Rosenmeyer uses standard American spellings. I will use the standard British spelling for “metatheatres” and throughout my thesis, except when quoting writers who have done otherwise.

Absurd, save only the “realist” plays of the later nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.”⁵⁴ Proffering a list of characteristics derived from Abel’s text, he exemplifies the range of devices here considered to be metatheatrical, among them: untraditional plot structures; self-dramatising characters; action that includes the depiction of a dream or, alternatively has dreamlike qualities; the undermining of closure and subversion of authority; self-centred or “self-conscious” language and the deliberate blurring of spatial boundaries between actors and audience.⁵⁵ In demonstrating the potential breadth of Abel’s concept of metatheatre, Rosenmeyer argues “It is almost as if by ‘metatheater’ [he] meant to define any play that does not observe the rules of classical mimesis.”⁵⁶ Also finding Abel’s definition of metatheatre too broad to usefully demonstrate a genre, Pavis suggests it is an expansion of the *theatrum mundi*, theatre as world, metaphor.⁵⁷ Jenn Stephenson, whose doctoral thesis involved an extensive review of “metatheatrical theory and criticism,” agrees with this assessment as does Johan Callens who, likewise, explains his hesitation to call metatheatre a genre on account of the broad definition attributed to it by Pavis. Pavis suggests that “metatheatricality is a fundamental characteristic of any theatrical communication.”⁵⁸

In addition to this breadth of definition, critics have contested Abel’s theoretical distinction between tragedy and metatheatre, a distinction central to his original thesis and re-iterated in later essays. As Stephenson points out, this distinction is problematic in that, subsequent to Abel’s argument, scholars have demonstrated the use of metatheatrical devices in pre-Renaissance plays. “Even the earliest definitive tragedies,” she suggests “inevitably express some metatheatrical elements.”⁵⁹ This argument is echoed by Thomas Rosenmeyer who, referring to recent work by classical scholar Mario Barchiesi, suggests that Abel’s “temporal starting line” for metatheatre could, in fact, be extended “into antiquity” and to cover “the whole history of Western drama, thus overthrowing one of Abel’s principal contentions.”⁶⁰ Even Martin Puchner, in his introduction to Abel’s

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁷ As explained by Jenn Stephenson, review of *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form*, by Lionel Abel, *Theatre Journal* 58, no.1 (2006), 165-66.

⁵⁸ Stephenson, review of *Tragedy and Metatheatre*, 165; Pavis, cited in and translated by Johan Callens, “Discovering Utopia: Drama on drama in contemporary British theatre,” review of *Drama on Drama: Dimensions of Theatricality on the Contemporary British Stage*, ed. Nicole Boireau, *Estudios Ingleses da la Universidad Compositense* 6 (1998): 211.

⁵⁹ Stephenson, review of *Tragedy and Metatheatre*, 165.

⁶⁰ Rosenmeyer, “‘Metatheatre’: An Essay on Overload,” 96.

posthumous collection, suggests that the origins of metatheatres may have been earlier and more extensive than Abel realised. He says:

If we understand metatheatres as the moment when theatre comes to itself, it is no longer surprising that it is almost impossible for the theatre not to become metatheatres. For how could any theatre not know, somehow, and show that it knows, somehow, what it means to be theatre?⁶¹

Related criticisms of Abel's discourse have centred on his apparent hesitation (or failure) to outline an adequate, comprehensive theory of metatheatres, and perceived problems of nomenclature (the term itself). Rosenmeyer critiques Abel's use of the Greek preposition "meta," arguing that "[s]tandard modern uses of meta," for example in relation to literature, generally signify "one superior entity...existing behind or above or beyond another."⁶² Rosenmeyer argues that the term metatheatres is confusing in relation to this idea, as metatheatres does not aim to demonstrate authority over the original form. In fact, he posits, no preposition is required, as the contrast of ideas set up in "metatheatrical" plays comes from *within* the theatrical practice.⁶³ "It is not," he points out, "as if tragedy were theater in the first instance, against which metatheatres were to set itself up as an enterprise raised above the theatrical experience."⁶⁴

Despite these often compelling criticisms of Abel's theoretical premise, the term metatheatres has gained strong critical currency in the decades since its inception. The publication of several key texts devoted to the subject, including a collection of essays edited by Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner in 2009, indicates that the term remains current, if not to denote a genre, then to describe actual dramaturgical devices used by present and past practitioners.⁶⁵ Metatheatrical techniques, perhaps on account of the aforementioned semantic confusions, have been discussed under a range of titles, "reflexive drama" and "self-referential drama" being two of the most common; but despite the omission of the term "metatheatres" from Nicole Boireau's 1997 text, *Drama on Drama: Dimensions of Theatricality on the Contemporary British Stage*,⁶⁶ other

⁶¹ Martin Puchner, "Introduction by Martin Puchner," in *Tragedy and Metatheatres*, by Lionel Abel, 13.

⁶² Rosenmeyer, "'Metatheatres': An Essay on Overload," 91.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner, eds., *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007).

⁶⁶ Nicole Boireau, ed., *Drama on Drama: Dimensions of Theatricality on the Contemporary British Stage* (Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997).

publications, for example by Hornby in 1986, have included *Meta-Theatre* and *Metadrama* in their titles.⁶⁷

In response to such criticisms, clarification of the intended meaning behind Abel's nomenclature has been offered by Martin Puchner who suggests that "most closely related" to metatheatre is the linguistic term "metalanguage," referring to the use of language to talk about language itself.⁶⁸ This, he argues, "corresponds to Abel's definition of metatheatre" as theatre concerned with theatre.⁶⁹ Puchner also highlights the significance of the historical and artistic contexts in which the term metatheatre was conceived, thus linking it to the self-referential arts of modernism in the late nineteen fifties and sixties. "From the mid-century onward," he argues, "the term *meta* was in the air and was used specifically to make sense of the arts of modernism," arts which often made no attempt to reflect the world but only "art itself."⁷⁰ The use of the term was not, he points out, exclusive to metatheatre, but demonstrated in a wide range of self-referential approaches including "metacritique, metalanguage [and] metapoetry."⁷¹ More recently, he adds, terms such as "metacinema" have also been adopted in the critical discourses of modernism and postmodernism.⁷²

In other recent discussions, critics have equated the metatheatrical use of historical texts with Brechtian "historicisation."⁷³ Integral to Brecht's "verfremdungseffekt," or estrangement, historicisation involves the dramatisation of historical material in such a way as to make the audience look at both the past and the present in a more objective light.⁷⁴ First theorised in his writings on epic theatre (though *used* by earlier playwrights,

⁶⁷ Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc.), 1986. See also Fischer and Greiner, above.

⁶⁸ Puchner, introduction to *Tragedy and Metatheatre*, 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ For example Janelle Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill: Socialist Feminism and Brechtian Dramaturgy," in *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*, 81-107.

⁷⁴ Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill: Socialist Feminism and Brechtian Dramaturgy," 87. See also Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 72-75 and John Fuegi, *Bertolt Brecht* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 83. "Verfremdungseffekt" is occasionally translated as "distancing," a term thought by some critics to be more accurate than "alienation" or "estrangement."

including Shakespeare), this technique has since been observed in the work of numerous post-Brechtian playwrights.⁷⁵

While historicisation might be included among the range of metatheatrical devices employed in contemporary drama, other recent discussions of metatheatre have considered, beyond specific techniques, the relationship suggested by Abel between metatheatre and modern realism. In part two of *Drama on Drama*, for example, Boireau examines ways in which contemporary playwrights have, through metatheatre, “stretched the mould of realism to breaking point and generated new modes of perception.”⁷⁶ Among the playwrights discussed by Boireau are Caryl Churchill, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Timberlake Wertenbaker, all of whom can be seen to challenge realist conventions. The present study draws upon Boireau’s methodological approach, extending it beyond Britain to the Australian context.

While many theorists have tended to discuss metatheatre in relation to notions of realism and non-realism, in *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Hornby dismisses the polarity between these two modes that is often intrinsic to modern dramatic theory.⁷⁷ Instead, he views all drama as operating within a broader network, first of dramatic art and, beyond this, culture. In applying this semiological theory to his dramatic analysis, Hornby also adopts elements of structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, which “implicitly reject the realistic/antirealistic bipolarity.”⁷⁸ He argues that realist theories,

⁷⁵ Historicisation is used extensively, for example, in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* (1979). In this two act play, Churchill draws parallels between the sexual politics of the late 1970s and British colonial oppression, through the structural juxtaposition of scenes set in the present and the past. This juxtaposition is created by setting the play’s first act in Victorian Africa, 1879, and retaining the same characters through to the second act while advancing the scene 100 years. Act Two is thus set in London of 1979, the year in which the play was first staged. According to Brecht’s idea of historicisation, it follows that *Cloud Nine* audiences in 1979 should have viewed the modern scene more critically and objectively, having just watched the first scene set in a previous historical context. Reinelt says “The audience, conditioned by the first act to look critically at the behaviours and social context of characters in the past, must now continue to examine matters closer to home. While Victorian sex-role stereotyping and political chauvinism are deadly, contemporary role confusion and the residue of imperialism remain problematic.” See Reinelt, “Caryl Churchill: Socialist Feminism and Brechtian Dramaturgy,” 88.

⁷⁶ Nicole Boireau, preface to *Drama on Drama*, xiv.

⁷⁷ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, 13-16.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 16. In his discussion, Hornby discusses the linguistic origins of semiotics, or semiology, and explains his application of the underlying concepts of this theory to his own analysis of drama. His theory relates not to the linguistic elements of drama so much as the way in which individual plays operate as symbols within a broader network system, including dramatic, artistic and socio-cultural networks. This is similar to the approach that I propose to take in my thesis.

those based on plays' proximities to realism, fail to address the true nature of the relationship between drama and "reality."⁷⁹ Central to this argument, he posits that:

[N]o form of drama or theatre is any closer or farther from life than any other, in any way that truly matters. No plays, however 'realistic' reflect life directly; all plays, however 'unrealistic,' are semiological devices for categorizing and measuring life indirectly.⁸⁰

In Hornby's view, the relationship between individual plays and reality is best understood as operating within the broader systems of which it is a part. "A play," he suggests "is 'about' drama as a whole, and more broadly, about culture as a whole."⁸¹ Related to this concept, culture in turn is seen to be influenced by archetypes established in drama, a phenomenon Hornby refers to as "the *drama/culture* complex."⁸² In relation to metatheatrical techniques, which have typically been associated with non-realistic approaches to drama, Hornby's perspective thus invites a broader consideration of the dramatic and cultural networks within which metatheatrical plays are located. Four key axioms drawn from structuralist and poststructuralist thinking lie at the core of his analysis. Two of these are that "[a] play does not reflect life" but instead reflects itself, and that "at the same time, it relates to other plays as a system."⁸³ The third axiom is that dramatic systems "in turn, intersect with other systems of literature, non-literary performance, other art forms (both high and low), and culture generally."⁸⁴ Hornby's fourth axiom is that "It is through the *drama/culture* complex, rather than through individual plays, that we interpret life."⁸⁵

Hornby's understanding of this drama/culture complex underpins my exploration of the ways in which Australian metatheatres both emerges from and participates in the culture that produces, performs and evaluates it. In addition to adopting Hornby's more holistic approach to the study of metatheatres, I also deploy his outline of six possible types of metatheatres:

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁴ This is interesting to consider in relation to metatheatrical uses of intertextuality, an idea that will be discussed throughout my thesis.

⁸⁵ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, 17.

1. The play-within-the play;
2. The ceremony within the play;
3. Role playing within the role;
4. Literary and real life reference;
5. Self reference;
6. The depiction of perception as a theme within the play.⁸⁶

Hornby points out that such techniques are seldom used in isolation but are combined or “blended” and can vary in the degree to which they interrupt the play of which they are a part. In the chapters that follow, we will see that Australian playwrights do blend a range of metatheatrical techniques, which creates a multivalence suited to their exploration of Australian culture.

Related to this discussion, Puchner adds that the intended effect, or meaning, behind the use of metatheatricality can vary significantly between plays, so that while “[t]he term *metatheatricality* tells us that the theatre reflects on itself...it does not yet tell us anything about the spirit in which this self-reflexivity occurs.”⁸⁷ In the works of modernist playwrights, Ionesco and Brecht for example, metatheatricality is often used to critique conventional theatrical forms and practices; in this sense it can be seen as “antitheatrical.”⁸⁸ Typically, Puchner argues, the critique offered by modernist metatheatricality is created by the use of devices that interrupt the “machinery” or progression of the play.⁸⁹ As well as encouraging a more active reception among the audience, such interruptions critique conventional play structures by the very fact of disrupting the flow of action required for their development; plays become, through interruption, anti-plays. In contrast, the use of metatheatricality in baroque plays indicates a “celebratory” relationship to theatre, observed in structures that embrace theatricality through the use of various metatheatrical devices and frequent reference to the notion of “theatre as world.”⁹⁰ Thus, Puchner argues “while the baroque theatre multiplies itself, delighting, as it does, in the play-within-the-play, masks and deceptions...the modernist metadrama seeks to keep the theatre under control.”⁹¹

Although Puchner’s discussion of “celebratory” and “anti-theatrical” uses of metatheatricality could be seen as overly generalised, his essay does highlight the way in which factors

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32. Note, the wording of the sixth category is my own (adjustment made for clarity).

⁸⁷ Puchner, “Introduction by Martin Puchner,” in *Tragedy and Metatheatricality* by Lionel Abel, 17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

beyond an individual play, including theatrical and cultural contexts, can inform the way in which metatheatrical devices are employed. Puchner's celebratory/anti-theatrical model is also relevant to the plays considered in this thesis, specifically because none of these works fits neatly into either category. Indeed, as demonstrated in each of the case studies that comprise the thesis, metatheatrical devices have been used in ways that deliberately and overtly complicate the notion of "celebration." This function is important in light of the fact that two of the plays considered were commissioned in the context of culturally significant celebratory events, the 1979 Perth sesquicentenary and the Australian Bicentenary of 1988.

Metatheatrical Devices and Scholarship in the Australian Context

Kate Flaherty's work on Shakespearean metatheatrical devices in Australia is particularly useful to the present study because it demonstrates the value of considering how metatheatrical techniques have been realised in performance. In her 2005 article "Theatre and Metatheatrical Devices in *Hamlet*,"⁹² Flaherty discusses the use of metatheatrical staging techniques in three Australian productions. Each produced in Sydney, these include a 2003 production by the Bell Shakespeare Company, a 2001 staging by Pork Chop Productions and a 1994 production by Company B, Belvoir. Using interviews, notes taken during rehearsals, her own close reading and archival materials, Flaherty describes how the three companies drew attention to metatheatrical dimensions within *Hamlet*, with a focus on what she considers to be a key metatheatrical moment, the "arrival of the Players and the First Player's impromptu performance."⁹³ Here, as Flaherty recounts, the First Player offers a stirring rendition of "Aeneas's Tale to Dido."⁹⁴ This, she suggests, is an important metatheatrical performance due to the way in which the events of the Player's dramatised story, specifically those of murder, grief and revenge, resonate with Hamlet's own predicament. Also significant, she posits, is the way in which the scene highlights the idea of performance (a key theme of the play) by showing Hamlet as a kind of on-stage audience member, both moved by and complicit in the making of the performance at hand. This is emphasised via Hamlet's subsequent soliloquy (notably, the same speech that is presented metatheatrically in Schmitz's play, previously discussed) in which he

⁹² Kate Flaherty, "Theatre and Metatheatrical Devices in *Hamlet*," *Sydney Studies* 31 (2005): 3-20. See also Kathryn J. Flaherty, "Spaces of Play: Shakespearean metatheatrical devices and the Australian stage" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2007), manuscript held in The University of Sydney Library .b33362051; fhrb.

⁹³ Flaherty, "Theatre and Metatheatrical Devices in *Hamlet*," 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

compares the First Player's capacity to move the audience with his own seeming inability to act.

Having outlined the significance of this moment within the play, Flaherty then argues that the extent to which *Hamlet's* metatheatrical potential (both here and in other scenes) is "necessarily determined afresh by each instance of performance."⁹⁵ Her argument is then demonstrated by a detailed description of the ways in which the scene of the First Player's speech was theatrically realised in the three productions at hand. In the 2003 Pork Chop production, for example, a distinctly metatheatrical staging of "Aeneas's Tale to Dido" was used to highlight the theme of performance. Presented in the style of a work of performance poetry, this speech was delivered by Aya Larkin "from the Sydney band Skunkhour," and was accompanied by music.⁹⁶ In this modernised staging, the company placed emphasis upon the speech as a moment of performance within the play. This was done by having Larkin, as the First Player, enter the performance area (a kind of on-stage platform or stage-within-the-stage) and adjust the microphone before motioning to Horatio, seated behind a mixing desk. As Flaherty explains, "Hamlet, [played by] (Jeremy Sims) sat in the dark beside Horatio. These forms," she suggests "would have been immediately recognisable to younger audience members as preparations for performance in a bar or club."⁹⁷

In Flaherty's view, it is not just the use of modern references such as performance poetry and rock musicians, but in fact the realisation of *Hamlet's* metatheatrical potential, that made the productions she discusses in her article such vital and immediate experiences for their audiences. This is because, by highlighting the theatrical construct at play (not only in *Hamlet* as a written text but in the *production of Hamlet*), these companies reminded audiences of their own role in the theatrical event. This, she contests, opens up a "space of play" wherein the contemporary audience can make meaning of the dramatised event, in the moment.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ In the few years following Flaherty's work on Shakespearean metatheatre, companies have continued to hone in on Shakespeare's metatheatrical potential, resulting in a number of distinctly metatheatrical productions. Two examples are *Twelfth Night* (2010) and *Henry V* (2014), both by the Bell Shakespeare Company. In *Twelfth Night*, director Lee Lewis had the actors perform as though they were everyday Australians engaging in an impromptu reading/performance of the play. Setting the action in a community

Flaherty's emphasis upon production analysis reflects her belief that an understanding of Shakespearean metatheatre necessarily involves a consideration of how such works operate in the live theatrical moment. This capturing of the quality of live exchange is also vital considering the importance of actor/audience exchange in the early modern theatre. By describing Australian theatre companies' staging techniques and productions, Flaherty therefore enhances understandings of the ways in which the metatheatrical dimensions of Shakespeare have been realised on the Australian stage. From Flaherty's methodology I adopt the emphasis on production analysis in order to understand metatheatre as a live theatrical moment. As such, each of the following chapters includes discussion of the play in production.

While Flaherty's research has focused primarily on Shakespeare, other scholars have identified the use of metatheatrical techniques in works by Australian playwrights. Despite the fact that none of these discussions has taken metatheatre as a central focus they are nonetheless valuable, both in illustrating the pervasiveness of metatheatre in Australian drama in recent decades and in pointing to the wide range of purposes to which metatheatrical strategies can be used. Veronica Kelly has written about the use of metatheatre by playwright Louis Nowra, outlining the metatheatrical techniques that Nowra adopts and reflecting upon the purposes towards which such strategies are put in place.⁹⁹ Kelly's work is useful in illustrating some of the kinds of socio-cultural and historical reflection that can be effected by the use of metatheatre. These include, for example, the use of plays-within-plays by characters who wish (or need) to subversively express alternative versions of Australian history or personal identity.¹⁰⁰ However, its focus is on a single playwright's life and oeuvre, not an exploration of metatheatre in its

hall in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires, Lee created a "wordless" metatheatrical framework in which community members, banding together in the aftermath of disaster, discovered and, to pass the time, re-enacted Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* using an old edition they had found among a pile of donated clothing. This metatheatrical staging, in which the donated clothing became the costuming for the subsequent performance, highlighted the play's themes of loss and reconciliation in ways that resonated uniquely and, at times, poignantly in light of contemporary events. See Jason Blake, "Bushfire Bard ignites emotions," review of *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare, directed by Lee Lewis, Bell Shakespeare Company, Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, Sydney, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 8, 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/bushfire-bard-ignites-emotions-20101108-17.jp.html>.

⁹⁹ Veronica Kelly, "Performing Histories," in *The Theatre of Louis Nowra* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1998), 141-78.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

many forms. The present study expands her insights to a broader canon of Australian theatre including a previously unstudied play by Nowra.

In other studies, metatheatre has been similarly sidelined by other critical foci. In the late 1990s, work by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins offered insights into the ways in which metatheatre can be used as part of post-colonial dramatic discourse.¹⁰¹ In *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, the pair argue that metatheatre, “although often playfully postmodern, should not simply be seen as part of the postmodern intertextual experiment.”¹⁰² They then go on to demonstrate how various metatheatrical techniques including “role playing, role doubling/splitting, plays within plays and interventionary frameworks” have been used in ways that lend themselves to post-colonial readings.¹⁰³ Among the Australian dramatists mentioned by Gilbert and Tompkins are David Malouf and Louis Nowra, whose metatheatrical re-workings of Shakespeare they cite as examples of counter-canonical discourse.¹⁰⁴

Gilbert also draws attention to the use of metatheatre in contemporary feminist drama, linking its capacity to highlight and redress issues of gender inequality with its ability to operate within a broader post-colonial discourse. The use of metatheatrical techniques, she contests in *Sightlines*, can work to subvert theatrical conventions that

would seem to collude in gender subjugation by positioning women as objects of knowledge, part of a spectacle framed and contained by the intentional gaze of the spectator. This inquiry has important implications for postcolonialism insofar as it attempts to expose and rework those scopie regimes that institute and maintain power over the colonizable Other.¹⁰⁵

Related to this argument, Gilbert discusses metatheatrical role-playing, a technique deployed by several Australian women playwrights, as a means of refusing imposed

¹⁰¹ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*. See also Helen Gilbert, *Sightlines*.

¹⁰² Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 23.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-33. This discussion is extended by Gilbert in *Sightlines*, in which she expands upon the analysis of metatheatre in Nowra's *The Golden Age*. Gilbert compares the metatheatrical charity performance of *Iphigenia in Tauris* that is presented by the wealthy “Archer” family, with the impromptu performance of a twice re-worked *King Lear* offered by the displaced, deformed and ultimately outcast group. Describing the charity performance as staid and stagnant in contrast with the more vital adaptation, she contests that the differences between the two performances demonstrate the shortcomings of the Archers' naïve attempts to simply transpose one culture upon another. See Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 131-36.

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 169.

societal roles. “Dorothy Hewett’s drama,” she contests, is typical of this approach, with on-stage role playing being used in her plays to challenge female gender stereotypes and highlight “the multiplicity of roles women have played in Australia.”¹⁰⁶ This post-colonial/feminist dimension of metatheatre is explored within the present thesis, with reference to Hewett’s *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979) and Murray’s *Things That Fall Over* (2014).¹⁰⁷ This thesis extends the perspectives offered by Gilbert and Tompkins, analysing a wider range of metatheatrical techniques and the ways in which they are used.

The Present Study

This thesis examines the use of metatheatre in Australian drama of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Having established the existence of metatheatrical plays and productions in this period, and the need for further scholarship of these works, I set out to redress this gap.

We have established, above, that a useful analysis of metatheatre has been offered by Richard Hornby. Hornby’s outline of six possible types of metatheatre seems applicable to the metatheatrical strategies employed in many Australian plays. Here I will consider the ways in which these “tenets” apply in four particular plays and their productions. Adopting Hornby’s holistic semiological approach to dramatic analysis, as previously discussed, my study examines Australian drama in relation to its broad social, cultural and theatrical networks, to provide insights into the nature of metatheatre and its position within an Australian theatrical tradition. Like Hornby, I discuss metatheatre not in the Abelian sense, as a genre, but as an approach to playwriting and production that includes a range of techniques, for example: the play-within-the-play; the ceremony-within-the-play; role-playing within-the-role; literary and real-life reference; self-reference and the depiction of perception as a theme.

It is impossible in the scope of this thesis to offer a full account of Australian metatheatre. I have therefore selected a number of plays that employ metatheatrical techniques extensively and that have been written and performed during the last forty years. This timeframe has been selected for several key reasons. The first, noted at the beginning of this Introduction, is the existence of what I have described as a “metatheatrical moment”

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰⁷ Gilbert, in fact, identifies *The Man from Mukinupin* as an example of the point she is making here.

that occurs in Australian drama in the post-war period, the exploration of which is one of the thesis' primary aims. Relatedly, the term "metatheatre" was conceived in the late twentieth century in response to trends in European and American playwriting at that time. These trends may be observed in Australian theatre practice of the period, just as they have been in the Western theatrical tradition more broadly. In addition, the selected timeframe encompasses a number of significant cultural events including the 1988 Bicentenary of British settlement in Australia and the West Australian sesquicentenary (1979). These events can be seen to have informed Australian playwriting in various ways; not only were two of the plays studied here commissioned specifically for such occasions, but reflections on national identities have influenced their subject matter significantly. This thesis illuminates how metatheatrical strategies are used to voice such reflections.

Four plays have been chosen for analysis as follows: Dorothy Hewett's *The Man From Mukinupin* (1978), Louis Nowra's *Royal Show* (1982), Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988) and Peta Murray's *Things That Fall Over* (2014). These have been selected not because they are the only examples of Australian metatheatre, but because they are particular examples that warrant further analysis. These plays, in my view, offer distinctive and valuable perspectives on the subject at hand and provide an inroad to what I hope will be a continuing, broader, conversation.

An examination of the four chosen texts in relation to one another and their respective Australian production histories reveals key themes and resonances which, in turn, facilitates a clearer understanding of Australian metatheatre. Through this case-study approach, my thesis considers what close readings, archival research and analysis of these works in production can tell us about the tradition of Australian metatheatre, partly through a consideration of canonical plays and partly through a discussion of how recent works have cited their metatheatrical forebears.

A disadvantage of this case study approach is that it does not allow sufficient breadth from which to draw a definition of Australian metatheatre. What my thesis can provide, however, in its depth of analysis, is a fuller picture of the metatheatricality of my chosen texts. The thesis does not, therefore, attempt to define Australian metatheatre, but rather, works towards such a definition.

Given the general critical currency of the term “metatheatre,” I have retained this term despite its contentiousness. My working definition is borrowed from Abel, as the term’s originator, altered only slightly to identify a range of techniques (not a genre) and to include the notion of “self-reflexivity,” as used in a number of recent analyses. It is drawn, too, from Puchner, following whom I define metatheatre as theatre that is self-reflexive, offering comment on theatre itself or depicting life off-stage as theatrical. Throughout the thesis I have adopted a broad use of the term “Australian drama,” reflecting the methodological approach of my study. “Australian drama” will be used to describe both works written by Australian playwrights and works such as Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good*¹⁰⁸ which have been written by non-Australian playwrights but which hold specifically Australian resonances both in their subject matter and productions on the Australian stage.

The thesis is divided into four broad sections, or chapters, each addressing one of the selected plays. Echoing the methodological approach adopted by Flaherty in her study of Shakespearean metatheatre, I combine close reading of dramatic texts with archival research and production analysis, attempting to arrive at as detailed as possible an understanding of the ways in which metatheatrical techniques have been employed. My research adopts a broad definition of the theatre archive, including: published and unpublished texts, DVD recordings, interviews, rehearsal notes and related papers from the both National and theatre company archives. This study’s methodology, combining as it does archival research with text and production analysis, is part its distinctiveness given that most previous discussions of the plays concerned and particularly any existing discussions of Australian metatheatre, have tended to focus on the written text. My use of archival material is especially important in my discussion of *Royal Show*, as will be seen below.

In Chapter One, I examine Hewett’s *The Man from Mukinupin*, a commissioned work first performed for the West Australian sesquicentenary. Through an analysis of this play and several key productions, I demonstrate its status as a work of central importance to both the study and tradition of Australian metatheatre. Drawing on Hornby’s analysis I

¹⁰⁸ Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good: based on The Playmaker, a novel by Thomas Keneally* (London: Methuen/Royal Court Theatre, 1988). Hereafter Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good*.

consider the ways in which the techniques he outlines apply to the metatheatricality *Mukinupin*, with the play-within-the-play and ceremony-within-the-play revealing themselves as vital to this play's structure and themes. My discussion of *The Man from Mukinupin* in production also includes an analysis of how this canonical work was interpreted by Indigenous director Wesley Enoch in a 2009 production for Company B, Belvoir. Here as in each of the plays considered, metatheatre is shown as part of a strategy for comment upon Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships. This is one of the distinctive features of Australian metatheatre, as revealed throughout my thesis.

In Chapter Two, my focus shifts away from the canon to a play produced only twice before being relegated to the archive, unpublished. In relation to Hornby's "tenets" of metatheatre, the play play-within-the-play and ceremony-within-the-play are once again shown as important dramaturgical techniques. These are seen in the play's metatheatrical Side Show event, an aspect that proved challenging to realise effectively in production. *Royal Show* is discussed as an ambitious metatheatrical work that, despite the challenge of the Side Show and, in some respects *because* of it, demonstrates the capacity of metatheatre for effecting powerful social critique. This chapter offers an important contribution both to studies of Nowra and discussions of Australian metatheatre in light of the fact that Nowra has been hailed as one of Australia's most metatheatrical playwrights yet this work, profoundly metatheatrical, has seldom been acknowledged in scholarship let alone been the subject of sustained analysis.

Returning to the canon, Chapter Three focuses on Timberlake Wertenbaker's modern classic, *Our Country's Good*. Significant on account of its metatheatrical depiction of the first theatrical performance in British colonised Australia, specifically the production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney Cove in 1789, the play is studied with an emphasis upon how its metatheatrical dimensions highlight particularly Australian concerns. In applying Hornby's analysis within this third chapter, I identify the rehearsal-within-the-play both as a longstanding dramaturgical tradition and a variation of the play-within-the-play.

Finally in Chapter Four I discuss Peta Murray's *Things That Fall Over: an (anti-) musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*. This only recently performed and, thus far, unpublished work represents a current and as yet

incomplete or finished example of Australian metatheatre and while it demonstrates the influence of earlier, canonical works, possibly including Dorothy Hewett's, it is also highly original in its use of metatheatrical techniques. Of the plays discussed in this thesis, *Things That Fall over* is the most extensive in its use of metatheatre and, as I will argue, goes furthest of all in its blurring of the boundaries between theatre and life. This play which, as mentioned, examines conditions of women's playwriting in Australia today, differs from the other three plays studied in that it is not a commissioned work and therefore responds to a different set of theatrical circumstances and constraints. As such, it is an important example of Australian women's metatheatre in the early decades of the twenty first century which demonstrates the continuing vitality of Australian metatheatre.

The first step in the process of identifying a problem is to define the problem. This involves identifying the symptoms of the problem and determining the scope of the problem. Once the problem has been defined, the next step is to identify the causes of the problem. This involves identifying the factors that are contributing to the problem and determining the underlying causes. Once the causes have been identified, the next step is to develop a plan of action. This involves identifying the steps that need to be taken to address the problem and determining the resources that will be needed to implement the plan. Finally, the last step in the process is to evaluate the results of the plan. This involves monitoring the progress of the plan and determining whether the problem has been resolved.

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CHAPTER ONE: DOROTHY HEWETT'S *THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

First performed in 1979, *The Man from Mukinupin* is a thoroughly metatheatrical play, and one that holds canonical status in the history of Australian Drama. Written by Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002), it was commissioned by Stephen Barry, then Artistic Director of the National Theatre Company of Western Australia, for the occasion of Perth's sesquicentenary, commemorating the settlement of the British colony of Swan River.¹ The play's first production was well received by critics and audiences and within two years *The Man from Mukinupin* had been performed by major theatre companies around Australia. It has subsequently been selected for production on other occasions of national and cultural significance, notably the Bicentenary of Australia in 1988 and the thirtieth anniversary of its own premiere, in 2009.² This chapter argues that metatheatre is central to the simultaneous celebration and critique of Australian society in *The Man from Mukinupin*. By examining a range of metatheatrical techniques deployed by Hewett, it argues that this play is an important work of Australian metatheatre, remarkable insofar as its historicising metatheatrical approach not only encourages audience reflection upon Australian history, but also incorporates theatre itself into the examination of that history.

The Man from Mukinupin presents a conflation of genres in its citation of a wide range of poetic, literary and theatrical works: Hewett draws on Tennyson, Mary Gilmore, Randolph Stow and Shakespeare as well as folkloric traditions and references to popular culture. The play is both broadly intertextual and profoundly metatheatrical, incorporating no fewer than all six types of metatheatre identified by Richard Hornby.³ Key to its discussion of Australian history, identity, landscape and race are four of these techniques including: the deployment of a play-within-the-play; the ceremony-within-the-play; use of real-life and literary or theatrical reference; and dramatic self-reference in which the

¹ Bill Dunstone, "Performance and Difference in Dorothy Hewett's 'The Man from Mukinupin,'" *New Literature Review* 19 (1990): 72.

² Note that I will employ the conventional capitalised spellings of Bicentenary when referring to the 1988 Australian Bicentenary and sesquicentenary when referring to the 1979 sesquicentenary of Perth.

³ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, 32.

play draws attention to its own theatrical mechanism, via character doubling and overtly theatrical staging elements. Also present, though arguably to a lesser extent, are instances of metatheatrical role-playing and the depiction of perception as a theme.

Although the play's metatheatricity has been widely acknowledged, the extent to which this has been thoroughly examined remains lacking. Analyses of *Mukinupin*'s metatheatre have typically come from post-colonial criticism.⁴ Symptomatic of the late twentieth-century academic interest in this field, itself relevant to the historical context of the 1988 Bicentenary, such perspectives have been offered by several critics. Bill Dunstone, for example, presents what might be viewed as a traditional post-colonial analysis of the play as "writing-back" to the centre.⁵ Drawing attention to Hewett's metatheatrical deployment of Shakespeare, he argues that the re-working of scenes from *Othello* as a play-within-the-play ("The Strangling of Desdemona") represents an abrogation of the "privileging of the canonical English text."⁶ Dunstone suggests that the displacement of the Shakespearean text "in favour of selected excerpts," coupled with the hybridised delivery of Othello's lines "in an Austral-Italian accent appropriate to the itinerant 'actor,' Max Montebello, who utters them," repositions the texts in relation to the dominant cultural hegemony.⁷

In a similar vein, Lekkie Hopkins examines the play's reference to canonical texts from a post-colonial perspective.⁸ Through an analysis of Hewett's use of language, she considers *Mukinupin*'s themes of language and culture, specifically "the colonisation of the Australian landscape and its people by the English language and its speakers."⁹ A discussion of Hewett's intertextual and metatheatrical use of Shakespearean texts is central to this analysis given the importance of Shakespeare to the play's "theatrical heritage."¹⁰ By examining the playwright's use of extracts from Shakespearean works, themselves concerned with themes of language and its "power as a civilising agent," Hopkins demonstrates the ways in which canonical texts necessarily change when played

⁴ As Helen Gilbert points out, the play has "attracted a number of critiques that pay attention to its treatment of colonialist discourse, particularly in reference to the landscape." See Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 245.

⁵ Dunstone, "Performance and Difference."

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lekkie Hopkins, "Language, Culture and Landscape in *The Man from Mukinupin*," *Australasian Drama Studies* 10 (1987): 91-96.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

out within the small-town Australian setting.¹¹ This appropriation or adaptation can, she argues, be viewed as a comment on the process of cultural inheritance since it demonstrates the way a canonical British author travels and is remediated within the colony. In addition to the intertextual and metatheatrical uses of Shakespeare, Hopkins discusses the play's deployment of metatheatrical techniques in relation to the theme of reconciliation. By engaging with the black/white cross-over implied in the use of metatheatrical character doubling (a strategy that, like the theme of reconciliation will be discussed throughout my chapter) it is possible, she suggests, to envisage a reconciliation between black and white (Indigenous and settler) communities. This includes the possibility of both cultural/racial reconciliation and a reconciliation between people and landscape.

In a separate analysis, Helen Gilbert foregrounds post-colonial feminist dimensions of the play, considering the ways in which two metatheatrical techniques, character doubling and the on-stage costuming of female characters, are used to demonstrate the constructedness of social roles.¹² Costuming, she contends, can be seen to highlight processes of gender and racial mapping. The metatheatricity of staging such processes upon the performing body is, according to this analysis, central to the play's examination of post-colonial Australian culture, a topic which my analysis here also addresses.

As noted in the Introduction to the thesis, critics have previously linked Hewett's use of metatheatricality to a possible Brechtian influence.¹³ Hewett has likewise acknowledged this influence, identifying echoes of Brechtian metatheatricity in her use of crowd scenes, on-stage narrators and "the historical and social voice," techniques that can be linked to the playwright's left-wing political leanings and long-time membership of the Australian Communist Party.¹⁴ Brechtian historicisation, outlined previously, is also employed in a number of Hewett's works and is integral to this play which is set both immediately before and after the First World War. The historicised setting of *The Man from Mukinupin*, as

¹¹ Ibid., 98.

¹² Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 145-84.

¹³ For example: Peter Fitzpatrick, "Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama," in *Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays*, ed. Bruce Bennett (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995), 99. See also Margaret Williams, *The Feminine as Subversion* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002), xiv-xv, 96.

¹⁴ Dorothy Hewett, interview by Bill Dunstone, *Australian Playwrights Speak*, VHS (Sydney and QLD: University of Sydney Television Service with Queensland University TV Services, 1986); David Hough, "Hewett's Best Yet," review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, premiere directed by Stephen Barry, National Theatre Company, The Playhouse, Perth, *National Times*, week ending September 29, 1979. Hough notes that Hewett was a member of the Australian Communist Party between 1942 and 1968.

this chapter will demonstrate, elicits audience reflection upon connections between past and present. This aspect of the play has partially been examined by Bill Dunstone who, in developing his post-colonial analysis, considers the way in which the conspicuous creation of fictional space in *Mukinupin* “countervails the closed narratives of history and identity.”¹⁵ By signaling these narratives as theatrical constructs, Dunstone argues, the play invites audiences to re-view time and history beyond the play as being open to reconstruction.¹⁶

Dunstone’s approach is similar to that of Richard P. Knowles and, most recently, Alexander Feldman on the subject of historiographic metatheatre.¹⁷ Examining late twentieth century Canadian drama, Knowles draws on readings of historical metafiction to interpret contemporary metatheatre as part of a postmodernist dramatic practice in which writers re-make or re-visit history “as fiction and myth.”¹⁸ Though Knowles’s examples are drawn from the Canadian context, his work offers a possible reading of Hewett’s metatheatre whereby *The Man from Mukinupin* can be viewed not (or at least not only) in relation to the project of national myth construction, but rather as re-working existing myths (and indeed, history itself) in a manner which actively involves the viewer by inviting them to view the on-stage action critically and objectively. This kind of approach to the history-making entailed by theatre, discussed throughout this chapter, is consistent with the play’s use of Brechtian historicisation and the related critical detachment elicited in the audience via its overt metatheatricality.

Although such analyses go part of the way in explaining Hewett’s use of metatheatre, Peter Fitzpatrick argues the need for alternative critical perspectives on her plays.¹⁹ He suggests that Hewett’s works have frequently proven difficult to classify because, unlike plays adhering to the social realist model, including many of those written by her “New Wave” contemporaries, Hewett’s approach to her art cannot be sufficiently encompassed by analyses that privilege the written text. Hewett, he argues:

¹⁵ Dunstone, “Performance and Difference,” 73.

¹⁶ The signalling of dramatic narratives as constructs may be seen, in relation to Hornby’s analysis, as a form of dramatic self-reference.

¹⁷ Richard P. Knowles, “Replaying History: Canadian Historiographic Metatheatre,” *Dalhousie Review* 67.2 (1987): 228-43; Alexander Feldman, *Dramas of the Past on the Twentieth Century Stage: In History’s Wings* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁸ Knowles, “Replaying History,” 228.

¹⁹ Fitzpatrick, “Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama,” 100-113.

has never been interested in the kind of theatre in which people disclose themselves in lengthy conversations, either in intimately psychological or socially representative ways. And the appropriate metaphor for the structure of her plays, simplifying and even distorting though it is, has always seemed the circle rather than the straight line. Her plots unfold through shifting impressions and disconcerting twists in tone and tactics.²⁰

Fitzpatrick suggests that the lack of “verbal density” of Hewett’s dialogue (in a paradoxical contrast with the densely literary nature of her plays suggested by their intertextual reference) precludes the capacity for critique on the base of textual analysis alone. “The written text of a Hewett play,” he posits, “tells only part of the story” and, whilst this is arguably true in the case of any written play text, it may be seen as more significant in the case of Hewett, whose works, in their very theatricality, incorporate visual and other physical elements of staging that “are only hinted at” in the play script.²¹ In *Mukinupin*, therefore, the effect of the play’s metatheatrical character doubling (a form of (a form of “dramatic self-reference” in Homby’s terms) may best be understood in the context of a performance analysis examining the way in which such techniques have been interpreted in productions and, in turn, how such interpretations have been read by audiences and critics.

Until recently, attempts to offer the kind of performance analysis suggested by Fitzpatrick and Gilbert have been limited by a lack of adequate archival recording.²² Fitzpatrick goes part way towards such a study in a discussion of programme materials from productions of *Mukinupin* in which he considers the wide-ranging interpretations of the play suggested by the corresponding variation in programme designs.²³ Such designs range from the realistic image of a domesticated “rural scene,” through to an abstract design of a landscape made up of pieces of a puzzle in the colours of the Australian outback, an unrecognisable face (possibly the eponymous “Man” from *Mukinupin*), peering as though from behind part of the design.²⁴ Other designs discussed by Fitzpatrick include one featuring silhouette caricatures of the play’s romantic couples in a style alluding to *Mukinupin*’s historical setting. Another programme incorporates an artwork by Australian

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

²² Gilbert indicates the need for a more detailed performance analysis to account for the ways in which metatheatrical techniques like Hewett’s use of on-stage costuming have been interpreted in production and received by audiences. See Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 231-33.

²³ Fitzpatrick, “Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama,” 102-6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

artist Russell Drysdale.²⁵ Entitled “Children Dancing,” Drysdale’s painting depicts a young girl dancing in an abstract landscape. The dark skin of the figure, as Dunstone points out, contrasts with her white dress, thereby alluding to the play’s racial theme.²⁶ In his analysis of these designs, Fitzpatrick states that:

What these little pieces of ancillary production evidence suggest is a particularly protean piece of theatre. All the elements on which the program designers have chosen to focus are justifiable from a reading of the written text, although none of them is a direct reflection of the plot itself.²⁷

This reading highlights not only *Mukinupin*’s multiplicity of themes but the way in which its own recorded production history suggests an underlying complexity that cannot be grasped simply through reading the text. My own analysis thus attends particularly to the play in performance, building upon and extending Fitzpatrick’s argument.

In light of recent improvements in processes of archiving and recording Australian theatrical productions, there has of late been an expansion in the body of documentary material available for the kind of performance analysis suggested by Fitzpatrick. A particular example is the DVD recording of the Melbourne Theatre Company/Company B production of *The Man from Mukinupin* in 2009.²⁸ Using this recording and other archival materials, this chapter explores *Mukinupin*’s metatheatrical engagement with themes including race and theatre history. It demonstrates how Hewett’s metatheatre not only contributes to the play’s canonical status, specifically through its citation of

²⁵ A copy of “Children Dancing” by Russell Drysdale was reproduced by kind permission of Mr Mervyn Horton as the cover for a 1981 Sydney production. See *Programme for The Man from Mukinupin* directed by Rodney Fisher for the Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, 1981, Archival Papers for *The Man from Mukinupin*, Sydney Theatre Company Archives.

²⁶ Fitzpatrick also describes how in another programme, from a Queensland production emphasising themes of landscape and Aboriginal experience, a “prettified version of an Aboriginal painting” featuring a carved goanna and butterflies was used as the central image. In 1990, coinciding with the year in which Hewett’s autobiographical novel *Wild Card* was published, the programme designed for a student production at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), Sydney, featured a photographic image of Hewett and her sister, standing before a signpost pointing to the West Australian rural town of their childhood, Wicpepin. By emphasising, photographically, the personal connection between Hewett and the play’s rural setting, this design thereby highlighted the autobiographical element of the play, aligning it with Hewett’s own autobiography.

²⁷ Fitzpatrick, “Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama,” 105.

²⁸ *Archival Recording of The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Wesley Enoch for Melbourne Theatre Company and Company B Belvoir, recorded on May 7, 2009 during a public performance at Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, DVD, Belvoir Archives. Hereafter Belvoir, *Archival Recording of The Man from Mukinupin*.

Australian theatre history, but allows what might otherwise be a straightforward celebration of Australian culture, to offer a profound, if subtle critique.

An understanding of Hewett's metatheatre in this work is vital as it represents a starting point and inroad not only to the study of Hewett's oeuvre, which has previously presented challenges to critics due to its "unconventional" engagement with dramatic form in the context of mid to late twentieth century dramatic realism, but also to the broader understanding of post-war Australian metatheatre. Such analysis in turn offers insights into the metatheatrical works of other Australian playwrights, including Louis Nowra, whose work will be discussed subsequently. The chapter begins with a discussion of the play's genesis, using a previously unexamined document from Hewett's archives at the National Library Australia. This is followed by a detailed outline of the play's events and themes, designed to facilitate a closer understanding of the metatheatrical strategies employed within it. Drawing on archival production records, the chapter then explores the ways in which themes of race and theatre history have been realised in productions and, particularly, how Hewett's metatheatre has been interpreted in relation to these themes. The productions examined here have been chosen primarily on account of the availability of archival materials. Among them, are: The 1979 premiere of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Stephen Barry for The National Theatre of Western Australia; the 1981 productions by Melbourne Theatre Company, directed by Judith Alexander, and by the Sydney Theatre Company, directed by Rodney Fisher; the 1988 Bicentennial production, directed by Kingston Anderson for the Western Australian Theatre Company; and the 2009 production by Melbourne Theatre Company and Company B Belvoir, directed by Wesley Enoch. Throughout the discussion, consideration will be given to the range of approaches that have been taken by practitioners and the extent to which Hewett's historicising metatheatre continues to speak to current Australian cultural concerns, particularly about race and "reconciliation."

1.2 "GENESIS": "A CELEBRATORY PLAY WITH RECONCILIATION BUILT INTO IT."

The origins of *The Man from Mukinupin* are outlined in a document held in Dorothy Hewett's papers at the National Library of Australia.²⁹ Typewritten by the playwright and also including a number of hand written notes, the document is not dated, but appears to have been written after the play's first production, possibly as a draft for a programme note in a subsequent season of the play. This four page reflection, which Hewett has titled "Genesis," has not yet been examined in any critical discussions of *The Man from Mukinupin*. The document (see Appendix A) provides insights into: the rationale behind *The Man from Mukinupin*; the theatrical and other influences informing the play and, crucially for the purposes of this thesis, factors contributing to her metatheatrical approach. In the opening lines of "Genesis," Hewett recalls the details of her commission by the National Theatre of Western Australia. Given the occasion of 1979 sesquicentenary, she had been asked to write "a celebratory play with reconciliation built into it."³⁰ This was a paradoxical request, since it asked for a celebration of Anglo-Australian culture while also attempting to reconcile a past that included the brutal destruction of the Indigenous population. In response to this commission, Hewett created a work that celebrates Australian culture and history (including its theatrical history) whilst simultaneously examining relations between "white" post-colonial Australians and the country's Indigenous inhabitants. This racial theme is addressed in a number of ways throughout the play, including in the metatheatrical character doubling of Polly Perkins the white Australian heroine, with an ironically named half-caste half-sister Lily. In addition, Hewett alludes to real-life historical events through her play's reference to a massacre of Indigenous Australians in the creek bed years earlier. Including an acknowledgment of a dark aspect of Australia's post-colonial history, the genocide of its Aboriginal people, Hewett's recognition of such events lies at the heart of her treatment of the racial theme and is salient in her interpretation of "reconciliation."

Despite the fact that in 1979 the term "reconciliation" had not yet infiltrated the public or political lexicon in relation to Indigenous issues, Hewett's take on this theme used

²⁹ Dorothy Hewett, "Genesis," an outline of Hewett's influences and process of writing *The Man from Mukinupin* for the 1979 Perth sesquicentenary, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, Subseries 4.13, Folder 27. Hereafter "Genesis."

³⁰ Ibid.

metheatrical strategies to provide a powerful counterdiscourse to the play's celebration of Australian culture by suggesting that any reflection on the nation's historical achievements at the time of the Perth sesquicentenary must also take into account its treatment, or more accurately, mistreatment, of Indigenous people. In this sense, Hewett's interpretation of "reconciliation" reflects a growing contemporary concern with relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Four years later, incoming Prime Minister Bob Hawke would use the term as part of his election campaign, which ran "on a platform of 'national reconciliation, national recovery and national reconstruction under the slogan 'Bringing Australia Together.'"³¹ Although Hawke's concept of reconciliation was broadly conceived and not, therefore, exclusive to Indigenous relations, his notion of the term "as it might [be] applied to Indigenous Affairs policy"³² was a feature of his speech delivered at the Labor Party's campaign launch, in which he posited that:

Another area of unresolved conflict involves the Aboriginal people of this country – the first Australians. As a group, they continue to experience the worst health, housing, employment, education, and the greatest poverty and despair. While this situation persists, we can never truly bring this country together.³³

The Hawke Labor Party's concept of reconciliation as it pertained to Indigenous issues was again raised later the same year in a speech given by Aboriginal Affairs Minister Clyde Holding. In outlining his vision of reconciliation as part of a systematic, governmental approach for addressing Indigenous disadvantage, Holding highlighted the need to "establish" more clearly the "principles of reconciliation," particularly in view of the forthcoming 1988 Bicentenary of post-colonial British settlement.³⁴ This emphasis on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was reiterated in a number of political speeches throughout the coming decade, including Hawke's 1988 Australia Day address, in which the Prime Minister again "committed his government 'and the Australian people to an earnest and continuing effort of rectification and reconciliation with Aboriginal people.'"³⁵

³¹ Bob Hawke, cited in Angela Pratt, *Practising Reconciliation? The Politics of Reconciliation in the Australian Parliament, 1991-2000* (Parliament of Australia: Department of Parliamentary Services, 2003).

³² Pratt, *Practising Reconciliation?*, 5.

³³ Hawke, cited in Pratt, *Practising Reconciliation?*, 5.

³⁴ Clyde Holding, cited in Pratt, *Practising Reconciliation?*, 5-6.

³⁵ Hawke, cited in Pratt, *Practising Reconciliation?*, 12.

Although the idea of reconciliation was not linked to any official government policy throughout the 1980s, its use in political discussions such as those mentioned above reflects the growing concern at that time with Indigenous relations. In the following decade, the term reconciliation would become ubiquitous in Australian politics, beginning, Pratt argues, with the foundation of the National Council for Reconciliation in 1991. Writing in 2003, Pratt suggests that:

Since the *Council for Reconciliation Act* passed through the Australian Parliament...the term 'reconciliation' has become part of the *lingua franca* of Australian politics and public life. 'Reconciliation' is now a key idea in debates about Indigenous Affairs policy in Australia, and discussions about Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations more generally.³⁶

In light of this history, Hewett's interpretation of reconciliation in 1979 is, in some respects, forward looking, though it might also be argued that her focus on the nation's past treatment of Aboriginal people was a logical element of the playwright's examination of Australia in the lead up to the celebration of the West Australian sesquicentenary.

In "Genesis," Hewett also alludes to another, more personal interpretation of "reconciliation" that can be seen to have informed her approach to writing the sesquicentennial play. Specifically, Hewett describes the idea of reconciliation as a personal challenge, requiring her to come to terms with (or "reconcile") unresolved conflicts within her own artistic identity and career. These conflicts included the critical and box-office failure of her then most recent play *Pandora's Cross*, and her sense of having been rejected by Western Australian audiences.

Originally from Western Australia, Hewett had lived and worked in Sydney throughout the 1950s. After beginning her play writing career in Perth during the 1960s, she had returned to Sydney in 1974 and it is here that *Pandora's Cross*, a poetic, musical play based on the "inner-city suburb of King's Cross," is set.³⁷ In its depiction of what was then an eclectic, artistic hub, the play examines the impact of "progress" upon Australian society and the role of the artist within it.³⁸ Written for the newly formed Paris Hat theatre company, *Pandora's Cross* was directed by Jim Sharman and staged in the company's

³⁶ Pratt, *Practising Reconciliation?*, vii.

³⁷ Hewett, *The Man from Mukimpin*, ii; Margaret Williams, *The Feminine as Subversion*, 81.

³⁸ Williams, *The Feminine as Subversion*, 81.

proscenium arch style theatre, also located in "The Cross."³⁹ Scheduled as part of a season of new Australian works, alongside *Visions* by Louis Nowra, the play was forced to close early after failing at the box-office; the Paris Hat theatre company shut down soon after.⁴⁰

On the back of criticisms of *Pandora's Cross* and a sense of personal responsibility for the failure of the Paris Hat company, Hewett initially struggled in the requirement to write a celebratory play incorporating reconciliation. Yet as she observes in her notes, this was an "obvious choice" of tone for the occasion of the sesquicentenary.⁴¹ In accepting this, she appears to have recognised an opportunity for a kind of personal, artistic, reconciliation, as well as embracing the opportunity to engage with the idea of reconciliation in relation to the Indigenous aspect of a national "celebration."

The personal angle of Hewett's response to the reconciliation theme is reflected in her account, in "Genesis," of her realisation that this occasion was "maybe the time to make peace with [her] beginnings."⁴² Indeed, in writing *Mukinupin*, the playwright was required to return to her origins in more than one respect. Hewett's return to Western Australia for the sesquicentennial project necessitated a kind of artistic reconciliation in response to criticisms angled at her perceived abandonment of her home state.⁴³ A return to origins was also implied in the setting of the play; as well as being staged in Western Australia, the nature of the project suggested the work should be place-specific in content. In creating the setting, Hewett therefore drew heavily upon her own memories of childhood in the early decades of the twentieth century, having spent the first twelve years of her life on a farm in Wickiepin, a remote Western Australian town. In "Genesis," the playwright describes her "discovery" of "the place" in which the play is set:

A WA country town...in the years 1912-1920 [...] I went to the stories told on the jarrah verandahs...my grandparents' and parents' memories...THE SETTING...how to create it...OPEN SPACED the people dwarfed by the landscape in their anachronistic clothes. The mixture of Australian pioneer life, the English memories, the epic quality of the figures in a landscape from Drysdale...⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid. Williams explains that "The Cross" is the name by which King's Cross is known among locals.

⁴⁰ Rex Cramphorn, introduction to *Visions* by Louis Nowra (Sydney: Currency Press, 1979): vii-xii.

⁴¹ Hewett, "Genesis."

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dorothy Hewett, "Writers View," *Theatre Australia* (1979), printed in programme for *The Man from Mukinupin*, production directed by Kevin Palmer, State Theatre Company, Adelaide, 1980, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, Subseries 4.13, Folder 27.

⁴⁴ Hewett, "Genesis." Capitalisations are Hewett's own.

Hewett's notes also offer insights into the purpose of the play's historicised setting. The playwright describes the war-time context of her chosen timeframe as being "far enough away for an idyllic haze, near enough for impact."⁴⁵ This note suggests that Hewett was conscious of the need for its examination of Australian culture to be meaningful for contemporary audiences. In choosing a setting from the recent historical past, the playwright seems to have been aiming to create a condition of viewing conducive to critical reflection. The "idyllic haze" of recent cultural memory would, or so she suggests, complement the play's requirement for celebration, while its proximity to contemporary experience would facilitate elements of critique.

In formulating the element of celebration for the play, Hewett explains how she began by listing rural celebrations from Australian life. These included "country shows [and] country dances [...] sheep shearing, ploughing, seeding, harvesting, flood, fire, drought, storm and rain...the seasons themselves."⁴⁶ As well as illuminating Hewett's conception of the Australian landscape, these reflections in "Genesis" highlight the dimensions of celebration which the playwright explores in the play; the *Man from Mukinupin* can thus be seen as a celebration of post-colonial Australian society, the society of her own childhood memory, and a celebration of life more broadly.

It was in the process of discovering an angle for the play's mood of celebration that theatrical traditions and, with these, metatheatrical strategies, can be seen to have entered into Hewett's concept for *The Man from Mukinupin*, thus demonstrating the integral nature of metatheatrical strategies to the play's overall purpose. "I deliberately read Shakespeare's great romantic comedies again," the writer explains, "*As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and for a shaft of magical darkness *The Tempest*."⁴⁷ Hewett also includes childhood recollections of a wide range of theatrical events, from local entertainments to touring musical comedy and Shakespearean productions. As demonstrated below, these influences (many of which are in themselves metatheatrical) had a profound impact upon the play's characterisation as well as its holding in tension of celebration and critique.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Childhood recollections of theatrical entertainments seen in rural Western Australia provided the direct basis for many of the characters of the play, for example the Hummer sisters, Mukinupin's narrator figures who are characterised as former entertainers. These theatrical creations were based upon her early memories of visits to Wirths' Circus and the musical comedy of J.C. Williamson's.⁴⁸ J.C. Williamson's, founded in 1882 by an American immigrant of the same name, was a significant force in popular theatre in Australia throughout the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Specialising in musical comedies, operas and vaudeville, "The Firm" (as it was widely known) programmed shows that had already proven their success in the international market, as well as fostering local talent.⁴⁹ Wirth Brothers (Wirth Bros) was arguably Australia's most successful travelling circus throughout the same period. With its range of acrobatic and animal circus acts, it drew on traditions of the modern circus that had been established in England during the years immediately preceding British settlement of Australia. Among these were the acts of famous equestrian performer May Wirth and Con Colleano, an Indigenous Australian acrobat and tightrope walker respectively.⁵⁰ Hewett's characterisation of the Hummer sisters in relation to these institutions is one example of the way in which her play references the broad spectrum of (meta)theatre history in Australia and will be discussed in further detail below.

"Real-life" theatrical memories (once again, in line with Hornby's analysis) are also reflected in the characters Max and Mercy Montebello. Although not mentioned in "Genesis", these characters are described elsewhere, including in Hewett's autobiography, as originating in her memory of veteran Shakespearean actor "Max Montesole" coming to the Town Hall to play *Othello*.⁵¹ As newspaper records from the time reveal, Montesole travelled throughout Australia, offering performances of scenes from Shakespeare and other classic works. Among the scenes performed with his Australian wife Elsie Mackay, was Act Five scene two from *Othello*, Montesole appearing as "The Moor" and Mackay as Desdemona. An article from *The Albany*

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Katharine Brisbane, ed., *Entertaining Australia: an illustrated history* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), 78.

⁵⁰ Mark St Leon, *Circus: The Australian Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2011), 163-207.

⁵¹ Dorothy Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958* (Ringwood, VIC: McPhee Gribble, 2000), 45. Specifically, Hewett recalls Max Montesole and his wife Elsie Mackay performing "'Excerpts from Shakespeare...The Strangling of Desdemona.'" It is unclear whether the scene was performed under this title or whether this is Hewett's own label for the performance of Montesole and Mackay's performance of *Othello* Act Five scene two.

Advertiser, April 1935, mentions this performance along with the range of other scenes presented by the travelling entertainers. In it, Montesole is described as “a powerful character actor ... his vivid portrayals of various scenes the work of a finished artist.”⁵² As part of a tradition of touring actors that continued in Australia until as late as the 1960s, Montesole represents one of the ways in which Hewett’s celebration of Australian history incorporates theatre history itself into the story told (or re-told) by *Mukinupin*.⁵³ There are also a number of racial dimensions to the metatheatrical performance of *The Man from Mukinupin* which are considered in the subsequent outline and production analysis.

Other theatrical memories and references to the Australian theatrical tradition from which they are drawn are reflected in the play’s incorporation of melodrama, vaudeville and music hall, along with other early Australian theatrical institutions outlined in the playwright’s notes. Also mentioned is the wide range of literary, poetic and classical theatrical references incorporated into the play. Hewett lists among these:

Australian folk songs [as reflected in the play’s] Fremantle Jail song; English rural traditions ‘The Five Man’s Morris’ and ‘The Hobby;’ English drawing room recitations - anything from Longfellow and Tennyson to Henry Lawson [along with] Literary memories, tags and quotations...The influence in the narrator figures The Hummer sisters and the cadences of their orchestrated voices [from Dylan Thomas] *Under Milkwood*.⁵⁴

In “Genesis,” having outlined the major sources of her inspiration, Hewett finally describes the process of fitting all these “disparate strands” together, thus weaving them into a play that would meet the requirements of her brief.⁵⁵ Having envisaged the town of Mukinupin and its celebratory romantic comedy, Hewett recalls pondering how she would then “darken the sunny world of the country store.”⁵⁶ It is here that the playwright recollects her vision of “the dark end of the town,” which she would aim to keep in “precarious balance” with the play’s romantic comedy “until the end.”⁵⁷ The answer to this challenge appears to have been found part in metatheatrical reference to Shakespeare and, in part, through the inspiration of Jim Cotter’s music.

⁵² “Max Montesole,” *Albany Advertiser*, April 25, 1925, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article70241757>.

⁵³ Philip Parsons with Victoria Chance, ed., *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1997 revised, abridged), 281.

⁵⁴ Hewett, “Genesis.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The “weird night music” is mentioned in “Genesis” as having been one of the starting points for the play.⁵⁸ It is central to the precarious balance described above as it underscores each of the scenes set in the “dark end of town.” Originally titled “piece for merry-go-round,” this music was composed for the merry-go-round in Canberra city and was incorporated into the play as an underscore to its night-time scenes.⁵⁹ Designed to create a mood of uncertainty, it incorporates what one reviewer called “eerie aboriginal cadences” and uses a series of sounds which help convey some of the play’s most important ideas, in particular the disturbing treatment of Australia’s Indigenous people by English post-colonial settlers.⁶⁰ Cotter’s music, together with Hewett’s personal memory of the merry-go-round, was integral to her early conception of the play, the circular nature of the merry-go-round seemingly symbolic of the play’s own circular structure.

Hewett had originally linked the music to her vision of an on-stage merry go-round, the image of which, according to her first manuscript, would mark the beginning and ending of the play. Instead, as she points out in “Genesis,” the on-stage structure was omitted but the music retained, “adapted for the opening with the voices of the town on tape (shades of MILKWOOD) and a circular dance of the Five Man’s Morris...taken from the Nine Man’s Morris is filled up with Mud (M.Night’s Dream).”⁶¹ Supporting the play’s cyclical pattern, the music was then used throughout the play, evoking life’s cycles, firstly in its aural reference to the merry-go-round, but also in its own repetition. Contributing to this overall effect, the play’s ending incorporates the Mकिनupin townspeople in a “song and dance” routine entitled “The Mकिनupin Carousel.”⁶² This number ties together the action of the play in a sequence that Hewett describes as “circular and reconciliatory in mood.”⁶³ Sung by all the play’s characters, it encores Mकिनupin’s history, but also history more broadly in the context of the play’s relevance to contemporary audiences, referencing the role of the past, birth, death and the reconciliation of white Australia with the land and with Indigenous people. Jim Cotter’s music combined with Hewett’s lyrics also remind the play’s audience of the links between life as depicted on stage and “real-life” beyond.

⁵⁸ Hewett, “Genesis.”

⁵⁹ “Reading the land,” *Iconophilia*, accessed March 14 2013, <http://iconophilia.net/reading-the-land>.

⁶⁰ Mardy Amos, review of *The Man from Mकिनupin*, directed by Stephen Barry, National Theatre Company, The Playhouse, Perth, *The Australian*, September 6, 1979, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, series 7, folder 4, box 32.

⁶¹ Hewett, “Genesis.”

⁶² Hewett, *The Man from Mकिनupin*, 116.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

This typically metatheatrical theme is effected through references to the act of “closing the curtain,” the first being a metaphor for human death, the latter a more literal reference to the end of the theatrical event at hand.⁶⁴ By deliberately placing these references together in the text, Hewett actively invites audiences to engage in her own staging of the classical *theatrum mundi* metaphor, whereby life on stage can be seen to reflect life beyond and vice versa. Also crucial to note in relation to this song and the circular nature of the play, is that it can be interpreted in different ways. While described by Hewett as reconciliatory, it is also possible, as the playwright’s account of Mukinupin’s genesis reminds us, to read the cycle as containing the possibility for the repetition of past events. It can therefore be argued that, while the ending of the play is joyful in tone, it is only ever *cautiously* so.

1.3 *OUTLINE OF THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN: A WORK OF METATHEATRE*

The Man from Mukinupin begins with a metatheatrical performance. Reflecting its circular, theatrical, structure, it also begins where it ends – in darkness. Against this background of darkness, the opening scene is set by an audio sound track of recorded (or live) music (depending upon the approach taken in production), which combines with overlapping voices to create “*the mood of night and eeriness*.”⁶⁵ In a half page of fragmented half-sentences and repeated words, the un-identified voices of this night-time ceremony create a poetic soundscape which, abstract in the context of the play’s introductory scene, is echoed at later moments in a kind of thematic refrain. The characters who participate in this opening chorus are: Zeek Tuesday, star-gazer and water diviner; the Widow Tuesday, a destitute fringe-dweller; Harry Tuesday her “no-hoper” drunkard son and Lily Perkins, half-Aborigine and outcast known to the Mukinupin townspeople as “Touch of the Tar.” Also among the voices, though like the characters above, unseen and unidentified during this opening sequence, is Edie Perkins, who moans, in an eerie citation of Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth*, “Wash your hands...put on your nightgown...don’t look so pale.”⁶⁶ These cries resonate with the diviner’s chant of

⁶⁴ In the third verse, Eck and Edie sing “Fire and blood and sand and water, the church bells toll for the storekeeper’s daughter, birth and magic and moth and rust, close the curtain because we must.” In the following verse, Clarry and Clemmy sing “Love-in-the-mist and salvation jane, down in the creekbed praying for rain, ring a roses and round we go, close the curtain and end the show.” Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 122.

⁶⁵ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

“Water...Water...Water...,”⁶⁷ and the wild laughter of the town Flasher, whose shadow is projected “*against the back scrim palely lit*” as the night music rises to its crescendo.⁶⁸

It is only after the creation of this opening soundscape that the metatheatrical ceremony of Mukinupin’s night-time characters can officially begin. The commencement of this metatheatrical performance is marked by Clemmy Hummer. Described by Hewett as an “ex-tightrope walker from Wirth’s circus,” and “mistress of ceremonies for the night people,” Clemmy initiates the ceremony-within and also, arguably, the performance of the play at large, by “*knocking on-stage with her crutch*.”⁶⁹ In the following moments, the townspeople of Mukinupin enact a rural fertility ritual as they dance and sing “The Five Man’s Morris.”⁷⁰ Unrecognisable as the characters they will momentarily become, Zeek, Harry, Touch of the Tar and Widow Tuesday are the dancers of the scene. “*They are each*,” Hewett specifies, “*carrying pitchforks and dressed in gum boots and wheat sheaves so that they look like moving haystacks*.”⁷¹ In lyrics that describe the process of working the Mukinupin wheat fields, the performers of this night-time ritual anticipate the successful completion of the harvest. There is also a symbolic linking of the end of the harvest with the romantic plot introduced in the following scene, as the performers sing of how they will dance “On Polly [Perkins’] Wedding Day.”⁷² Here, as in traditional pagan fertility ceremonies enacted in rural English towns, the end of harvest will be celebrated by consummation of young romances, accompanied by the dancing of the Five Man’s Morris and communal celebration.

As this song and, with it, the night-time ceremonial draws to its close, the dancers exit and Hewett’s stage directions indicate that Clemmy Hummer turns downstage. It is only now, facing the audience, that she identifies the dancers by name, bidding each of them goodnight as they exit the stage. As Clemmy takes her seat downstage, where she is soon joined by her sister Clarry, night-time gives way to daylight. Formerly a wardrobe mistress for J.C. Williamson’s, Clarry Hummer is now the local dressmaker in Mukinupin, the fictional Western Australian small town in which the play is set. Together,

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3-5.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

the Hummer sisters are the “presenters of the play.”⁷³ Described by Hewett as “narrative chorus,” they comment upon and, at times, officiate, on-stage events.⁷⁴ Throughout the play, the sisters also draw attention to the broad (meta)theatrical metaphor whereby the passing of on-stage time and events is shown to be representative of life itself. This function is indicated in the sisters’ ongoing commentary on time (both theatrical and real), the passing of seasons, and the way in which Hewett connects their conclusion of the play’s events with the idea of death, as outlined below.

From here the work is divided into two acts, spanning the years of the First World War; Act One begins in 1912 and ends in 1914, while Act Two takes place between 1918 and 1920, in the war’s immediate aftermath. Within this two act structure, the action is divided into a series of episodic scenes which alternate between night and day. This cycle, beginning with the night-time ceremonial described above, reflects the time-cycles of daily life, but also the passing of theatrical time and, symbolised within both of these, the cycle of life itself.

This division of *The Man from Mukinupin* into day-time and night-time scenes also reflects a split within the fictional setting whereby characters of one plot occupy primary roles in the day-time realm and others, including those “outcast” members of society identified above, are connected with the dark-side of town. As such, these characters belong to the Mukinupin night. However, the split between the play’s day-time and night-time realms is not straightforward. As Margaret Williams argues, the division is deliberately complicated, seemingly with the purpose of suggesting that, contrary to appearances, day-time and night-time elements are not mutually exclusive.⁷⁵ That cross-over between these worlds exists is indicated clearly in the use of metatheatrical character doubling whereby the actors playing characters from the outcast world of Mukinupin night also take on roles of siblings in the day-time world. Thus Lily/Touch of the Tar doubles with Polly Perkins, her Anglo-Celtic half-sister and Mukinupin sweetheart. Nohoper Harry doubles with a more respectable twin, shop-boy Jack Tuesday, and star-gazer Zeek doubles with a twin brother “Eek,” seemingly upright citizen and father to both Polly and Touch of the Tar. Further doublings include the outcast Widow Tuesday’s

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴ Dorothy Hewett, “Creating Heroines in Australian Plays,” *Hecate* 5, no.2 (1979): 79.

⁷⁵ Williams, *Dorothy Hewett: The Feminine as Subversion*, 95-96.

pairing with presenter of the play Clarry Hummer, while the Flasher of the night-time realm is *triple* cast with day-time character Cecil Brunner and travelling actor Max Montebello. The use of character doubling, as Williams asserts, creates a visual connection between day-time and night-time realms whereby the audience is encouraged to consider connections between the two worlds.⁷⁶ The implications of this metatheatrical strategy will become clearer upon a complete outline of the play's events.

Following the night-time ceremony of Act One, morning lights come up on the cardboard facade of the Mukinupin Town Hall. As the day-time residents of Mukinupin enter the stage, the Hummers offer brief but pertinent insights into each character. Throughout this sequence of sisterly gossip, the narrators signal awareness of their own theatricality by embellishing sensitive parts of the exposition with overtly self-conscious stage whispers. In this way, viewers learn of Eek Perkins's history of encounters with the town's Aboriginal women as Clemmy discloses his reputation as a "Gin jockey."⁷⁷ It is later revealed that Eek, at the bidding of his wife and other townspeople, led the massacre of the local Aboriginal people in the creekbed some years earlier. Eek's wife, Edie Perkins, is the second character of Mukinupin's day-time world to be introduced by the Hummer sisters. She is heard before she is seen, a device that may be intended to reflect her passive role in past events. Throughout the play, much of Edie's dialogue is metatheatrically performed as she self-consciously recites a selection of English canonical poems. Dressed in a Victorian outfit, Edie evokes the image of those British colonials who, as recalled by Hewett, still referred to England as "home."⁷⁸

In the following sequence, Hewett sets the foundation for the play's main comic-romantic plot. This involves a rivalry between Jack and Cecil Brunner for the affections of Polly Perkins. Jack, as shop-boy and son of the outcast Widow Tuesday, is not considered to be a suitable candidate by Polly's conservative parents. Travelling lingerie salesman Cecil Brunner is their preferred suitor: however Polly's affections lie with Jack. As the complications of this love triangle unfold, Hewett's action is interspersed with a number of songs and recitations. These, like Polly's entrance, suggest an exaggerated theatrical style, as though to indicate an awareness of the play's engagement with the conventions

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁷ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 8.

⁷⁸ Dorothy Hewett, interview by Bill Dunstone, *Australian Playwrights Speak*. In this interview, Hewett says "I think I'm old enough to remember grandparents who still referred to England as home."

of the romantic comedy. In one song, "Polly Put the Kettle On," a title drawn from the well-known eighteenth century nursery rhyme, Jack and Cecil sing of their respective affections for the heroine. They are joined in the chorus by all the characters of the day-time realm, who celebrate and highlight Polly's status as the town's and, indeed, the play's sweetheart.

In the action that follows, Edie enlists the help of the Hummer sisters in transforming Polly from adolescent girl to young woman. This is enacted via a sequence of on-stage costuming, in which Clarry, as ex-wardrobe mistress and town seamstress, fits and dresses Polly in a fashionable "beaded pink georgette" frock.⁷⁹ This metatheatrical performance of Polly's coming-of age, which is examined at length by Helen Gilbert, reflects not only society's designation of gender roles, but the on-stage making of the actress, a function highlighted in the theatrical Hummer sisters' likening of the newly costumed Polly to famous actresses of the day.⁸⁰

The costuming is also symbolic of the passing of time and the coming of age of Australia as a post-colonial nation, highlighted in this scene via a song performed in the moments after Polly's on-stage costuming. The song's lyrics mark the transition of seasons, from the spring previously suggested in Edie's recitation of Tennyson's "May Queen," a poem evocative of Polly's youth, to summer and beyond. Hewett's stage directions indicate that this song is delivered from centre stage and, like Edie's recitations, in a self-consciously theatrical style.⁸¹ Other events of this first day-time cycle of action include the performance of a play-within-the-play, enacted for the entertainment of the townsfolk by a troupe of travelling performers. In a Shakespearean performance combining two scenes from *Othello*, the itinerant Italian actor Max Montebello and his partner, Mercy re-enact "The Strangling of Desdemona."⁸² The racial dimensions of the scene, highlighted and complicated by Montebello's self-casting as an Italian *Othello*, operate in the context of the metatheatrical play-within-the-play to reflect the town's own racial conflicts. In particular, the violent event of strangling of Desdemona and the related racial dimension

⁷⁹ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 18.

⁸⁰ Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 171-72.

⁸¹ Williams discusses the play's potential reading as a metaphor for Australia's process of maturity. See Williams, *Dorothy Hewett: The Feminine as Subversion*.

⁸² Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 26-30. Two separate scenes from Shakespeare's play (Act Four scene three and Act five scene two) are conflated in the Montebellos' performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona."

of Shakespeare's theatrical couple, resonate with Mukinupin's own history of racial violence as will be discussed in further detail below.

Following a comic intervention in which Jack Tuesday, confusing art with life, tries to thwart Othello's efforts to strangle Desdemona, Jack is invited to contribute to the evening's events with a performance of his own. This leads to a further complication in the comic romantic plot in which the young man, seduced by the experience of performance (and in part, the flirtations of Mercy Montebello) toys with a newfound desire to become an actor. Unable to convince Polly to join him in his adventure – an adventure which will afford them both an escape from Mukinupin and the past – Jack opts for the alternative “action” of becoming a player on the international stage, enlisting to become a soldier.

Following another visit to Polly by the hopeful Cecil Brunner, this first display of Mukinupin's day-time world concludes with a musical performance in which the residents of Mukinupin “sing [*Jack Tuesday*] off to the war.”⁸³ Evocative of patriotic war-time tunes, this song is entitled “Your Country Needs You in the Trenches” and is accompanied by a dance in which the Misses Hummer wave a large Australian flag.⁸⁴ As the day draws to a close, the people of Mukinupin, celebrating Jack's pending participation in world events, exit the stage.

The transition of time, here from day to night, is again observed by the two Hummer sisters. Hewett's stage directions indicate that “*the night sounds begin as the stage darkens...A last crow calls, a dingo howls, an insect begins tapping; there is a wolf whistle, a coo-ee, then a wild scream.*”⁸⁵ As the soundscape is re-introduced there is a sense of imminent danger. Seemingly in response to the change in atmosphere, the sisters are reminded of the dark events that occurred in the creek-bed years earlier; Clemmy recalls “the blacks like wild ducks crying under the guns” while Clarry remembers the omen of a sky “full of crows.”⁸⁶ They are joined by characters Zeek and Polly Perkins, both searching – Zeek for “stars and water,” Polly for Jack Tuesday. As Clemmy questions her purpose in “stray[ing] down the wrong side of town after dark,” other

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

characters of the night-time realm occupy positions on the stage and as the scene unfolds their various warnings to Polly combined with a series of chants and screams, contribute to the developing sense of foreboding.⁸⁷ Here, as in the first scene of the play, it is only when Clemmy knocks on stage for silence that the night-time ceremony officially begins. The ceremony now played out involves the ritual of the Hobby Horse, accompanied by distinct, sinister music. The creature is summonsed by the ceremony's participants, members of the night-time realm, who call to it in a circular chant. The Hobby Horse is played by Harry Tuesday, who enters wearing "*a simulated horse's head skull on a broomstick, with glass bottles for eyesockets and a lolling red tongue.*"⁸⁸ During the proceedings, the Hobby Horse carries Polly off stage and, although the audience is later given the information that she has not been harmed, there is a sense in which this ritual and the ceremony as a whole, are unresolved and uncertain.

The ceremony over, Harry Tuesday returns to stage, no longer in his Hobby Horse disguise, and relates in a song the story of his time in Fremantle jail to the other night-time characters. Upon his release, Harry has come looking for Touch of the Tar. Romantically linked, this pair is a night-time counterpart for the day-time pairing of Jack Tuesday and Polly. Unable to find her, and learning of his brother's recent enlistment, he resolves to "do the same" as Jack.⁸⁹ Just moments after his departure, Touch of the Tar/Lily arrives on the scene. Disappointed to find he has not waited for her, she strikes up with Jack who, drunk and on the eve of his own departure, has wandered down near the creekbed. Here, at the site of the massacre of Lily Perkins' people, the two disappointed lovers keep each other company for the night. As the pair makes their way down to the creekbed, Hewett's stage directions read that Clemmy sits dozing in her wicker chair. A voice is heard from off-stage, approaching and reciting mournfully. In the scene that follows, Edie Perkins appears, dressed in a long white nightgown. In a sequence of action that echoes the sleepwalking of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth (first evoked during the play's opening through Edie's moaning "Wash your hands...put on your nightgown...don't look so pale") she "*circles the stage, wringing her hands*" trying to cleanse herself of the blood with which she has been marked.⁹⁰ Beyond the allusion to Lady Macbeth's guilt for crimes committed, Edie's dialogue incorporates intertextual

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 55

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5, 58-59.

references to a poem that links her guilt directly to her own and, symbolically, Australia's complicity in the genocide of the Aboriginal people.⁹¹

In Act Two, it is the celebratory tone of Hewett's drama that prevails, while the critique embedded in the play's night-time sequences remains, conspicuously, just beneath the surface. At the start of the act, Mukinupin's day-time characters celebrate news of Armistice. The end of war is commemorated in a metatheatrical ceremony-within-the-play, performed as a kind of welcome home for their supposed war hero Jack Tuesday. As the townsfolk gather outside the Mukinupin Town Hall,

*They all sing a wartime medley beginning with 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' and the churchbells ring out...During the songs EEK and CECIL exit and bring back a huge boomerang of flowers, the HUMMER SISTERS exit, return dressed in their best, carrying a floral star five feet across.*⁹²

The celebratory mood of this ceremony is momentarily subverted by Jack's "bewildered" response. Jack's revelation that it is Harry, not he, who has performed heroic acts, serves as an embarrassing anti-climax and the ceremony quickly dissolves before the true war hero is acknowledged.

*EEK exits, disgusted, with CECIL. EDIE and the HUMMER SISTERS gather up the floral tributes and exit.*⁹³

Mukinupin (and Australia's) celebration of its performance on the international stage is not deferred for long, however, and shortly after the ceremony dissipates:

*EEK and CECIL re-enter with ladder and bunting, and put up a large sign in front of the Mukinupin Town Hall. It reads 'LEST WE FORGET'. The MISSES HUMMER enter, staggering under a cardboard statue of a soldier with a kelpie dog at his feet. They set it all in place and when they have all finished their respective jobs they exit.*⁹⁴

From this point, much of the action within Act Two is concerned with the resolution of the play's main comic-romantic plot. This outcome is reached in the act's second day-time scene, after minor complications that almost result in Polly's marriage to the lingerie salesman. Jack, following his return from war, is reluctant to resume his previous

⁹¹ The poem referred to is *The Aborigines* by Mary Gilmore. A copy of this poem in full was included in the programme for the production *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Kevin Palmer, State Theatre Company of South Australia, 1980, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, series 4.13, folder 27. See also Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 58-59.

⁹²Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 64.

⁹³Ibid., 68.

⁹⁴Ibid., 69.

occupation as Mukinupin shop-boy. Having ventured beyond the confines of the small town, he is restless and eager to live his own life, rather than following a pre-determined path. Conveniently at this point, Mercy Montebello makes a re-appearance. Now travelling alone, following the death of her thespian partner Max, she is searching for a new associate. Mercy's arrival proves convenient for Cecil who, eager to dispose of the threat Jack poses to his own wish to marry Polly, assists her in arranging a business meeting with Jack.

When Polly refuses to join Jack and Mercy in their proposed theatrical venture, Cecil seizes upon the opportunity to propose. Jack, meanwhile, frustrated by Polly's lofty aspirations, stumbles upon *Touch of the Tar* and, in a drunken moment, invites her to join him as Polly's replacement. Asserting that she cannot accompany him dressed in her usual ragged attire, Jack drags the half Aboriginal girl into Perkins' General Store. Here he insists on dressing her, despite Edie Perkins's protests, in the likeness of her half-sister, Polly. In another instance of on-stage costuming, Lily removes her old dress and is dressed up in the colonial outfit of white muslin, black pumps and parasol.

Complications are resolved and the play's celebratory happy ending is finally achieved in the two scenes that follow. First, in a night-time ceremony officiated by stargazer Zeek Perkins, Harry Tuesday is married to Lily. She, having struggled to fit in to the world beyond, has returned to the place of her ancestors and, after the marriage, sets off across the landscape with Harry, in search of Paradise. In another example of Hewett's dramatic intertextuality, Zeek conducts the impromptu wedding using a pocket Shakespeare that he produces from his pack.⁹⁵ In a metatheatrical re-working of the masque performed in Act Four scene one of *The Tempest*, Zeek, along with Clemmy Hummer as mistress of ceremonies, conducts a ceremony-within-the-play that echoes the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. Borrowing from and adapting the text to its Australian setting, this scene echoes *The Tempest*'s wedding in the sense that, like the marriage of Shakespeare's young lovers, the wedding of Harry and Lily symbolises a vision of reconciliation. In this instance, the vision, described by Clemmy (but using Ferdinand's language from *The Tempest*) is "most majestic, and Harmonious charmingly," a reconciliation of elements of Australia's dark past. Lily is representative of white Australia's mistreatment of

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

Indigenous peoples, Harry of its violent past in war and convict heritage.⁹⁶ In a blessing sung by all those in attendance, the harvest song sung by Shakespeare's Juno and Ceres is re-created, voicing hopes of a successful marriage and cultural reconciliation. The "plants" of Shakespeare's harvest song are here substituted for "wheat," making the message more relevant to its Australian recipients. Entitled "The Marriage Song," it is presented in the context of this scene as follows:

- CLEMMY. Honour, riches, marriage – blessing
 FLASHER. Long continuance and increasing,
 ALL. Hourly joys be still upon you
 as we sing our blessings on you.
 Earth's increase and harvests plenty,
 barns and cradles never empty;
 Vines with clustr'ing branches growing,
 wheat with goodly burden bowing.
 Spring come to you from the farthest,
 in the very end of harvest!
 Scarcity and want shall shun you.
 All our blessings now are on you.⁹⁷

Beyond the usefulness of Shakespeare's text in highlighting the theme of reconciliation, Hewett's re-working of the canon can be seen to operate as part of a broader examination of Australian culture. It is significant that the playwright not only incorporates the Shakespeare intertextually; indeed she is at pains to signal its importance by including it in the play's action. Here it becomes a prop for her metatheatrical performance of a vision for Australia's future (a vision which, notably, is hoped for but remains unrealised by the end of the play – Harry and Lily head off, after their wedding, over the salt plains, in search of paradise, but as Clemmy remarks in the play's final moments, "Paradise is Mighty Hard to Find.")⁹⁸ By reinterpreting the Shakespearean text in this manner, Hewett offers what can at once be seen as a celebration of the canon as part of Australian culture and a re-invention of it for the Australian context.

Hewett's (meta)theatrical influences again come into play in the resolution of the comic romantic plot. In the final day-time scene, confusions are resolved in a Shakespearean style double wedding that sees Jack at last married to his sweetheart Polly, whilst Cecil, almost left at the altar, finds a convenient last-minute match in Mercy Montebello. With

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

Jack and Polly departing Mukinupin for a theatrical career, Cecil and Mercy remain behind, and in an ironic nod by Hewett to both the play's outback setting and the contrived nature of this plot, determine to open up a fish and chip shop.

However, at the very moment that loose ends appear to be tied up in a traditional Shakespearean comic resolution, the play refers back to the subversive, night-time wedding that has occurred in a previous scene and raises questions regarding the true possibility of a happy ending. Key to this effect is a moment of dialogue between narrators, Clemmy and Clarry, which occurs in the final moments of the play. As the other on-stage characters take up their positions behind a scrim in a tableau described by Hewett as an "*eternal photograph*," Clemmy and Clarry comment reflectively on the action that has just been played out.⁹⁹ It is here that the audience is reminded, first of the artifice of what they have just seen, but beyond this, that happy endings are not always what they appear to be. As the other characters assume positions in the final tableau, Clarry says briskly:

Time to go, Clemmy. I've locked all the doors, swept
the stage and blessed the place. (*Clemmy rises painfully
to her feet.*)¹⁰⁰

Clarry's references to the physical conditions of the theatre and the actions performed, as though she were a stage manager shutting down the theatre after a performance, can be seen to work here in a Brechtian sense, distancing the audience from the action they have just seen – a position from which they are arguably more detached and critical. Notably, the play's action does not end at this point; Hewett has created this audience detachment for a specific purpose. The sisters "bless the place," thereby enacting a kind of theatrical Last Rite, and "whirl" off, in a gesture evocative of the transition between life and death (the Last Rites of Christian ceremonies being connected with the "afterlife") and the ending of the play itself.¹⁰¹ However, their exit is interrupted (as indeed is their whirling) by the following dialogue in which, as a kind of post-script or epilogue, they question the play's happy ending. Clarry asks:

What about Polly and Jack?

To which Clemmy replies:

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Margaret Williams also discusses the framing of the play by the Hummers as a kind of "Brechtian" metatheatricality whereby the play itself becomes an enactment facilitated by the sisters as presenters. See Williams, *Dorothy Hewett: The Feminine as Subversion*, 96.

Oh, they'll never come back. They're playing Chu Chin Chow with Oscar Ashe and the camels.

They continue:

CLARRY. And Harry and Touch of the Tar have gone bush over the salt lakes. Do you think they've found Paradise?

CLEMMY. Paradise is mighty hard to find.

CLARRY. Like Zeek Perkins fishing in the dust all the days of his life.

CLEMMY. He never found fresh water in Mukinupin.¹⁰²

By reminding the audience, at this point, of the play's third, night-time wedding, and shedding doubt upon the notion of paradise, Hewett suggests that the concepts represented by such a wedding, in particular the reconciliation of darker aspects of Australia's past, remain unresolved. In this way, *Mukinupin* can be seen to deny the catharsis offered by the otherwise straightforward comic resolution of a Shakespearean double wedding.¹⁰³ Clemmy's final line, notably delivered in the past tense suggests that Zeek Perkins never did find fresh water in *Mukinupin*. Together, this post-script and the metatheatrical detachment of the audience from the play in its final moments complicate the play's happy ending with enduring questions and doubts. The two aspects of Hewett's brief – to write a play that celebrates Australia while acknowledging its dark past – are not so much reconciled as held in tension, with the celebratory tone punctured by critique.

1.4 METATHEATRE AND THE PLAY'S THEMES

As the preceding analysis demonstrates, the extent to which the play is imbued with metatheatre is immediately apparent. Analysis is complicated by the fact that the boundaries of Hewett's metatheatre in *The Man from Mukinupin* are often unclear. In the context of a work featuring overtly theatrical characters, recitations and the kind of dense intertextual and cross-genre references outlined above, it is difficult to determine which parts of the play are specifically metatheatrical – where "theatre" ends and "metatheatre" begins. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of "traditional" metatheatrical

¹⁰² Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 121.

¹⁰³ Leckie Hopkins offers possible interpretations of this line in her article "Language, Culture and Landscape in *The Man from Mukinupin*." She too suggests that in the context of this scene, the line works to complicate the play's comic ending.

strategies that are vital to the play's examination of Australian culture and history. These include the performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona" by *Mukinupin's* travelling players; the use of the ceremony-within-the-play for the depiction of the town's night-time characters; inter-racial and other types of character doubling; and the framing of the play by the theatrical Hummer sisters. In Hornby's terms, the latter two of these represent forms of dramatic self-reference.

As demonstrated, Hewett's play operates as a comic celebration in which is embedded a subtext of critique. Key themes relevant to this critique include: landscape, identity, history and race, as well as the theme of theatre itself, which can be analysed as part of the play's examination of Australian history broadly. Metatheatrical strategies are integral to the examination of these themes and in achieving the play's "precarious balance" of light and dark.¹⁰⁴ A discussion of selected productions will now provide insights into how some of the play's metatheatrical dimensions have been realised on stage.

1.5 PRODUCTIONS – OVERVIEW

The productions considered in the following analysis can be divided into three categories, each connected to a moment of national or cultural significance. The first category includes early productions, those staged at the time of the West Australian sesquicentenary and in premieres in other states; the second category includes the Bicentennial production of 1988 and the third category, the production staged for the thirty year anniversary of the play's premiere. The fact that *The Man from Mukinupin* continues to be celebrated on anniversary occasions such as these indicates its ongoing relevance to Australian audiences in the decades since it was originally written. As argued above, the process of historicisation inscribed in the play's metatheatrical dimensions is undoubtedly one of the factors contributing to its endurance. This is a point highlighted in critical receptions throughout its production history.

The significance of Hewett's play has been recognised by critics and audiences since its earliest productions. Reviews of the Western Australian premiere convey a sense that the

¹⁰⁴ Hewett, "Genesis."

work was not only relevant to contemporary audiences, but that it represented a profound contribution to the canon of Australian Drama. In a foreword to a sesquicentennial edition of the play that was published to coincide with the first production, editor Katharine Brisbane described *Mukinupin* as “the best play Dorothy Hewett [had] written since *The Chapel Perilous*.”¹⁰⁵ This was high praise in light of her assessment of *The Chapel Perilous* eight years earlier which she had reviewed in its West Australian production, describing it as being “in the forefront of Australian playwriting.”¹⁰⁶ Brisbane described *The Man from Mukinupin* as “an epithalamion, a marriage feast in which the journey of life is celebrated.”¹⁰⁷ She also recognised in the play’s overall tone and West Australian setting “a spiritual coming home after long adventures, for Dorothy Hewett the poet.”¹⁰⁸ These observations reflect the sense of personal reconciliation which Hewett had experienced in writing the play while also identifying the extent to which *Mukinupin*’s theatricality is underscored by an essential poetic quality. Brisbane also remarked upon the playwright’s depiction of life in rural Australia. It is here, she posited, in the characterisation of the people and landscape of Australia’s recent past, that the play evokes what she termed the “tribal memories” of late twentieth century Australians. According to Brisbane’s assessment, by tapping into the shared experience and memory of Australians, Hewett had successfully created a drama to which audiences would be able to relate “for many years to come.”¹⁰⁹ Brisbane thus highlights the celebratory and glosses the darker aspects, wanting to find in the play that sense of reconciliation on which any notion of an “Australian tribe” and “shared experience” must be predicated.

Assessments of the play in production were equally positive. David Hough, reviewing the 1979 Perth premiere wrote:

It is, I believe, Dorothy Hewett’s best play to date. It is well constructed and has some of her finest lyrical writing. Add to this the theatricality of her conception, magnificently realized in Tony Tripp’s set and Duncan Ord’s lighting, and the fine ensemble playing led by Noni Hazlehurst and you have one of the most entertaining productions in town.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Katharine Brisbane, foreword to Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, iii-iv.

¹⁰⁶ Katharine Brisbane, “Playwright’s Perilous Journey,” review of *The Chapel Perilous*, premiere directed by Aarne Neeme, New Fortune Theatre, University of Western Australia, Weekend News section of unnamed publication, January 23, 1971, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, series 7, folder 2.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ David Hough, “Hewett’s Best Yet.”

Two years later in a review of the Sydney Theatre Company production, reviewer Harry Robinson described *The Man from Mukinupin* as “a sheer delight” while several critics shared the sentiments of those who had reviewed the Perth production, in assessing the work to be Hewett’s best to date.¹¹¹ Observations of the play’s theatricality and underlying poetry were also common among reviews of early productions. In a critique of the 1981 Melbourne production, for example, Leonard Radic remarked “[This] is the work of someone who is a poet as well as a dramatist with a feel for the theatre and its possibilities.”¹¹²

This comment acknowledges Hewett’s professional identity as a poet (as she had been published in this genre long before the commencement of her playwriting career), but also identifies the extent to which Hewett, as *playwright*, engages with the theatrical form. Radic’s comment taps into the way in which *The Man from Mukinupin* engages with theatre as a theme. Indeed, the “possibilities” of theatre are both celebrated and referred to directly within the play’s dialogue – as Clemmy Hummer tells us during a sequence of action in Act One “In the theatre, everything is possible,” including, this implicitly suggests, reconciliation.¹¹³

When, nine years after its premiere, *The Man from Mukinupin* was selected by the Western Australian Theatre Company for a production to mark the Australian Bicentenary, David Hough, who had reviewed the play in 1979, maintained his initial assessment of its artistic merit, stating “I still think it is the best play Hewett has ever written.”¹¹⁴ In an affirmation of the play’s enduring relevance to Australian audiences, David Britton, writing for *The West Australian*, said: “*The Man from Mukinupin* came

¹¹¹ Harry Robinson, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Rodney Fisher, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, Sydney, *The Sun Herald*, February 8, 1981.

¹¹² Leonard Radic, “A Delightful Tapestry of Outback Life,” review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Judith Alexander, Melbourne Theatre Company, Russell Street Theatre, Melbourne, *The Age*, February 19, 1981.

¹¹³ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 19. Helen Gilbert also discusses Hewett’s depiction of performance in the play “as a means to rapprochement.” Citing Dunstone’s 1990 article, she considers the way in which theatre (or the metatheatrical depiction thereof) creates what she terms a “condition of possibility,” in which audience members can see the ways in which reconciliation of the play’s light and dark elements might be brought about. Gilbert also quotes Clarry Hummer’s line about the possibilities of theatre. See Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 175.

¹¹⁴ David Hough, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Kingston Anderson, WATC, The Playhouse, Perth, *Australian Listener*, December 3, 1988, *Australian & New Zealand Theatre Record*, 2 (1988): 37.

home last night, wearing different clothes but as close to the heart of WA as ever.”¹¹⁵ Describing the work as a “classic,” an angle that was emphasised in publicity for the production (see fig.1.1), Britton suggested that the tension between the celebration and critique in the play was pertinent in the context of the Australian Bicentenary. Describing the return of *Mukinupin* to The Playhouse in November 1988, he said “nine years later, in our national bicentennial, it returns to remind us that while we have much to celebrate, we also have lessons to learn and a past we must face.”¹¹⁶

Written for Western Australia's
150th Anniversary in 1979 and now
acclaimed as an Australian
"Classic"
THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN is set in
a mythical country town in the
wheat belt of Western Australia.
The story of Mukinupin is told with
marvellous Dramatic expression
through the characters, images and
music which combine in an
unforgettable night at the theatre!

Fig.1.1. An extract from a document advertising the 1988 production of *The Man from Mukinupin* by the Western Australian Theatre Company (WATC), directed by Kingston Anderson, The Playhouse, Perth. State Library of WA, JS Battye Library of WA History Collection, Records of the Western Australian Theatre Company (1985-1990), 7841A/Box44_7, 1988 Production Records.

In this Bicentennial context, *Mukinupin's* racial theme was particularly relevant, on account of the broader social discourse that had taken place throughout that year, generated by the celebration of British “settlement” of Australia.¹¹⁷ In particular, this commemoration had generated anxieties among Australia’s Indigenous people along with those supportive of their claims to prior ownership of the land. Indigenous protests had been staged on a number of occasions throughout 1988, notably on Australia Day (January 26th) when, in the largest public demonstration since the Vietnam moratorium, 40,000 people marched in protest against the “Celebration of the Nation” that was encouraged by the Bicentennial slogan.¹¹⁸ The sentiments of many protest participants were signified in a badge produced as part of the Indigenous campaign. Pictured below

¹¹⁵ David Britton, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Kingston Anderson, WATC, The Playhouse, Perth, *West Australian*, December 9, 1988, *Australian & New Zealand Theatre Record*, 2 (1988): 38.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ I have borrowed this italicisation from Joanne Tompkins who, in her article “Celebrate 1988? Australian Drama in the Bicentennial Year,” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* June (1994): 103, uses an ironic register to describe British “‘settling’: by Captain Arthur Phillip” in the light of the continent already being inhabited by Indigenous people.

¹¹⁸ “Indigenous Protest, 1988 Australian Bicentenary,” webpage citing Editorial, *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 19, 1988, Museum of Victoria, Collections and Research Department, accessed on March 4, 2013, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections/themes/2835/Indigenous-protest-1988-australian-bicentenary>.

(fig.1.2), this badge featured a black, red and yellow background, representing the Aboriginal flag. Upon this background, was the image of two arms in shackles breaking free of a chain. In a counter slogan to the Bicentenary's well-advertised campaign ("Celebrate in '88"), the text on the badge read "White Australia has a Black History. Don't Celebrate '88."¹¹⁹



Fig.1.2. Image of the Badge produced as part of the Indigenous campaign protesting Australia's Bicentennial Celebrations in 1988. The slogan draws attention to White Australia's Black History, a theme that is woven throughout Hewett's play. Museum of Victoria, image identifier HI775, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections/items/246993/badge-white-australia-has-a-black-history-australia-1988>.

In addition to urging Australians not to celebrate the Bicentenary, the slogan on this badge served as a reminder of Indigenous peoples' historical mistreatment at the hands of British colonial settlers. In the production of Hewett's play at the end of the Bicentennial year, the campaign's reference to "White Australia's Black History" can be seen to have been echoed in the play's own representation of the genocide in the creek bed. Indeed the play as a whole highlights the hypocrisies of a white Australian post-colonial society blind to its past (and selectively deaf as symbolised in the character of Edie Perkins, to its present) Indigenous voices. As Harry Tuesday observes when the murder of the town's Aboriginal people is mentioned: "Everybody knows but nobody's sayin'. Bush towns are like that."¹²⁰ Here and throughout the play, Hewett gives expression to some of the concerns that became part of the public discourse at the time of the Bicentenary.

¹²⁰ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 54.

It is against this background that Sian Martin, reviewing the 1988 production for *The Daily News*, observed that “recent tensions give its racial events more relevance.”¹²¹ Likewise, the production’s media release pointed to a play that in the context in which it was being produced had taken on greater significance – a “relevance” beyond that perceived on the occasion of its initial production.¹²² The Bicentenary, as a time of national celebration and reflection on a grand scale, facilitated the reception of the play as critics and audiences responded to the corresponding elements of celebration and reflection inscribed within it. The play’s Bicentennial *theatrical* context is also crucial to an understanding of this combined celebration and critique. As noted previously, the Western Australian Theatre Company’s production of *Mukinupin* took place in November of 1988. Throughout that year, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins both observe, Australian theatre had produced a plethora of plays, some at the invitation of the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA), which “looked to the history of the country.”¹²³ While many of these works were in line with the celebratory focus of Bicentenary, several also represented critical views of Australian history. Among these were *Barungin* by Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis, along with works by “non-Aboriginals” Michael Gow, Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra.¹²⁴ As Gilbert explains, Gow’s *1841* and Sewell’s *Hate* were particularly controversial on account of their critiques of Australian history. In these plays, she argues,

The versions of the past [presented] were in themselves important counter-texts which attempted to recuperate marginalized, muted or silenced histories.¹²⁵

Against the background of Bicentennial plays adopting such revisionist approaches, Hewett’s work can be seen to have taken on a further significance. Though written a decade earlier, *Mukinupin* represented, in the context of its 1988 production, an apparent

¹²¹ Sian Martin, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Kingston Anderson, WATC, The Playhouse, Perth, *West Australian*, November 11, 1988, *Australian & New Zealand Theatre Record*, 2 (1988): 38.

¹²² Media Release for *The Man from Mukinupin*, production directed by Kingston Anderson, WATC, The Playhouse, Perth, Papers of Western Australian Theatre Company, State Library of Western Australia, 7841A, Box 4-5.

¹²³ Tompkins, “Celebrate 1988?,” 103; Helen Gilbert, “Monumental Moments: Michael Gow’s *1841*, Stephen Sewell’s *Hate*, Louis Nowra’s *Capricornia* and Australia’s Bicentenary,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 24 (1994).

¹²⁴ Gilbert suggests “the most notable non-Aboriginal plays circulated under the sign of the Bicentennial logo included Michael Gow’s *1841*, Stephen Sewell’s *Hate*, and Louis Nowra’s *Capricornia*. Of these, she argues, Gow and Sewell’s plays were the most critical with regards to the depiction of Australian history. See Gilbert, “Monumental Moments,” 30.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

foregrounding of current critical concerns. Within this theatrical context, the canonical status of *Mukinupin* was reinforced as a kind of artistic predecessor for the revisionist critiques that emerged in new plays of that year. This sense of the play's developing mythology was highlighted in Martin's review in which she referred to the production of 1988 being "larger than life – larger than ever" suggesting that *Mukinupin* had not only continued to be relevant but had acquired a more profound status, theatrically, in the decade since its first production.¹²⁶ This artistic legacy would be embraced and continued through the 2009 co-production by the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) and Company B Belvoir.

The 2009 production of *The Man from Mukinupin* was directed by Indigenous Australian director Wesley Enoch. Originally programmed as part of an all-Australian season for the MTC, this co-production marked the thirty year anniversary of the play's premiere, an occasion that was highlighted in the related publicity. In reviewing the production in its Sydney season at Belvoir Street Theatre, Kevin Jackson affirmed the play's mythology by referring to previous productions as significant events in Australian theatre history.¹²⁷ Having also attended the Sydney production of 1981, he was able to describe with some authority the experience of the production both at the beginning of its legacy and in its most recent incarnation. As he wrote in his review:

The production by Rodney Fisher of *The Man from Mukinupin* by Dorothy Hewett at the Drama Theatre in the early eighties is one of those theatrical memories that has stayed with me. It was a magical and translating experience. This new production at Belvoir confirms for me, my belief, that this play is one of the great heritages of the Australian repertoire.¹²⁸

Here, just as Hewett herself canonises popular Australian theatre history in *The Man from Mukinupin*, Jackson's review exemplifies the way in which critical responses have reinforced (and arguably helped manufacture) the play's own canonical status. The critic's experience of the play, as recalled here, is profoundly "one of those" theatrical memories. The significance of Hewett's work is further emphasised as Jackson acknowledges both its local relevance and a quality of Shakespearean universality. He describes a moment of intertextual Shakespearean reference from the play that, during

¹²⁶ Martin, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

¹²⁷ Kevin Jackson, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, production directed by Wesley Enoch, MTC and Company B, Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, *The Blurb* 101, accessed December 6, 2010. [http://www.theblurb.com.au/Issue101/Man from Mukinupin.htm](http://www.theblurb.com.au/Issue101/Man%20from%20Mukinupin.htm).

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

the 2009 production, caused him to reflect upon both its every-day application and its broadest meanings. Hewett, he muses:

had her feet firmly in a real world and a poetic gift of expression that was reaching for the heavenly parts of our natures. Zeek in *Mukinupin*, one of the eccentric outcasts of this town speaks ‘Sun, moon, and stars, all sweet things...The stars are above, wherever we are. We walk the earth and gaze into eternity, we ride the Andromeda, see the holes in heaven.’ This, last night, struck me as the essence of my experience of the play, now.¹²⁹

In his assessment of the play’s dramatic style and applicability, Jackson ascribes the status of “masterpiece” to Hewett’s work.¹³⁰ In the process of making this claim, Jackson also indicates an awareness, on behalf of the producing company, of the play’s theatrical legacy, the company conveying a sense of “commitment and admiration” in its homage to the original.¹³¹ This, he suggests, was bestowed in a manner that was both theatrically vibrant and appropriate to the occasion of the play’s thirtieth anniversary.

As in the West Australian production of 1988, media coverage of the MTC/Company B production emphasised the play’s “relevance” to contemporary audiences. The idea of relevance was raised by *Mukinupin*’s actors and director in several pre-production interviews, with an emphasis reflecting the production’s particular focus on racial themes. In an interview with Graeme Blundell, director Wesley Enoch described the production as being an opportunity to re-visit the work, “to re-evaluate [just what] Hewett had to say.”¹³² Enoch remarked upon his love of Hewett’s bold, theatrical, style and the way in which the play engages with ideas of race.

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* interview, actor Kerry Walker, cast as Edie Perkins, discussed the play’s relevance to contemporary issues including the environment. Speaking of the playwright, Walker explained “she was meant to be this hippie commie ratbag and raving lunatic yet here she is writing about the pillaging and raping of the earth.” Walker also acknowledged the play’s depiction of Australian race relations,

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Wesley Enoch, interview by Graeme Blundell in “Force of Nature,” *The Australian*, March 21, 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/force-of-nature-story-c6frg8of-1111119160182>.

stating “the theme of race is woven throughout the play and it’s amazing that 30 years later its topics are on everyone’s lips.”¹³³

Despite the “relevance” and canonical status of *The Man from Mukinupin* in 2009, interviewer Bryce Hallett observed that in contemporary Australian theatre it “is rarely performed outside of drama schools.”¹³⁴ This production, it was noted, would be “the first mainstage production since Hewett died in 2002.”¹³⁵ The fact of the play’s infrequent production on Australian mainstages (which is not, in itself, an accurate index of its relevance or popular appeal) combined with the way that the idea of relevance was emphasised in pre-production advertising, suggests that despite *Mukinupin*’s “legacy,” there was nonetheless a perceived need to assure potential audience members that an Australian play written thirty years ago (and set in the past) would still be of interest. The way in which major productions of the play have been scheduled to coincide with national and cultural moments of reflection suggests that the true legacy of *The Man from Mukinupin* lies in the revival of its functions of simultaneous celebration and critique. The extent to which this legacy is still vital in the early decades of the new millennium depends, I argue, upon the way in which the play’s metatheatrical techniques are realised in production.

1.6 METATHEATRE IN PRODUCTIONS OF THE MAN FROM MUKINUPIN

“A play script ... is nothing on a page.”¹³⁶

So claimed Dorothy Hewett in an interview given in 1987. Speaking with Bill Dunstone, Hewett reflected upon her process of playwriting and observed that, while influenced by a broad range of literary and poetic works, when it came to making plays she “prefer[red] to be part of the whole business of the theatre.”¹³⁷ As three generations of actors, directors and production teams who have worked on Hewett’s plays would doubtless attest, the Hewett script, for all its poetic, literary and dramatic descriptiveness on the page, only acquires its full potential in production, when those elements that “are only hinted at” in

¹³³ Kerry Walker, interview by Bryce Hallett in “Never Far from Home,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 21, 2009, Spectrum, <http://www.slm.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/never-far-from-home/2009/03/20/1237055064078.html>.

¹³⁴ Bryce Hallett, “Never Far from Home”.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Dorothy Hewett, interview by Bill Dunstone, *Australian Playwrights Speak*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

the printed script can be realised, or interpreted.¹³⁸ With this sentiment in mind, the following discussion examines some of the ways in which the metatheatrical dimensions of *The Man from Mukinupin* have been interpreted in production. Although examination of the play's early productions is limited by the absence of archival recordings, it is possible, at least in part, to determine from other records and critical accounts of the productions' reception how some of the play's strategies of metatheatricality were realised. While the productions considered in this discussion vary in the levels of emphasis they have placed upon the play's themes of national identity, landscape and race, in all cases the use of metatheatricality can be seen to function within the mode of critical celebration outlined above. Indeed, the metatheatrical strategies *produce* the critical celebration. Together, these productions demonstrate the play's theatrical re-telling of Australian history and Hewett's integration of theatre history into this history re-told.

1.6a EARLY PRODUCTIONS

First production – National Theatre Company, Perth, Western Australia

Directed by Stephen Barry, the premiere production of *The Man from Mukinupin* was staged at The Playhouse in 1979, opening on August 31st. Its cast, doubling in their roles in the manner indicated above, included: Richard Tulloch, Noni Hazlehurst, Margaret Ford, Rosemary Barr, Sally Sander, Maurie Ogden, Jenny McNae and Bill Kerr.¹³⁹ As critics have frequently noted, Hewett was a controversial choice for The National Theatre's sesquicentennial production. Barry, then Artistic Director of the National Theatre Company, reported a "vociferous and considerable" public opposition to the announcement of her selection.¹⁴⁰ Such accounts, now part of the "legacy" of *Mukinupin*, include the report of one "irate man who rang complaining that [hearing the news] had caused him to cut himself shaving."¹⁴¹ For reasons including her "expatriate" status as a Sydney-dwelling Western Australian and controversy over the form and content of her earlier plays, Hewett's commission caused consternation in certain quarters.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Fitzpatrick, "Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama," 99.

¹³⁹ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, vii.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Barry, foreword to *The Man from Mukinupin: A Musical Play in Two Acts: a special sesquicentennial edition*, by Dorothy Hewett (Perth and Sydney: Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Currency Press, 1979), v-vi.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁴² As Graeme Blundell reports, "many of Hewett's earlier plays met hostility because of her honesty in representing both the lyricism and grotesqueness of female life. Explicit references to menstruation,

Nonetheless, the production was warmly received by critics and audiences, a response echoed in David Hough's assessment that the premiere "may well be Western Australia's theatrical event of 1979."¹⁴³ In a separate review, Michael Holmes described how at the end of the opening night's performance "the audience applauded for two minutes" while another critic described the reception of the premiere as "rapturous."¹⁴⁴ Graeme Blundell, critic and long-time personal friend of Hewett's, later reflected upon the production's popular appeal. Whereas previous works had often confounded theatre producers and directors on account of Hewett's tendency to deviate from the dominant mode of theatrical realism, "*The Man from Mukinupin*...proved [Hewett] could write a successful box office play."¹⁴⁵ In making this assessment, Blundell implied that part of Hewett's success in writing *Mukinupin*, was her incorporation of more accessible elements than had been seen in her earlier plays, for example the comic romantic plot featuring the romance between Polly and Jack.

An examination of production records contained within Hewett's archival papers indicates that the quality of "accessibility" described above was the result of a deliberate effort on behalf of playwright and director. Stephen Barry wrote to her on October 17, 1978:

Dear Dorothy,

Many thanks for your *Man from Mukinupin* outline. It sounds fascinating and I eagerly await the first draft on December 1st. Two points strike me and I hope in mentioning them that I do not interrupt your creative flow.

- A) The plot, which is intricate and almost Jacobean in its contortions; will it be dissectible by the audience?
- B) I think at this stage, without seeing the script, that some of the doubling could be confusing (e.g. Max Montebello, Cecil Brunner, The Flasher.)

abortion, affairs, menopause, domestic and sexual violence and drunkenness confronted her audiences." See Blundell, "Force of Nature."

¹⁴³ Hough, David, "Hewett's Best Yet."

¹⁴⁴ Michael Holmes, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Stephen Barry, Playhouse, Perth, *Daily News*, September 5, 1979; Zoltan Kovaks, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Stephen Barry, *West Australian*, September 1, 1979; Kevin Jackson, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

¹⁴⁵ Blundell, "Force of Nature."

...I think it unwise, and also unnecessary, to say more at this stage except to say that I'm red hot on story lines!¹⁴⁶

Part of the process through which the abovementioned quality of accessibility was achieved (notably without compromising elements deemed to be thematically important such as the character doubling of the cast) can be seen when comparing the initial draft of Hewett's play with the more developed script used for the premiere production. Both documents are held within Hewett's archival collection at the National Library of Australia and, for clarity, I shall refer to them here as "First Draft" and "Prompt Script" respectively.¹⁴⁷ An examination of these texts also sheds light upon changes that were made to the play's metatheatrical framing during the process of drafting and rehearsal, apparent, for example in the development of the Hummer sisters. As described by Hewett and identified by reviewers, the sisters operate in the manner of a Greek chorus, narrating and, at times, facilitating, the action within as well as functioning in the Brechtian sense of actively engaging the audience in an analysis of the play.

While Clemmy, mistress for the night-people (and therein Australia's unheard voices) enters into each of the night-time ceremonies with a keen sense of anticipation, Clarry, her more conservative and sensible counterpart, issues caution. Like a subconscious voice, Clarry responds to the onset of dusk with an element of fear. "You're always imagining things" she says to her more poetically minded sister, as though encouraging her to ignore the pull of the weird night music, "It's late and I'm going to bed, and so would you, Clem, if you had the sense you were born with."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Stephen Barry, letter to Dorothy Hewett dated October 17, 1978, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia MS6184, Series 1, Folder 5.

¹⁴⁷ Dorothy Hewett, "First Draft" of *The Man from Mukinupin*, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, Subseries 4.13, Folder 27. Hereafter "First Draft"; Dorothy Hewett, annotated "Prompt Copy" of *The Man from Mukinupin* for production at The Playhouse, Perth, 1979, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, Subseries 4.13, Folder 27. Hereafter "Prompt Copy."

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44, 45. Here my analysis extends Terence Clarke's observation that there are connections between the Hummer sisters and Hewett herself, as an artist (see Terence Clarke, note from programme of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Terence Clarke, NIDA, Parade Theatre Sydney October 10-14, 1990, Papers of Dorothy Hewett, National Library of Australia, MS6184, Series 9, Box 3). Such a reading, consistent with Hewett's frequent use of semi-autobiographical characterisations (a strong sense of self, as it has been noted elsewhere, pervades much of Hewett's work as well as the publicity surrounding her), is reinforced by the depiction of the Hummers in the play as aging women, "theatrically dressed" as former, or failed, artists.

¹⁴⁸ The circumstances of *Mukinupin*'s "genesis," in the aftermath of failure of *Pandora's Box*, adds resonance to her depiction of the Hummer sisters within the play. Here, Clemmy's fall from the high wire during her former career with Wirth's circus indicates a process of failure and subsequent artistic exile. In

In Hewett's First Draft, the metatheatrical framing of the play by the Hummer sisters contained an additional element. This was the presence of another character described in the Draft as "Bobbie Le Brun," "[a] pianist, and Mukinupin's 'child prodigy.'"¹⁴⁹ Bobbie Le Brun, like the Hummers, draws upon references to Australian theatre history. Colourfully dressed like Clemmy and Clarry she appears in a fright wig, "ballerina dress," and frilly ankle socks, a costume that indicates her theatrical appearance in contrast with the neutrally dressed residents of Mukinupin. Metatheatrically, her representation within the play can be seen to fit Hornby's descriptions of both real-life and dramatic reference. Described as a kind of grotesque, she is a theatrical echo of a freak performer, drawn from an historical tradition of Australian touring sideshows.¹⁵⁰ The name Bobbie Le Brun is a direct reference to the (male) performer, Bobby Le Brun who toured Australia as part of the travelling tent show circuit during the mid 1900s.¹⁵¹ As a grotesque, the character also contributes to the darkening of the "sunny world" of Mukinupin, thereby meeting a need perceived by Hewett to create a counterbalance to the celebratory romantic comedy.¹⁵² Bobbie, like the Hummer sisters and, arguably, Hewett herself, can be seen to represent the aging star who, once full of promise, has gone to waste in this unknown town. In the child prodigy, promise and decay are simultaneously embodied, a notion captured in Hewett's description of Le Brun as "a crepe-faced aging Shirley Temple."¹⁵³ As a third narrator for the play, Bobbie also contributes to its metatheatrical framing, as described in the scene directions of the beginning of the Draft version:

*She curtseys to the audience, takes conductor's baton off piano top, a grimace smile to audience, and like the bad fairy makes a few magical passes at the stage.*¹⁵⁴

As the action proceeds, Bobbie commands the entrance of the actors as well as her theatrical compatriots, the Hummer sisters. Elsewhere in the text, her function as a theatrical grotesque is emphasised when, in the metatheatrical night-time ceremony of Act One, Clemmy Hummer summons her to the stage in language echoing the demonstrative spiel of a circus sideshow spruiker.

the town of Mukinupin, as she explains "I'm like a bird with a broken wing." Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 60.

¹⁴⁹ Hewett, "First Draft," iii.

¹⁵⁰ This tradition will be discussed in my Chapter Two analysis of Louis Nowra's *Royal Show*.

¹⁵¹ Katharine Brisbane ed., *Entertaining Australia: an illustrated history*. (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), 289.

¹⁵² Hewett, "Genesis."

¹⁵³ Hewett, "First Draft," 1.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

CLEMMY. In-ter-o-juicing 'Bobbie Le Brun,' the child star who never grew, the Mukinupin idiot, plays everything by ear, bites everybody on the bum.

*To the sound of bullroarers, didgeridoos, etc. Bobbie Le Brun rises, curtseys, grimaces, and with a wild scream leaps onto stage to chase The Flasher.*¹⁵⁵

Bobbie Le Brun, the "child star who never grew" can be seen as symbolic of a nation that has retained its child-like relationship with Britain despite the fact that, in reality, she is no longer a child. The description of her grimace smile is another striking aspect of this introduction. Indeed, the image of such a smile conveys a powerful sense of Hewett's attempt to puncture comedy with critique. Even upon reading this description, it is possible to imagine that the image of Bobbie Le Brun's grimace would tip that balance too far – the grimace smile reading almost as a burlesque of comedy itself. The character of Bobbie Le Brun was omitted from the production and does not appear in any text beyond the First Draft. In the absence of any documented reference to the process by which Le Brun was cut, one could also speculate that the deletion was made for practical reasons such as casting concerns, length of script, and the view that the metatheatrical function served by Le Brun could be fulfilled just as effectively, if less thoroughly, by the theatrical Hummer sisters. However, I would argue that opening the play with this frame, with its implication of a grotesque and decaying nation, rather than the poetic Hummer sisters, would have had an alienating effect, immediately foregrounding the play's critical function. It seems likely, then, that it was deleted to make room for an overall mood of celebration and reflection, rather than confrontation or challenge.

1981 - Sydney Theatre Company

Staged a little more than a year after the West Australian premiere, the first Sydney production of *Mukinupin* opened on February 5th, 1981. Directed by Rodney Fisher, this production was staged at the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre with Musical Direction of Jim Cotter's original score by composer Sarah De Jong.¹⁵⁶ The cast included Noni Hazlehurst, appearing as she had done in the premiere in the dual roles of Polly and Touch of the Tar, along with Jane Harders, Maggie Dence, Ron Hadrick, Judi Farr, Colin Friels,

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵⁶ Programme for *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Rodney Fisher, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, 1981.

John Gaden and Ruth Cracknell.¹⁵⁷ This critically acclaimed, sell-out production of *Mukinupin* was shaped by a directorial focus on the play's themes of national identity. Fisher, responding to the Perth production's apparent emphasis on music, explained in an interview that he wished to reduce this focus in his own production. Picking up on Hewett's description of *Mukinupin* as "a play with music" rather than a musical per-se, Fisher explained that he viewed the play primarily as a coming-of-age story.¹⁵⁸

Fisher's interpretation involved a focus on the idea of human relationships with the Australian landscape. This, for Hewett, was a strength of the production, landscape having been the starting point for her play.¹⁵⁹ In an interview for the *Weekend Australian* Hewett indicated that her conception of the scale of the land, relative to its human inhabitants, had been successfully evoked upon the expansive stage at the Sydney Opera House.¹⁶⁰ Working with Shaun Gurton as set designer, Fisher had extended the already massive stage several metres beyond the proscenium arch, bringing the space outward into the theatre's auditorium. This, combined with other elements of set design and costuming created a sense of vastness against which the human actors of the play appeared small in scale, their man-made structures temporary and inconsequential (see figs.1.3. and 1.4. below). Such effects were highlighted in reviews of the production. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, H.G. Kippax reported that

[Fisher] sets the play on a vast coppery plain against a merciless, washed out sky. Skeletal wooden frames of a veranda or a doorway suggest the town. Human pictures, Drysdale pictures – a young girl skipping in the vastness, two elegant ladies in a wilderness, their parasols indomitable under the sky – suggest its incongruity.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Hewett, interview by Bill Dunstone, *Australian Playwrights Speak*.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Maria Prerauer, ed., interview with Dorothy Hewett, *Weekend Australian*, Jan 31-Feb 1, 1981, 8.

¹⁶¹ H.G. Kippax, "It Should have been a Musical Comedy," review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, production directed by Rodney Fisher, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 7, 1981.



Fig.1.3. Photograph of the Hummer Sisters and Polly Perkins in Act One, *The Man From Mukinupin*, demonstrating the relationship of the play's figures to the landscape. Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production directed by Rodney Fisher. Image from Sydney Theatre Company Archive, STC_TheManFromMukinupin,1981_03-28a(c)DDelFavero.



Fig.1.4. Photograph of the Hummer Sisters and Polly Perkins in Act One, *The Man From Mukinupin*. Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production directed by Rodney Fisher. Image from Sydney Theatre Company Archive, STC_TheManFromMukinupin,1981_07-19a(c)DDelFavero.

Picking up on the play's metatheatrical dimensions, an important element of this set design was the visible presence of overtly theatrical staging elements. Among these, were a fully exposed row of hanging theatre lanterns, and the framing of the landscape depicted on stage. As indicated in his floor plan (see fig.1.5 below), Gurton's design featured man-made structures on either side of the stage. In silhouette, as they appeared at moments throughout the production, these structures created the subtle impression of a set of theatre curtains, framing an Australian landscape. Through this design, not only was Hewett's landscape depicted as "dramatic," its human structures as temporary as their apparently two-dimensional on-stage representations, but theatre itself became a constant visual element in its staging. In his article written years later, Graeme Blundell would describe *Mukinupin* as "a theatrical landscape, peopled with a rabble of broken down

vaudevillians, travelling plays [and] old folk fond of a ditty.”¹⁶² Here, in the staging of the Sydney Theatre Company production, Hewett’s landscape was literally theatrical.

In a further highlighting of the play’s theatricality, the play-within-the-play was staged in a manner that drew attention to its metatheatrical status. Specifically, notes in the Sydney Theatre Company’s Prompt Script indicate how the set-up of the staging for the play-within-the-play was carried out as part of the on-stage action, in a kind of dramatic self-reference that drew attention to the mechanism of theatre – a performance, in other words, of theatre making.¹⁶³ At the beginning of the Montebellos’ performance, the theatre’s black sound curtains were drawn in at both sides of the stage, thereby covering the structures of the verandah and shop front and creating a frame for the play-within-the-play (see figs. 1.6 and 1.7). A hand-written note indicates this action was carried out by the on-stage Mukinupin residents who, as audience for the play-within-the-play, set-up for the event at hand. At the same time as the curtains were drawn in, a set of footlights was brought on (again by the on-stage audience) and placed in a row, centre stage, to demarcate the front of what would momentarily become the stage-within-the-stage.

¹⁶² Blundell, “Force of Nature.”

¹⁶³ Hewett, annotated “Prompt Copy” of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

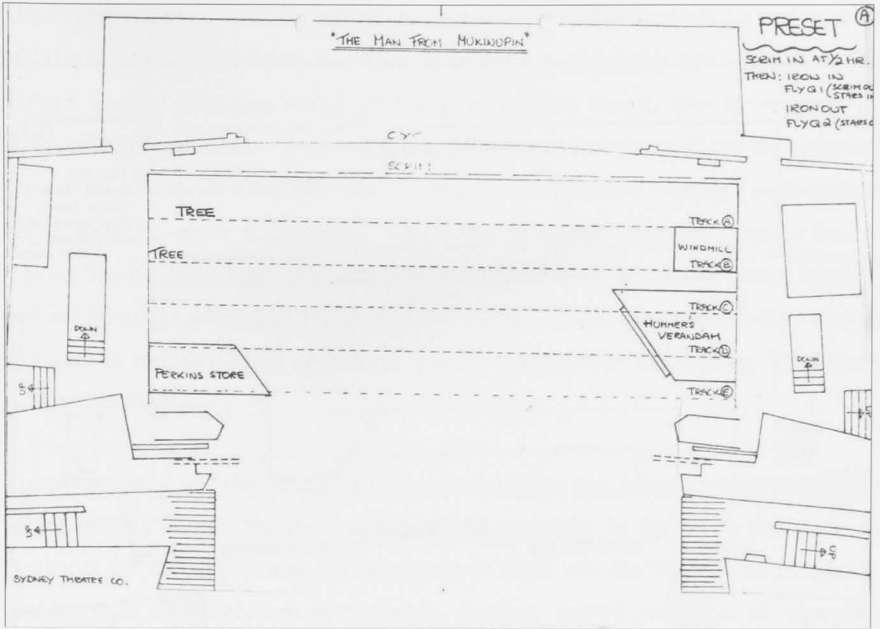


Fig.1.5. Floor Plan for the Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Rodney Fisher. Man-made structures labelled. From Sydney Theatre Company Archive, STC_ TheMan from Mukinupin, 1981_setplan01.

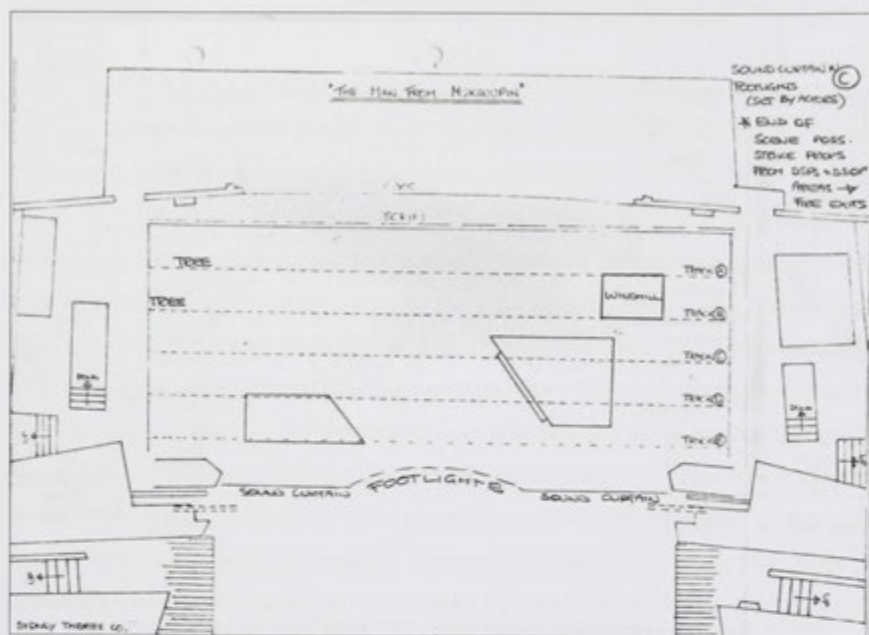


Fig.1.6. Floor plan for Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production of *The Man from Mukinupin*, demonstrating the use of footlights set by actors during the Act One performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona" by Max and Mercy Montebello. From Sydney Theatre Company Archive, STC_The_ManfromMukinupin,1981_setplan02.



Fig.1.7. Photograph from Sydney Theatre Company 1981 production of *The Man from Mukinupin*, demonstrating the effect created by use of on-stage footlights and the drawing in of sound curtains to create the stage-within-the-stage for Max and Mercy Montebello's metatheatrical performance. From Sydney Theatre Company Archive, STC_TheManfromMukinupin,1981_11(c)DDelFavero.

This strategy of overt dramatic self-reference was continued throughout the performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona." One of the ways in which this was achieved, as the Sydney Theatre Company's Prompt Copy annotations reveal, was by making the "backstage" preparations of Max and Mercy Montebello entirely visible to the audience. Thus, during moments when Max was "on-stage" introducing the evening's performance, Mercy could be seen in a "backstage" area to the side of the "on-stage" stage, as though making up and doing final preparations before her entrance. Similarly, during Mercy's performance of Desdemona's "Willow" song, a note indicates that Othello's door-knock, indicated in the play being performed, was enacted by Max Montebello, "knocking" visibly from "off-stage."¹⁶⁴

The performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona" was also intensely metatheatrical in its referencing of past theatrical traditions. As suggested in the production's use of footlights for the stage-within-the-stage, one of these was the tradition of nineteenth century style Shakespearean performance. Another, related reference, as suggested above, was the Australian tradition of touring performers which had begun as early as the gold rushes of the mid nineteenth century and was inspired by Hewett's memory of performances by Max Montesole and Elsie Mackay. Carol Payne described Max Montebello, as played by John Gaden, as "a third-rate Shakespearean actor," while H.P. Kippax referred to the performances of the travelling players as "grotesque."¹⁶⁵ These descriptions suggest an overtly theatrical acting style, echoing the "*commanding gesture[s]*" and curtsies indicated in Hewett's stage directions.¹⁶⁶ While on one level this might be read as a parody of the grand, nineteenth century acting style (a style often viewed by twentieth century audiences and critics as "hackneyed"), such an interpretation in the context of this scene is mediated by the presence of the on-stage audience. As contemporaries to Max and Mercy and their style of travelling performance, the Mukinupin townspeople are accepting rather than critical of the Montebellos' Shakespearean offering, a point demonstrated in part by Jack's ability to empathise with the action to the point of becoming actively involved. This invites a viewing of the scene whereby, while identifying the Shakespearean performances as "dated," the wider

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Carol Payne, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Rodney Fisher, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, *North Shore Times*, February 18, 1981; Kippax, "It Should have been a Musical Comedy."

¹⁶⁶ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 24. The playwright suggests that Max Montebello "*hold up his hand in a commanding gesture*," whilst Mercy "*curtsys*."

audience are also witness to an historicised act of viewing; in the context of this scene, it is possible to see not only the Mukinupin audience's engagement in the action, but also how their involvement in the action in fact affects it. Jack's mediation of the ending of *Othello* does not change the outcome of the death of both Othello and Desdemona, but does, as Helen Gilbert points out, transform the tragedy into a comic performance.¹⁶⁷ This might be interpreted as a kind of counter-canonical transformation, reflecting a fundamental change in the Shakespearean text engendered by its playing in the post-colonial Mukinupin setting. It can also be viewed as a demonstration a kind of historical re-working relatable to the mechanism of the play at large; just as the events of Shakespeare's play are altered here by their theatrical re-playing, so too the theatrical staging of history in *The Man from Mukinupin* offers an opportunity to view history from alternative perspectives. In this sense, the metatheatrical play-within-the-play demonstrates theatre's capacity for conveying alternative histories and, most importantly, perhaps, generating alternative viewpoints.¹⁶⁸

An important dimension of the Sydney Theatre Company's approach to the "Strangling of Desdemona" was the casting of Ruth Cracknell as Mercy Montebello. Born in 1925, Cracknell was 56 years old at the time of this production and already a celebrated actor. Although she had not yet appeared in the television series *Mother and Son*, for which she would be best known in her lifetime, Cracknell had appeared in a number of other popular television series and films and had recently worked on two Shakespeare productions, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Measure for Measure*. She had also been appointed a member of the Order of Australia just one year earlier, in honour of her contribution to Australian drama.¹⁶⁹ Cracknell's casting as Mercy Montebello added a powerful dimension to the play's engagement with theatre history, comparable to the casting of well known contemporary actors in the role of *Hamlet's* Player King (for example, Charlton Heston in Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation of 1996). Specifically, the casting of a respected actor can be seen to have imparted a degree of credibility to the style of performance enacted in the play-within-the-play. Thus in the case of *Mukinupin*, Mercy Montebello,

¹⁶⁷ Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 174-75. "The entire scene displaces the generic markers of tragedy when the performance becomes a site of slapstick comedy that discursively intervenes in the racial paradigms embedded in the canonical text."

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 175. Gilbert argues that "Such metatheatricality resists the textual closures of imperial (stage) history and enacts what Dunstone calls a 'crisis in reception' that problematizes the audience's role in the production of meaning because a split gaze is required to follow the many overlapping images."

¹⁶⁹ Michael Bradley, "Ruth Cracknell dies at 76," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 14, 2002, <http://smh.com.au/articles/2002/05/14/1021002436811.html>.

while still being a comic role, took on a certain authority by virtue of being played by Cracknell. At the same time, the enjoyment offered by having Cracknell, a comic actor, play this style of historical performance, worked to make the performance more accessible, thereby bringing the play's performance of theatrical history closer to the present. Most significant, here, is the way in which Cracknell's status as a well-known Australian actor, and ultimately, part of that tradition's present embodiment, relates to Hewett's citation of theatre traditions (again, a form of dramatic and real life self-reference in Hornby's terms.) If Cracknell is viewed, as indeed she was at the time, as belonging to a current Australian theatrical tradition, then she can also be seen, within *Mukinupin*, as an integral part of the story of Australian theatre history that Hewett offers within the play. Through her presence on stage in the role of an actor from the past, a connection is forged between past and present traditions in which it becomes possible to imagine the development of current traditions into the future. The casting of Ruth Cracknell can be argued, in this sense, to have contributed significantly to the play's lyrical commemoration of Australian theatre.

1.6b THEMES OF RACE AND THEATRE HISTORY IN THE 1988 AND 2009 PRODUCTIONS

In their performances on significant anniversary occasions, the productions of 1988 and 2009 extended the play's examination of Australian theatre history, as well as of Australian history more broadly. The play's metatheatricity is crucial to its representation of race relations through, as we have seen, the reference to the sleepwalking scene from *Macbeth*, echoed in Edie Perkins' night-time wanderings in which she exposes her complicity in past crimes against local Indigenous people. Through an intertwining of Shakespeare's text with Mary Gilmore's poetry, the link to the murder of Mukinupin's, and at a broader symbolic level, the nation's Indigenous people, is made clear. The other important intertextual Shakespearean reference is the "Strangling of Desdemona," as performed by the travelling players. It has been argued above that this performance by travelling entertainers, The Montebellos, operates as part of a celebration of the theatrical traditions out of which *Mukinupin* and contemporary Australian theatre has emerged. But the "Strangling of Desdemona" also demonstrates how metatheatricity facilitates critique as well as celebration.

In *Othello*, the innocent Desdemona is killed violently by the Moor; in *Mukinupin's* violent crime, the racial dimension is reversed - the town's Aboriginal people become the innocent victims at the hands of white men. It is significant that while the violent crimes within *Othello* are depicted on-stage, and thereby publicly acknowledged and punished, in *Mukinupin* past crimes are only ever alluded to "behind the scenes" and, when played out or reflected in Max and Mercy's performance, go unrecognised (or un-acknowledged) by the on-stage *Mukinupin* audience. In a possible comment upon the role of the arts in addressing social issues such as Australia's racial past, it is only Jack, the aspiring actor, who engages with the apparent mistreatment of Desdemona to the extent that he tries to stop the action on-stage from playing out. Where Max and Mercy Montebello's performance functions as a mirror in which the past crimes of *Mukinupin* are reflected, Jack alone is willing or able to respond emotionally to this, if only indirectly, through his attempt to intervene to stop Othello's murder of Desdemona. Via the mechanism of the on-stage performance in which the *Mukinupin* townspeople are shown passively watching the performance, those watching on-stage are unable to "feel" the injustice in the same way as he does. The reflection of the town's (and symbolically Australia's racial past) is surely *intended*, reinforced by Max/Othello/Hewett's urging of Desdemona to "Zink on zy sins."¹⁷⁰ Beneath the comic surface of the itinerant actor's delivery of the Shakespearean text, the significance of the dialogue cannot help but resonate, like Bobbie Le Brun's grimace smile, for a society (both on-stage and off) deemed to be guilty of "past-crimes," as Hewett encourages viewers to look to the past. As Othello says to Desdemona:

If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconcil'd as yet to 'eaven and grace,
 Solicit for it straight.¹⁷¹

As mentioned, Jack interrupts the Montebellos' performance when struck by the injustice of Othello's behavior towards Desdemona. He is particularly incensed by Othello's failure to see Desdemona's innocence as she laments "Oh! falsely, falsely murder'd. A guiltless death I die!"¹⁷² The young man's action of jumping on to the stage results, ultimately, in his realisation that he wishes to be an actor. Here, his ability to "act" is

¹⁷⁰ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 27.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Emphasis mine.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 29.

clearly connected to his capacity to empathise and willingness to “take action” in trying to prevent what he sees as being socially unjust.

Another important moment of “action” occurs during Act Two when, behind the counter in the Perkins’ store, Edie refuses to serve her husband’s half-caste daughter, Lily. As she says to Jack and Lily “We don’t serve blacks in here.”¹⁷³ Jack’s response is similar to his intervention into Othello’s strangling of Desdemona, as he objects to Edie’s mistreatment of the Indigenous girl and goes on to insist that she help find Lily an outfit “somethin’ like Polly’d wear.”¹⁷⁴ If we consider, at this point, the significance of Jack’s chosen career as an actor, then surely this must be read to reflect Hewett’s perception of the role of the actor (and theatre itself) in addressing social injustice. Moreover, if we take Jack, at this moment, to be the eponymous “Man” from *Mukinupin*, then his role as social commentator/artist/activist, in turn reflects that of Hewett, the woman from *Wickepin* who, commissioned to write a celebratory play, could not help but complicate her own work with a more critical social purpose, in addressing the plight of Indigenous Australians.

1988 Bicentennial Production – West Australian Theatre Company, Perth

In his review of the 1988 Bicentennial production David Hough remarked:

The Man from Mukinupin is a musical comedy with a serious undertone about the need to reconcile the consequences of the past as they work themselves out in the future.¹⁷⁵

This production of *The Man from Mukinupin* was staged at The Playhouse, Perth, and opened on 8th November, 1988. It was directed by Kingston Anderson with Music Direction by Jim Cotter and a cast including: Tina Williamson, Jedda Cole, Douglas Walker, Margaret Ford, Yvonne Adams, Laura Black, Jill Perryman, Michael Carman and John Saunders. One of the novel aspects of this interpretation of the play was that, for the first time in a mainstream production, the role of Lily Perkins (*Touch of the Tar*) was played by an Indigenous actor. Whereas in 1979 the roles of Poly and Lily had been doubled, with non-Indigenous actor Noni Hazlehurst playing Lily in light blackface, here

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Hough, “Hewett’s Best Yet.”

the roles were split between two actors – Tina Williamson as Polly Perkins and Jedda Cole as Lily.¹⁷⁶ There are a number of possible reasons underlying this approach to casting, one being that by 1988 the use of blackface, even “light” blackface as had been used in the 1979 production, was increasingly seen as a problematic strategy by directors and theatre practitioners in light of public and political sensitivities to racial casting. Related to this, the production’s social context may have served as an incentive to offer the role to an Indigenous actor, since the production had been programmed for the Bicentenary.

One implication of this change was that it created a clear division between Polly and Lily as white and Indigenous respectively, whereas part of the function of Hewett’s metatheatrical character doubling had been to encourage the audience to engage with ideas of racial mixing and reconciliation via the on-stage enactment of both races by one actor. Underlying this concept is the idea that, by seeing the roles of Indigenous and “white Australian” embodied by the same performer, the idea of race is foregrounded and the viewer engaged in a critical evaluation of the play’s racial themes; the capacity for one person to embody both races on stage suggests, symbolically, the possibility of society itself accommodating hybrid racial elements. It can also be read as an allusion to the idea of Mukinupin and Australia containing a dark past (symbolized by Touch of the Tar) beneath its white surface (Polly Perkins). In splitting the roles, Anderson can, in this sense, be seen to have removed one of the metatheatrical constructs by which this kind of critical analysis of the play is generated. David Britton, reviewing the production, observed “it is a gamble Hewett enthusiasts will be discussing for a long time,” while David Hough described the approach to casting as “a debatable touch of realism.”¹⁷⁷

In other respects, however, this production’s revision of Hewett’s character doubling can be seen to have offered new and valuable perspectives on the play’s racial themes. Notably, Mardy Amos suggested that the casting of an Indigenous actor in the Indigenous role lent a “poignant fragility to the part.”¹⁷⁸ This is particularly notable during the scene in which Lily is dressed on-stage, by Jack Tuesday, in the clothes of “the coloniser,” to look like Polly Perkins.¹⁷⁹ As demonstrated in the DVD recording of the 2009 production

¹⁷⁶ Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 172, 245.

¹⁷⁷ Britton, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

¹⁷⁸ Amos, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

¹⁷⁹ Belvoir, *Archival Recording of The Man from Mukinupin*, disc 2 of 2, 0:29:33

in which, again the role of Lily was played by an Indigenous actor, it could be argued that this moment in production offers a more powerful comment on the British colonisation of Indigenous Australian communities when the actor being dressed in such clothing is Indigenous than when, as in the 1979 production, race is performed.

Another moment that was deemed to benefit from the casting of an Indigenous actor was the rain dance performed by Jedda Cole as Lily in Act Two. This dance occurs towards the end of the play, in the moments before the night-time wedding between Lily and Harry Tuesday. Following Lily's failed attempt at a theatrical career with Jack Tuesday, the Indigenous girl returns to the creekbed of her origins, her colonial costume in rags. The rain dance, symbolising in part her connection with and understanding of the land, is performed as a kind of homecoming; Lily, despondent about her failure to "fit-in" to mainstream society, reclaims her Indigenous identity and resigns herself to her status as an outcast as she prepares to drown herself in the creek. The song does not claim to replicate an Aboriginal corroboree, but just as the night-music, also played in scenes featuring Lily Perkins, contained "Aboriginal cadences," an allusion to this kind of ceremonial seems to have been implied. In this sense, the performance of the rain dance by an Indigenous actor may, indeed, have brought an element of authenticity to this moment that would be missing (and arguably problematic in light of the kinds of cultural concerns described above) from a performance of the same scene by a non-Indigenous actor. Whereas this scene had escaped the attention of reviewers in 1979, David Hough considered it to be "a highlight" of the 1988 production.¹⁸⁰

2009 Co-production – Melbourne Theatre Company and Company B Belvoir

When *The Man from Mukinupin* was performed at Belvoir Street Theatre, in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of its first season, the racial theme was, once again, a focus in the production and publicity. A significant context of the 2009 production was Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 Apology to Indigenous Australians, in which, by means of a Parliamentary address delivered on February 13th, he officially acknowledged the historical mistreatment of Aboriginal people at the hands of non-Indigenous

¹⁸⁰ Hough, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

Australians.¹⁸¹ As Graeme Blundell, interviewing Indigenous director Wesley Enoch explained, “the politics of skin is central to Enoch’s interpretation,” and this was reflected throughout the production in a number of ways.¹⁸²

The cast of the MTC/Belvoir production included three Indigenous actors who, according to the strategy of “colour-blind casting” adopted by Enoch, played a number of non-Indigenous roles. Two of these actors, David Page and Lillian Crombie, were well known at the time of the production, and were cast according to Hewett’s original concept of character doubling, Page playing Cecil Brunner, Max Montebello and The Flasher, with Lillian Crombie in the role of Clarry Hummer. Suzannah Bayes-Morton, having recently graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts, was cast in the dual role of Polly and Lily Perkins, the first Indigenous actor in a mainstage production of the play to perform both white and Indigenous roles. Along with these actors, Enoch’s cast included: Max Gillies (as Eek and Zeek), Kerry Walker (Edie Perkins) and Craig Annis (as Jack and Harry). Also among them, playing the role of Mercy Montebello, was Amanda Muggleton, well known to Australian audiences from her role in the long-running TV series *Prisoner*.¹⁸³

Enoch’s production of *The Man from Mukinupin* opened at Belvoir Street Theatre on April 2nd 2009 and transferred to Melbourne for its season in the Sumner Theatre, where it opened on 6th June. In a review of the Sydney production, Daniel Browning, writing for ABC Online Indigenous, cited Enoch’s description of the play as “a musical about genocide.” He also acknowledged that Hewett’s work was “not an Aboriginal or even an Indigenous play; nor could it be described as Indigenous theatre.”¹⁸⁴ Whilst identifying a longstanding debate regarding the right and, to quote Katharine Brisbane, “capacity – of

¹⁸¹ Prime Minister Kevin Rudd MP, “Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples,” Motion passed in Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, February 13, 2008, <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>.

¹⁸² Blundell, “Force of Nature.”

¹⁸³ Alex Lalak, “The Man from Mukinupin, Belvoir Street Theatre,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 18, 2009, accessed on December 12, 2010, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/arts/the-man-from-mukinupin-belvoir>.

¹⁸⁴ Daniel Browning, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Wesley Enoch, MTC/Company B, Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, *ABC Online Indigenous*, April 13, 2009, accessed December 6, 2010, <http://www.triplejtv.net/Indigenous/stories/s2538701.htm>.

a white writer to attempt a black character,"¹⁸⁵ Browning explains Enoch's view of the play and its significance to Australian history, as "a white story that needs to be told."¹⁸⁶

At the time of this production, Enoch was well known in Australia as a major player in the representation of Indigenous actors on the Australian stage. Among his works as director and writer for mainstage productions of Aboriginal plays, he was also founder of Queensland Indigenous performing group, Kooemba Jdarra, with whom he had produced a number of works (including plays by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers).¹⁸⁷ In a production exemplifying his ongoing concern with Indigenous rights, Enoch had, nine years before the production of *Mukinupin*, directed a play by non-Aboriginal writer George Landen Dann. Written in 1942, *Fountains Beyond* offers a sympathetic insight into an Indigenous Australian man's attempts to preserve his people's cultural history in the face of expansion of the local white community.¹⁸⁸ In her analysis of this production, Helen Gilbert explains how Enoch employed a strategy of white-face in the depiction of the play's three non-Indigenous roles.¹⁸⁹ In the context of this production, she suggests, white-face was used "ironically and self-reflexively," as a way of reversing the tradition of black-face minstrelsy that had long been used in the portrayal of Aboriginal Australians on the stage. As Gilbert says:

In Australia, where Aboriginal characters in popular theatre were styled after the stage Negro for decades after minstrel shows first began touring, and where the terms nigger and coon still linger in some circles as derogatory epithets for Aboriginal people, theatre practitioners approach minstrelsy with understandable caution and tend not to employ the tactic of direct reinscription – of replaying the tropes of the minstrel show on the assumption that modern-day spectators will process them critically in relation to the given context. Enoch thus reserves the minstrel mask for the white characters in *Fountains Beyond*, transferring its stereotyping functions, but not its more grotesque features, to the settlers who are forcing Aboriginal fringe-dwellers from their ancestral lands.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵Katharine Brisbane, "The Future in Black and White: Aboriginality in Recent Australian drama," *The Koori History Website: Images from Australian Indigenous History*, accessed October 6, 2010, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/blacktheatre/story2.html>.

¹⁸⁶Browning, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*.

¹⁸⁷"Wesley Enoch," Artists' Biography from HLA Management website, accessed on March 17, 2013, <http://www.hlamgt.com.au/client/wesley-enoeh/>.

¹⁸⁸Helen Gilbert, "Black and White and Re(a)l All Over Again: Indigenous Minstrelsy in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 55, no.4 (2002): 687.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 679-98.

¹⁹⁰Gilbert, "Black and White and Re(a)l All Over Again," 9.

In a strategy similar to that employed in *Fountains Beyond*, Enoch's production of *The Man from Mukinupin* incorporated the use of white-face as a way of foregrounding ideas of race. This technique was employed specifically for the depiction of Mukinupin's "white" residents, such that the actors playing those characters (regardless of their own skin colour) appeared in white-face "masks." In the manner described above, and as demonstrated in the archival DVD recording, these masks consisted of a thin layer of white make up applied to the faces of the actors. Although no attempt was made to replicate what Gilbert describes as the more grotesque features of Negro minstrelsy, the fact that the edges of the painted mask could clearly be seen on the actors' faces, made it clear that the white cover had been deliberately applied – a self-conscious, metatheatrical, reference to the idea of whiteness.

In the case of Susannah Morton-Bayes, playing Polly and Lily Perkins, the white-face was removed for scenes in which she appeared as the Indigenous character. In this sense, the strategy offered a reversal of the black-face approach which had been adopted in 1979, when the roles had been played by non-Indigenous actor Noni Hazlehurst. Viewed in relation to this particular instance of casting, Enoch's use of white-face invites reflection upon the original conception for the casting of these roles. Although, as acknowledged previously, Hewett's idea of double casting and the related use of black-face emerged as part of a critique that was sympathetic to Indigenous concerns, in this 2009 re-working, the reversal of this technique by the production's Aboriginal director, suggests a change in social attitudes which, as Gilbert identifies, renders tactics of white/black reinscription problematic. By reversing the tactic of racial representation, Enoch's approach could be seen to operate as a kind of inverse reference to white-face as a dark aspect of Australian theatre history.

The use of white-face in Enoch's production can also be read independently from the casting strategy adopted in the original. Foregrounding, as it does, the construct of "whiteness," this approach serves, in part, to highlight the ways in which British post-colonial identity is performed upon the Mukinupin, and Australian national, stage. This function is clear upon viewing the DVD recording of the production, in which the effect created by the use of white-face for all of *The Man from Mukinupin's* white characters can be seen. The first impact of the strategy occurs early on, when the Hummer sisters introduce the characters of the play. Seated at their table down stage, the sisters narrate

the entrances of Eek and Edie who are then joined on stage by Polly, Jack and Cecil Brunner. While the sisters themselves are made up in white-face, the full impact of this effect becomes clearest once all characters have made their entrances. The costuming of the actors, predominantly in black, works to highlight the use of the white-face while, additionally, the obvious fact of some of the actors being dark skinned underneath their constructed “whiteness” adds a further dimension of intrigue in these early moments. In its overt theatricality, this racial inscription (or re-inscription as the case may be) seems designed to engage the audience, from the outset of the play, in a process of critical reflection.

The effectiveness of Enoch’s use of white-face in highlighting the cultural constructs connected to “whiteness” is demonstrated at a number of moments throughout the play. Arguably some of the most powerful among these are the moments when Edie Perkins lapses from the more naturalistic sequences of dialogue within the play into her recitations of nineteenth century Romantic poems. The first occasion on which this occurs is just eleven minutes into the play’s first act, when Edie, as described in the previous outline of the play, recites a verse from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Lilian.”¹⁹¹

(Laughter. EDIE PERKINS comes centre to recite, to accompaniment on the piano.)

EDIE. Airy fairy Lilian,
 Flitting, fairy Lilian,
 When I ask her if she love me
 Claps her tiny hands above me,
 Laughing all she can;
 She’ll not tell me if she love me....

ALL. Put her in a billycan.

EDIE. (oblivious) Cruel little Lilian...¹⁹²

Edie recites this poem during a sequence of action in which Jack and Cecil are vying for Polly’s attention. Tennyson’s verse speaks of Lilian, a cruel mistress who accepts the speaker’s flirtation with no real intention of returning his affections. This reflects Polly’s behavior towards Cecil Brunner throughout the play, suggesting a cruel side to her personality that counterbalances the sweet, romantic heroine loved by all the town. The association of Polly’s dark side with Tennyson’s “Lilian” takes on a further resonance

¹⁹¹ Belvoir, *Archival Recording of The Man from Mukinpin*, disc 1 of 2, 0:10:58

¹⁹² Hewett, *The Man from Mukinpin*, 17.

when we consider that Polly's Indigenous half-sister is named "Lily." It is almost as though when Edie speaks of Lillian as "cruel" she is expressing her own despair and humiliation over the fact that her husband has betrayed her and has sired an Indigenous child.

In the DVD recording of the production directed by Wesley Enoch, the beginning of this recitation is marked by a sudden change in lighting state, from the warm interior of the Mukinupin General Store to a darker state against which Edie's whitened face is highlighted. Costumed in her black late nineteenth century style costume, Edie appears almost disembodied – a white face against a black background. Contributing to the overall effectiveness of this scene is the way in which an echo was used to enhance this and each of Edie's subsequent recitations. Enoch's interpretation of white-face works to create what might be described as a haunting effect, as though Indigenous spirits of the past, symbolised in the profound poetic works of nineteenth century English poets, are finding voice in the Mukinupin present. Complicating this effect, is the way in which Edie's verses resonate with the action at hand. Using such techniques, Enoch's production highlighted some of the ways in which traditions of the British past (here Tennyson's poem) continue to speak in future contexts.

Beyond its engagement with the themes above, the 2009 production demonstrates another approach to the play's own legacy as a seminal work in the history of Australian theatre. As well as the company's awareness of Hewett herself as a theatrical icon, notably one who had lived and maintained an active artistic presence in the vicinity of the current Belvoir Street Theatre, the production was also marked by an awareness of the play's own history. Once again using an approach he had adopted in the Queensland Theatre Company production of *Fountains Beyond*, Enoch's production was performed within a superimposed metatheatrical framework – in other words as though it were, itself, a play-within-a-play. This was established via a sequence of semi-improvised actions added to the opening moments of the play.¹⁹³ In it, a group of travelling tent performers of the 1950s were seen gathered by a camp-fire, as though preparing for a pending performance. In half lit profiles, the actors could be seen engaging in quiet conversations and moving in and out of their caravan (which would shortly become part of the play's action). Fifty seconds into the recording of the archival production, a telephone rings, supposedly in

¹⁹³ Belvoir, *Archival Recording of The Man from Mukinupin*, disc 1 of 2, 0:00:15

the audience. One of the on-stage vagabond actors makes their way into the auditorium where, lit in a spot-light, the old-fashioned telephone continues ringing. At this point, the other on-stage actors voice discontent with the apparent rudeness of the caller. "Tell them," says one of them, "We're about to do a show." As the actors complain (in terms familiar to contemporary mobile-phone bearing audience members) about "modern technology," Clemmy Hummer picks up, then *hangs up*, the phone. Crisis averted, another of the actors pulls a makeshift calico curtain across the width of the stage, thereby converting the campsite into a backstage area, while the forestage becomes a stage. At this point, Clemmy taps on the stage as indicated in the script, and the "performance" of *The Man from Mukinupin* begins.

In extending the play's own internal reference to a tradition of travelling performers, Enoch's production is a tribute to the play's own theatricality. As noted by one reviewer, the strategy of staging the story of *Mukinupin* as a play-within-the-play may also have offered a practical solution to the problem of limited space in the Belvoir Street upstairs theatre.¹⁹⁴ Relative to the large stage of the Drama Theatre, where the play had been staged in its previous Sydney main stage incarnation, the space at Belvoir Street Theatre, while flexible in some respects, did not offer the same opportunity for portraying the scope of the Australian landscape. By depicting *Mukinupin* as part of a metatheatrical performance by travelling players, staging elements could easily be reduced to a minimum. One, perhaps unintended, effect of extending its metatheatrical strategies to foreground the history of the play itself, may have been to consign the play to the past and rob it of some of its potential for critique. Critical and audience responses to the production at Belvoir Street Theatre indicate a largely positive response to this approach. Insofar as reviewers continued to comment upon the play's "relevance" and applicability, it would seem that audiences engaged with the play and were able to identify with the company's celebration of its legacy. In Melbourne, however, responses to the production were less consistent. Here, without the benefit of Sydney's close connection with Hewett's own legacy, the play's historical and theatrical references were deemed, by some, to be obscure. Rather than seeing the play and its production as a celebration of Australian theatre, audience members questioned the value of the play's historical

¹⁹⁴ James Waites, review of *The Man from Mukinupin*, directed by Wesley Enoch for Company B Belvoir and Melbourne Theatre Company, Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, May 15, 2009, <http://jameswaites.ilatech.org/?p=3577>.

references and, possibly fueled by the fact of its metatheatrical depiction as a work performed by actors of a previous theatrical era, deemed it to be a work for the archives. Whereas Hewett's use of metatheatre enabled a bloodier storyline to become visible beneath its more celebratory aspects, and to hold them in uneasy tension, it seems extending *Mukinupin's* metatheatrical techniques to encompass the play itself made it possible to see that dark storyline as a piece of theatre, easily cast aside as irrelevant.

1.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an analysis of the metatheatrical techniques deployed by Hewett in *The Man from Mukinupin*, as well as how these techniques have been realised, practically, in several productions. Through this analysis, the thoroughly metatheatrical nature of Hewett's play has become apparent. As demonstrated, the play incorporates each of Hornby's tenets of metatheatre, with the play-within-the-play, the ceremony-within-the-play and intertextual dramatic and real-life reference being particularly important to its structure and cultural discourse. Indeed, it is through the metatheatrical night-time ceremony and the Montebellos' performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona" that Hewett gives voice to the concerns of marginalised social groups, notably Indigenous Australians. In this respect, the playwright's use of metatheatre lends a critical edge to her play's celebratory tone.

The Man from Mukinupin has been seen here as both a canonical Australian play and a key text in the tradition of Australian metatheatre. In the coming chapter I will turn my attention away from the canon to a little known but nonetheless profoundly metatheatrical play, Louis Nowra's *Royal Show*. The chapter examines a number of similarities in the kinds of metatheatrical techniques used by Nowra and Hewett and highlights the potential of metatheatre for subversively effecting social critique.

CHAPTER TWO: LOUIS NOWRA'S *ROYAL SHOW*

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Louis Nowra's *Royal Show* (1982) is an unpublished and critically neglected play in the oeuvre of one of the foremost exponents of modern Australian metatheatre.¹ Though challenging to stage due to its scale and ambition, the work provides valuable insights into the ways in which post-war Australian playwrights have utilised metatheatrical strategies in order to generate particular kinds of social and cultural comment. Like *Mukinupin* which uses its war-time framework to invoke reflection upon contemporary Australian culture, Nowra's play engages the audience in a similar metatheatrical contemplation of the nation's past and present, effecting a critical tension between celebration and critique. One of the aims of this chapter is to uncover Nowra's hitherto unexamined play from the realms of the archive. Using materials held by the National Library and theatre company records, I offer the first substantive account of *Royal Show*, discussing it in relation to the contexts that produced it and its brief production history in the early 1980s. A reference copy of this play has also been attached as an Appendix to the thesis (see Appendix B). I argue that *Royal Show*, in its two productions and as a written play text, is an important example of Australian metatheatre that warrants further analysis, particularly since metatheatre has come to represent Nowra's "dramaturgical trademark."² I examine the ways in which Nowra's play is indebted to Hewett's *Mukinupin*, particularly its use of metatheatre to temper an otherwise celebratory tone with the depiction of another, darker, story, contained within but straining the edges of, the celebrated national narrative. I also demonstrate how in productions and the written text of *Royal Show*, Nowra's metatheatrical ambition was only ever partly realised. There are a number of factors that contributed to this metatheatrical "failure," including the play's epic scale and the related scope of its poetic vision which made it difficult to realise in practical terms. Nonetheless, I argue the metatheatrical dimensions connected to these challenges are worth examining given the potential they hold for powerful comment on Australian society and culture.

¹ Nowra, *Royal Show*. Appendix B.

² Kelly, "Performing Histories," 145.

Louis Nowra (b.1950) is widely known for his use of metatheatres in, for example, *Visions* (1978), *The Golden Age* (1986) and *Cosi* (1992), all of which feature variations of the play-within-the-play. Indeed, critics have observed that metatheatricality is a recurrent feature of his work. Veronica Kelly remarks that:

Music and verse are indispensable to [his] concept of...theatre, as is a wide range of theatrical devices: metamorphic shape-shifting, carnival disguising, impersonations, recitations, rituals and internal plays. Consciously undertaken performances by dramatic characters are a traditional structural method of communicating obscured or latent meanings significant to the larger plot; and in Nowra's work some kind of formalization via performance or self-display appears intrinsic to the characters' interaction.³

Nowra's deployment of metatheatrical techniques in relation to post-colonial discourses has been widely noted; through the metatheatrical communication of marginalised characters in his plays, Australian subcultures and hidden histories find expression – "latent meanings" are thereby revealed and a fuller depiction of modern Australian society achieved.⁴ However, while critics offer useful analyses of metatheatrical strategies in some of Nowra's better known plays, in particular *The Golden Age* and *Cosi* (Australia's best-known metatheatrical works), *Royal Show* remains marginal to their discussions. Kelly, for example, acknowledges the play's origins as a collaborative, devised, work and comments briefly on its discourse relating to its post World War II Australian setting, but does not offer a sustained analysis.⁵

This critical neglect can be explained, perhaps, with reference to its sparse performance history and its unpublished status. Unlike *Mukinupin* with its well established and now extensive history of live production, *Royal Show* received only two productions in 1982-83 and not been performed since. Critics and directors alike appear to adopt Nowra's own sidelining of the play. As Dennis Carroll explains:

Royal Show...was received fulsomely, but Nowra regards it more as a collaboration with the actors, even though he wrote the final draft. He regards it as his poorest work: 'I compromised by writing for Adelaide a light and frothy play which was given a wonderful production. That

³ Kelly, "Performing Histories," 142-143.

⁴ Ibid. See also, Joanne Tompkins "'Spectacular Resistance': Metatheatres in Post-Colonial Drama," *Modern Drama* 38.1 (1995); and Helen Gilbert as discussed in previous chapters and below.

⁵ Veronica Kelly, introduction to *Louis Nowra*, ed. Veronica Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 13-14. Elsewhere, Dennis Carroll provides a synopsis of the play and its genesis. See Dennis Carroll, *Australian Contemporary Drama* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1988), 321.

convinced me that critics can't tell the difference between a good production and a bad play.⁶

However, the play cannot be so easily dismissed as "light and frothy." In what follows, I suggest that in *Royal Show*, Nowra holds a mirror up to Australian society in the early 1980s to depict a moment of cultural transition from the recent past. Themes of memory and innocence are central, and Nowra draws upon the audience's own memories to engage them in reflections upon Australian cultural history, both in the 1946 setting of the play and in the contexts of 1982 when it was first staged.

As with Hewett's *Mukinupin*, historical contexts were a vital dimension of *Royal Show's* "genesis." *Royal Show's* setting at the time of an upcoming Federal election, for example, was relevant to 1982 audiences as they awaited the announcement of the 1983 March election in which Labor Minister Bob Hawke would defeat the longstanding Liberal government in a landslide victory.⁷ Nowra's post-war setting also offers a useful parallel for a nation in the midst of one of the century's most severe droughts, high unemployment and economic depression.⁸ This is balanced by a sense of optimism which, in the play's 1946 setting is connected to the end of the war. Nowra invites the audience to ponder the ways in which Australian society has changed between its 1946 setting and 1982 production, but also vice versa, how the future of Australia may be gauged by its past. This connection reflects a two way conversation between past and future which is an important dimension of this play, and one that if fully realised in production, has the capacity to extend beyond the original 1982 contexts.

Like *Mukinupin*, *Royal Show* involves the audience in a critique of Australian society, allowing them to celebrate their culture whilst demanding an acknowledgement of some of the contradictions underlying it. Metatheatre is integral to this process. The play includes several instances of the types of metatheatrical technique identified by Richard

⁶ Carroll, *Australian Contemporary Drama*, 321. Carroll cites Martin Portus' quotation of Louis Nowra: Martin Portus, "The Victims of a Messiah Complex," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April, 1988.

⁷ Itef Bereson, *Australia in the 1980s* (Port Melbourne: Echidna Books, 2002), 29; "Australia's Prime Ministers," National Archives of Australia, Australian Government website, accessed January 31, 2013. <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/primeministers/chifley/>.

⁸ In 1988 The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that "in terms of rainfall deficits over a one to two year period, the most severe droughts on record for eastern Australia have been those of 1901-02, 1982-83, 1994-95 and 2002-03." See National Climate Centre, Bureau of Meteorology, "Drought in Australia," in *Year Book Australia: 1988* (Canberra: 1988), under "1310.0 - Year Book Australia, 1988," accessed January 30, 2013, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>.

Hornby, notably: the play-within-the-play (or at least, a variation of it), intertextual dramatic and real-life reference, and the ceremony-within-the-play. Indeed, its ambitious use of such metatheatrical techniques, its choice of characters and its epic scope, combine to present a number of challenges for the play in production, which surely contributes to the paucity of its production history.

2.2 RESEARCH TEXTS

2.2a TEXTS OF FIRST PRODUCTION

Royal Show was written and first performed in late 1982, commissioned and directed by Jim Sharman, then Artistic Director of Lighthouse (the State Theatre Company of South Australia). Nowra wrote the play in collaboration with the Lighthouse ensemble, as part of a writing residency.⁹ The production was designed by Stephen Curtis with a cast made up of the actors of the Lighthouse actors' ensemble.¹⁰ This included: Robynne Bourne; Peter Cummins; Melissa Jaffer; Alan John; Gillian Jones; Melita Jurisic; Russell Kiefel; Robert Menzies; Jacqui Phillips; a young Geoffrey Rush; Kerry Walker and John Wood (fig.2.1).

⁹ This followed a period as playwright in residence at the Sydney Theatre Company and the production of a number of his early works by well-known theatre directors including John Bell, Neil Armfield, Richard Wherrett, Jim Sharman and Rex Cramphorn. The production of *Royal Show* ran from November 20 through to December 11 at The Playhouse Adelaide Festival Centre.

¹⁰ This group had been established under the State Theatre Company's Artistic Directorship by Jim Sharman (1982-83), the period in which the Company itself underwent a renaming (to Lighthouse Theatre Company). Sharman was committed to the ensemble's production of new Australian work. Half way through the following, 1983 season, he announced his intention to resign as Lighthouse's Artistic Director at the end of that year, 12 months before his tenure was due to end. Geoffrey Milne suggests that one of the reasons behind his decision was likely the Board's rejection of his proposal for the 1984 season. This proposal involved devoting all the Company's efforts to the production of new Australian works. See Geoffrey Milne, "Lighthouse: A 'Mainstage' Ensemble Experience," *Australasian Drama Studies* 53 (2008): 52.

PRESENTING THE GRAND FINALE OF 1982

ROYAL SHOW



By Louis Nowra and the Lighthouse Ensemble
 Director: Jim Sharman
 Designer: Christine Curtis
 Music: Sarah de Jong
 Lighting: Alan Lortie
 Musical Director: Alan Jones

CASTING will be to be held for this show which features all the actors in a variety of roles.

 Melissa Miller	 Neil Alder	 Wilson Jones	 Nicola Aron	 Ronald Cook
 Peter Maloney	 Robert Woodcock	 Jerry Phillips	 Geoffrey Park	 Gary Walker

PRESENTED IN ASSOCIATION WITH

IC
 BAO CHANNEL TO
 THE
 COOPERATIVE

LIGHTHOUSE
 STAFF • TOURS • COMPANY • CITY • COST • REHEARSAL

Fig.2.1. Cast of the 1982 Lighthouse Production. From the programme of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman for Lighthouse Theatre Company, Adelaide, Papers of Louis Nowra, National Library of Australia, MS10042, Series 11, Folder 5.

Nowra's dissatisfaction with *Royal Show* and its production in Adelaide might well explain why he never pursued publication. In turn, the play's unpublished status makes it particularly challenging for scholarship as it becomes difficult to determine its text or rather texts. Nonetheless, my research has led to the identification of a number of existing texts. These have been useful in formulating an idea of what the 1982 production of *Royal Show* was like and, subsequently, uncovering the ideas at play in what Nowra seemingly dismisses as a superficial work. However, due to the fact there are several working drafts, it is difficult to establish which, if any, of these represents the authoritative text. In view of its origins in the Lighthouse project, it is arguably the 1982 production of the play which must be viewed as the most authentic representation of the work. There is, unfortunately, no recording of this; a few photographic production sheets, preliminary costume designs and a copy of the floor-plan for the staging are the only visual records of how the production was staged.

Given the collaborative nature of the project, and in the absence of a recording of this production, an important resource in researching *Royal Show* has been the National Library of Australia's Manuscript collection, which holds Nowra's "Working Draft" of the play script.¹¹ The text contains several hand-written notes, evidently made by Nowra during the process of refining the play. Most of these pertain to intended cuts or re-writes, possibly identified by Nowra whilst working with the company in the rehearsal room and explaining the editing of this draft of 160 pages down to 128 pages in subsequent drafts. There is also, attached to the back of one page of this Working Draft, a newspaper clipping titled "Berridale CWA News," reporting on events of a meeting in which issues of membership and other matters were discussed.¹² This clipping (see fig.2.2) is inserted into a scene from *Royal Show* set in the CWA tea rooms. Against this background, Ida and Freda discuss the difficulties of catering to the Royal Show hordes given the limited rations available at the end of the war. At an initial glance, the newspaper clipping, from *South East Magazine*, appears to be one of Nowra's inspirations for the scene. The interactions reported in the article are remarkably similar to the actions of and exchanges between the characters in his *Royal Show* CWA tea rooms. The article states:

¹¹ Louis Nowra, *Royal Show*.

¹² "Berridale CWA News," *South East Magazine* 7, no. 3 in Louis Nowra, *Royal Show*, back of p8.

The president extended a special welcome to Flo Constance a new member who has been a strong supporter of CWA for many years. The president said she hoped her association with CWA would be a long and happy one as a member...

It continues:

In view of the heavy expenses with the painting, insurance and electricity, etc, several suggestions were made towards fund raising. A stall will be held at each meeting.¹³

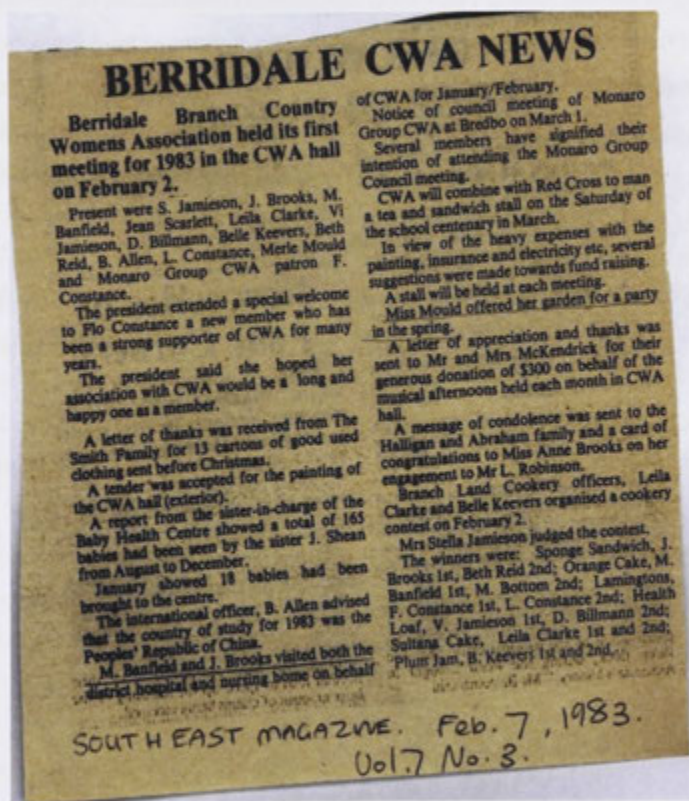


Fig.2.2. "Berridale CWA News," an article enclosed within the Working Draft of Nowra's *Royal Show*

¹³Ibid.

Contrary to the logical assumption of this article being a source for the performance text, it is in fact dated February 7, 1983 – more than one month *after* the production of the play in Adelaide. This leads to the speculation that Nowra, reading the article after the production, was struck by the likeness between his play and the real-life events of the Berridale Country Women’s Association (CWA) meeting. It is in the aftermath of the production that he has inserted this text into his working draft – an interesting document of his own reflections upon the play’s depiction of Australian cultural history. It also captures something of the way Nowra’s play itself complicates temporalities, particularly through the use of reflective monologues in which characters step out of the 1946 action and, seemingly speaking directly to the theatre audience, reflect on their experience of the Royal Show from an unspecified future; in this way, the playwright, using the ephemeral text of a newspaper clipping, connects his play with Australian society in 1983.

Nowra’s Working Draft of *Royal Show* should be considered alongside materials held by the State Theatre Company of South Australia “Lighthouse” archive, since the collaborative nature of the project means that these documents form part of the play’s texts. As explained in the director’s programme note for the premiere of *Royal Show* (contained within this collection) the aims of the ensemble were expansive, including the development of innovative theatre, with a focus playwrights, actors and contemporary audiences. Sharman wrote:

At Lighthouse we aim to stage our productions with a clarity that acknowledges our audience, enjoys their presence and quite often talks directly to them – making the theatre experience as spontaneous as possible. We avoid hiding behind too much makeup, stage tricks and illusions – trying instead to emphasise the shared contact between our actors and audience and generate that special ‘flesh and blood’ excitement only theatre can provide. The plays we choose seem to emphasise poetry and humour, make generous use of music and are large in scale...The Lighthouse Company started working together at the beginning of 1982. By the end of 1983 we will have presented new approaches to Shakespeare, given Adelaide the first professional productions of European classics by Bertolt Brecht, Garcia Lorca, Kleist and Beaumarchais. Most importantly, we will have presented major premieres of works by Patrick White, Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell and Bill Harding as well as creating a trilogy of plays revealing a highly individual view of our own society.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sharman, programme note from the Lighthouse Theatre Company production. Photographs, Programme and Ephemera, Archival Records of Lighthouse Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia. Three plays examining Australian society were presented by Lighthouse in world

Such projects presented a clear contrast to the small cast plays that had become popular during the theatrical “New Wave” of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the eastern states of Australia. Small casts were linked to considerations of commercial practicality, a practicality that Nowra had overlooked on a number of occasions and, in this production, was able to ignore. As indicated in the programme, each of the actors in *Royal Show* ended up playing several roles, often within the same scene. As a note placed prominently on the programme stated, “Lighthouse will be in full flight for this show which features all actors in a miscellany of roles.”¹⁵

Sharman’s programme note reveals the level of ambition with which the Lighthouse ensemble approached the *Royal Show* project, and the conditions under which they were able to generate a production of this scope. For Nowra, the fact of working with a company who could engage in a workshop process and embrace the challenge of creating and playing so many roles allowed for the breadth of characterisation the depiction of a *Royal Show* required but, as we shall see, ultimately resulted in the play’s critical and theatrical failure.

A number of other *Royal Show* texts and related archival documents are also held at the State Theatre Company of South Australia. These include an edited Working Draft of 128 pages which belonged to one of the Assistant Stage Managers (hereafter ASMs) for the late 1982 production and, as such, incorporates annotations regarding costuming and props.¹⁶ The extensive notes written throughout this script indicate that it was used as the ASM’s prompt copy during the production. There is also a copy of the script by Louis Nowra marked “Final,” 128 pages in length, and containing the same text as the one used by the ASM. In addition, the archives contain a script belonging to actor John Wood, another ASM’s prompt copy, a “Sound Script” indicating various sound cues and effects

premieres in 1983. Although they do not appear to have been billed as a trilogy at the time of production, these may be the works to which Sharman was referring in the programme for *Royal Show*. The plays were: Patrick White’s *Netherwood* (June 1983), Stephen Sewell’s *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (October 1983) and Louis Nowra’s *Sunrise* (November 1983). See “The Lighthouse Acting Company,” AusStage webpage, accessed February 11, 2013, <http://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/organisation/11871#>.

¹⁵ Sharman, programme note from the Lighthouse Theatre Company production, Photographs, Programme and Ephemera, Archival Records of Lighthouse Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia.

¹⁶ Louis Nowra and Lighthouse Company, *Royal Show: A Working Draft*, 128 page Lighthouse production script, Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show* by the Lighthouse Theatre Company directed by Jim Sharman, Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide. Hereafter Nowra, *Royal Show*. Lighthouse production script.

used throughout the production and another copy of a Working Draft by Louis Nowra (this one also 128 pages in length).¹⁷ Taken together, Nowra's Working Draft and the records of the production provide quite a comprehensive view of the play and its aims. As I shall demonstrate, they also highlight some of the challenges of putting this work into effect.

2.2b TEXTS OF SECOND PRODUCTION

The only other production of the play was staged by a professional regional theatre ensemble, the New Moon Theatre Company, in Northern Queensland in July 1983, just six months after the Adelaide premiere. Records held in the New Moon Theatre Company Archives indicate how *Royal Show* was re-staged by the New Moon touring ensemble, how its practical requirements were handled, the way in which the production engaged with local communities and the response from both audiences and critics.¹⁸ Given this production's proximity to *Royal Show*'s development and premiere in Adelaide, these records arguably constitute part of the play's "text."

Founded in Townsville in 1981, New Moon was a joint initiative between local authorities there and in three other Northern Queensland cities to support a professional touring theatre company. This company, formed like Lighthouse on the basis of an acting ensemble (arguably a factor contributing to their selection of *Royal Show*), operated between 1982 and the early 1990s, touring plays to Townsville, Cairns, Rockhampton and Mackay. By shifting its residential base intermittently between these cities, the company aimed to engage with local communities, filling a perceived cultural gap created by the former absence of a permanent professional theatre company in the Far North of Australia.

Selected from a shortlist of three plays, *Royal Show* opened in Cairns on July 6, 1983, playing for four nights in each location before closing in Rockhampton at the end of the month. It was directed by Terry O'Connell, with a cast including: Valerie Bader; Bob Baines; Ross Brewer; Deidre Chambers; Stephen Clark; Nicholas Flanagan; Gillian Hyde; Penny McCue; Wayne Pigram; Gina Riley and David Sandford (see figs. 2.3 and 2.4).

¹⁷ The scripts used by John Wood, the sound script and the extra copy of the working draft are the same version as the one used by the ASM.

¹⁸ New Moon Theatre Collection, Edi Koiki Mabo Library, James Cooke University, Townsville. In particular, see NEWM/PUB/23, NEWM/PUB/24, NEWM/PUB/1, NEWM/PS/40.



Fig.2.3. New Moon Theatre Company cast and director, 1982 production of *Royal Show*. Copies of photographs used in the programme, here provided by photographer Ponch Hawkes. L to R, Top Row: Valerie Bader, Deidre Chambers; Middle Row: Nicholas Flanagan, Penny McCue; Bottom Row: Terry O'Connell, Ross Brewer.



Fig.2.4. New Moon Theatre Company cast and director, 1982 production of *Royal Show*. Copies of photographs used in the programme, here provided by photographer Ponch Hawkes. L to R, Top Row: Bob Baines, Gina Riley; Middle Row: Stephen Clark, Gillian Hyde; Bottom Row: David Sandford, Wayne Pigram.

Through its advertisement and production in the four North Queensland cities to which it toured, Nowra's *Royal Show* demonstrates the New Moon Theatre Company's attempts to connect with local audiences. Advertisements published in local newspapers and bulletins drew attention to the Royal Show as a shared event in Australian cultural history, "a spectacular evocation of [a] great Australian tradition," but beyond this, the play was

marketed specifically within each town.¹⁹ In Townsville, for example, the “Australian tradition” referred to on the production’s generic advertising poster became “a great Townsville tradition” (see fig.2.5). In addition, an article published in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* on Wednesday 13th July 1983 describes a fair that was set up outside the theatre “featuring stalls, food and fairground frolics,” thereby extending the theatrical action of *Royal Show* beyond the play itself and into the community.²⁰ Similarly in Mackay, a Royal Show display was erected in the window of the un-occupied former David Jones Department Store (as shown in fig.2.6). Designed to promote New Moon’s production, the display was put together by Mrs Helen Royes, a Mackay Resident and member of the “Friends of New Moon,” a community group that had been founded in Mackay the same year and whose tasks related to promotion of New Moon productions. The use of the unoccupied building reflects the uncertainty of the early 1980s economic depression, and also the ongoing uncertainty that New Moon Theatre Company itself faced about its artistic future; they had campaigned at the end of the 1982 season for sponsorship and an increase in local government support to secure its continuation in 1983.²¹

¹⁹ Examples of such posters and advertisements can be found in New Moon Theatre Collection, 388R, NEWM/PUB/24.

²⁰ Advertisement for the Townsville production of *Royal Show*, New Moon Theatre Collection, 388R, NEWM/PUB/24.

²¹ Unsigned review of *Royal Show*, directed by Terry O’Connell for New Moon Theatre Company, Mackay, “Cuts Threaten Theatre Group,” *Mackay Daily Mercury*, no date, New Moon Theatre Collection, 388R, NEWM/PUB/24.



Fig.2.5. Image of the Townsville poster from the New Moon Theatre Company tour of *Royal Show*, 1983, directed by Terry O'Connell. The photograph used in the poster features a cake trimmed with lace, decorated with the heading *Royal Show* and a series of plastic farm-yard animals. Photograph provided here by Ponch Hawkes.



Fig.2.6. Image of the display window put together by Mackay resident and "Friend" of New Moon Theatre Company. New Moon Theatre Collection, 389L. NEWM/PUB/23.

Records from this production indicate a set that was simple and versatile, consisting of a series of portable, light-weight painted flats.²² Several of these featured decorative titles consistent with the various stalls depicted throughout the play, for example “Ghost Train,” “Laughing Clowns” and “Dodgem Cars.” This worked to create the image of a busy showground setting while serving another more practical purpose in eliminating the need for elaborate scene changes. In the manner of a medieval station drama, different scenes could be played out on the same multi-purpose set, as indicated in the images below (see figs.2.7 and 2.8).²³ Photographs of the set show how, at moments, a curtain was draped in front of the flats up stage centre. Painted red and featuring the title “Royal Show,” the curtain can be seen as both an introduction to the play itself and a reference to the idea of the Royal Show as a performance of Australian identity and history. In this way, the set constructed by Kerry Saul engaged directly with the play’s metatheatrical themes.²⁴

Photographs also indicate that transformations of character in this production of *Royal Show* were achieved, as in the Adelaide production, via simple costume changes. Using elongated trousers, a purpose made fat-suit and a menagerie of animal ears, the actors of the ensemble were able to embody most of the play’s challenging costuming requirements – the worlds’ tallest man, Dahlia the fat lady and a menagerie of chickens, sheep and pigs.

These materials offer rich insight into the production of the play and constitute the key texts of *Royal Show* as identified through archival research, and which have been central to my analysis. To summarise, they include:

1. The 160 page original working draft of the play, held in the National Library of Australia²⁵
2. The 128 page working draft used by the Stage Managers and actors of the Lighthouse production of 1982²⁶

²² Set diagrams and photographs from 1983 production of *Royal Show*, New Moon Theatre Collection, 390R, NEWM/PS/40.

²³ See Martin Banham, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2000), 714-16.

²⁴ No set designer is listed in the programme or other archival documentation of the production. The design may have been done collaboratively or by Kerry Saul, who is credited with its construction.

²⁵ Nowra, *Royal Show*.

²⁶ Nowra, *Royal Show*. Lighthouse production script. As discussed, the State Theatre Company of South Australia archive holds a number of copies of this script, including one belonging to each of the production’s two Stage Managers (Di Misirdjieff and Colin Mann), another which on close inspection appears to have belonged to the actor John Wood, another marked “Sound Script” and another, unmarked, which includes the note from Jim Sharman. Cuts to the text (i.e. subsequent to the earlier Working Draft) appear largely related to scaling the play back to a length manageable in production. These include edits

3. Photographs and other ephemera from the Lighthouse production²⁷ and
4. Photographs, floor plans and a recording of the Queensland production by New Moon Theatre Company.²⁸

Together, these texts have formed the basis of my analysis of *Royal Show* in its brief production history between 1982 and 1983. As well as providing insights into Nowra's play writing strategies, in particular *Royal Show's* metatheatre, these records illustrate the challenges inherent in the play's production.

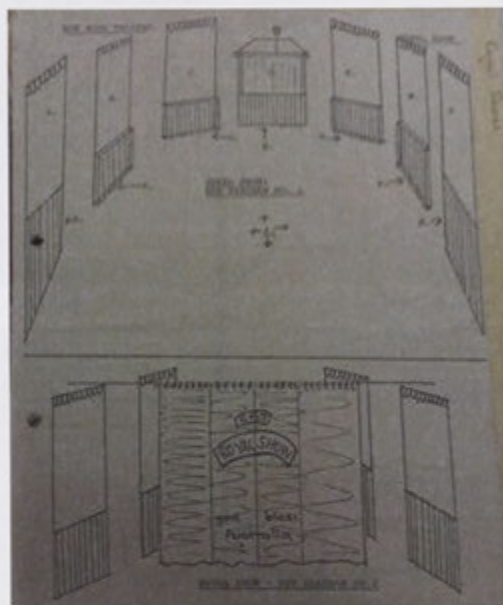


Fig.2.7. Image of the set construction plan for the New Moon Theatre Company tour of *Royal Show*, 1983. Carpenter Kerry Saul. Designer unlisted. New Moon Theatre Collection, 390R, NEWM/PS/40.

to some of Nowra's longer monologues. As the cuts made prior to production do not have a significant impact upon the play's metatheatrical functions, they will not be discussed in detail in my own analysis.

²⁷Photographs, Programme and Ephemera. Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show* by the Lighthouse Theatre Company directed by Jim Sharman, Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide.

²⁸ Records from 1983 production of *Royal Show*, New Moon Theatre Collection, 373R-392M and folio 509. At the time of this study, the film reel recording of the production could not be viewed. DVD transfer forthcoming.



Fig.2.8. Images of set of the New Moon Theatre Company tour of *Royal Show*, 1983. New Moon Theatre Collection, 390R, NEWM/PS/40.

2.3 *ROYAL SHOW – AN OUTLINE*

Given the play's status as unpublished and rarely performed, a brief outline will highlight several pertinent themes and some of the metatheatrical techniques deployed. *Royal Show* is set on the grounds of an Australian Agricultural Show in the aftermath of the Second World War. The year is 19

46 and, consistent with the actual war-time secondment of many Australian showgrounds for military purposes, the Show depicted in the play has just re-opened after a six year hiatus.²⁹ The action is set against the background of Australia's forthcoming Federal election; it is September, one week before the coalition Liberal Party (formerly United Australia Party) would again be defeated by the Labor Party, heralding three more years under the leadership of Prime Minister Ben Chifley.³⁰ Within the play, these events are referenced via direct mention of the pending election and the characterisation of one of the Show's patrons as a Liberal Party candidate. Act One of *Royal Show* opens with a meeting in the Farm Produce Hall between executives of the Royal Agricultural Society (RAS), just moments before the Show's official opening. Final preparations are being made and Mr Fox, RAS President, is congratulating himself on the realisation of his vision, a map of Australia made of fruits and vegetables from each constituent State and Territory. Fox describes this vision, symbolic of Australia's then new allegiance with the United States of America, as having come to him during the war when, lunching in a Prague Art Gallery that had been bombed by the Americans, he discovered the relic of an artwork which inspired him in creating the display. The RAS executive committee looks forward to the Show's re-opening, viewing it as a "triumph" over the war-time challenges of "rationing, electricity cuts and the Axis powers."³¹ In their view, the Royal Show represents a performance of Australian culture on the world stage. As the committee admires Fox's display of live produce, a three year old girl finds her way into the showground unseen by Charlie the gatekeeper who, "getting too old," has lapsed in his

²⁹ Colin and Margaret Kerr, *Royal Show* (Adelaide: Stock Journal Publishers Pty Ltd, 1983), 85-86; Kate Darian Smith, "Royal Melbourne Show," School of Historical Studies webpage, Department of History, University of Melbourne, last modified February 25, 2010, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01279b.htm>; "History of Royal Adelaide Show, Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society of South Australia webpage, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.theshow.com.au/showground/royal-adelaide-show/history.jsp>.

³⁰ "Australia's Prime Ministers," National Archives of Australia, Australian Government website, accessed January 31, 2013. <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/primeministers/chifley/>.

³¹ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 1.

attention.³² Pursued by an anxious mother who had not even intended to visit the Show, three year old Rebecca is lost among its various displays and wanders about, immersing herself in the action. Meanwhile a range of stallholders is introduced via scenes depicting frantic preparations for the opening of this grand event. These characters include representatives from a cross section of Australian society. In the CWA tea rooms, Ida and Freda (one of whom is a war widow) struggle to set up for the arriving hordes. Pressure brews as executive member Mrs Davies attempts to oversee their preparations. Nearby, Mr Snell of the Cattle, Sheep and Swine Committee directs a confused menagerie as things fall behind schedule with the arrival of final cargos. Amidst the chaos and confusion of these preparations, a P.A. announcement hails the opening of the "1946 Royal Agricultural Show."³³

Between the Royal Show's opening and the end of Act One, Nowra guides onstage patrons and the audience through the Show's display of Australian culture. More stalls and pavilions are introduced, some through on-stage depictions of their displays and the characters running them, others via descriptive announcements over the Royal Show's P.A. system. The action is also interspersed with songs in which characters describe and comment upon the displays at hand. Together, these songs, scenes and announcements make up the sights and sounds of the busy 1946 Show with its record crowds and post-war atmosphere of celebration.³⁴ The showground patrons are an eclectic mix of school children, teachers, young lovers, freaks, politicians, conmen, religious fanatics and elderly couples. Also among them is Desmond, a mentally handicapped boy, and a pregnant woman who, unbeknown to her devoted husband, is bearing the child of an American GI. The range of events depicted in this first act is as colourful and entertaining as its characters. As the conman, Max, swindles innocent patrons of their limited savings, Liberal candidate Sir Sidney Truscott campaigns for votes and publicity. Desperate for media attention, Truscott assaults a blind man in an attempt to frame his "communist" Left wing opponents, then forcibly recruits a nearby photographer to cover the "story." Joe Moyne, the Circus Ringmaster, has been appointed to direct the Royal Show's Grand Parade, but is sidetracked into helping judge the winetasting competition. He is soon

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁴ This is consistent with accounts of Australian Royal Agricultural Shows in the years immediately following World War II. For example, see Colin and Margaret Kerr, *Royal Show*, 85-86.

assisted in his drunken efforts by the gentleman in charge of the Quarantine Pavilion, who has taken a break from his demonstration of the dangers of “foreign bugs.” A wood-chopping contest is held between three burly male competitors, while two young lads elsewhere on the showgrounds discuss strategies for meeting girls. Their aspirations are met by the appearance of two young ladies whom they pursue in following scenes, with a romantic ride on the ghost train and, later, the merry go round. The couples are joined on the ghost train by an escaped Italian Prisoner of War who, in an attempt to evade authorities, has disguised himself as a nun. Also present is the actual ghost of Mary Watson, a young woman who committed suicide at the 1939 show when abandoned by her lover. Over in the Women’s Pavilion, a skirmish takes place when Mrs Davies judges the unlikely “Camellia and Barbed Wire” to be the winner of the floral art display. Supplies are running low in the tea rooms and the disgruntled Duke of Berkshire, attending as a Royal representative, is unhappy about the Show’s failure to adequately acknowledge Britain. Furious when he discovers Fox’s intention of delivering a speech in which he will pay homage not to Britain but to the USA (an allusion to Prime Minister Curtin’s 1941 announcement of American allegiance) he insists upon a more fitting representation.³⁵ Ultimately, however, his demands are dismissed by Fox in favour of his own vision of a new, modern, Australia. Demonstrated in the Show’s displays of modern technologies, this vision culminates in the Grand Parade at the end of Act One, in which “A huge American car comes out” adorned with Australian and American flags. As the P.A. voice announces “Ladies and gentlemen, the pride of modern technology,” Nowra’s stage directions indicate:

the horses and animals have turned into chorus girls as they present the car. Before us is the smiling grille of the car with its huge aluminium teeth. Out steps Fox. Smiling Broadly.

FOX. Ladies and Gentlemen of Australia – the future!³⁶

In Act Two, darkness approaches and the youngest patrons are guided towards the exit by exhausted parents and teachers. Others remain to participate in the Royal Show’s

³⁵ On December 27, 1941, Prime Minister John Curtin, announced “Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.” As David Black argues, this moment is often viewed as the point at which Australia broke from its historical allegiance with Britain, thereby “coming of age.” See Black, “Menzies and Curtin in World War Two: a comparative essay,” John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library / Menzies Foundation, 2006, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://john.curtin.edu.au/ww2leaders/world.html>.

³⁶ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 90.

evening events, including stalls and games, quarantine demonstrations, dodgem cars, the merry-go-round, and, importantly, Sideshow Alley, with its multifarious freak show performances. Hearing of Mrs Davies' controversial judgment of the art display, Fox laments the failure of the executive to recognise her artistic potential. Davies has interpreted the artwork "Camellia with Barbed Wire" as symbolising the experience of Australian women captured in Japanese prison camps. Upon passing her judgment she is ousted from the Pavilion of Women's Industries by colleagues who cannot appreciate the value of original Australian art. In a comment that resonates with anxiety over the legacy of British colonisation characteristic of both the play's post World War Two setting and its early 1980s performance context, Fox laments that:

Too few Australians have a vision, Hobbs. It involves too much hard work, heartache and struggle to remain true to a vision. What we are, Hobbs, are cultural parasites, forever feeding off other countries' visions and not our own. We'll pay for it in the future. Dearly.³⁷

In the following moments, Fox is confronted by the angry Duke of Berkshire who is unable to forgive the perceived slights suffered by his country in the Grand Parade. In a sweeping gesture of de-colonisation, he announces his disappointment in the Royal Show and departs, leaving behind a token of the British Empire's legacy, the *Collected Works of Shakespeare* "in one volume on rice paper."³⁸ Fox, failing to recognise the cultural value of Shakespeare, expresses his dislike of rice paper, while the impact of the Duke's grand exit is diminished when he is later discovered having a romantic interlude with Ms Dawkins after hours in the Women's Pavilion.

As the day draws to a close a baby is born, young lovers switch partners and conman Max finds himself gainful employment as Public Relations Manager for Sir Sidney. Following the closure of the Show's day-time stalls, stragglers find themselves amidst the stalls of Sideshow Alley. Here, in the world of freaks and illusions, the play draws to its close. Nowra ends the celebration of the Royal Show in the on-stage depiction of a wedding, seemingly typical of a Shakespearean comic romantic ending with the exception that the playwright casts unlikely characters in the roles of bride and groom. Against his

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

freak show background, Nowra marries Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman and Billy the Memory Man, who has recently returned from war.

2.4 A METATHEATRICAL COMPARISON

The lighthearted, celebratory tone of the play is evident from this brief outline; a simple plot description of the play foregrounds the the “frothiness” of the fairground setting and the play’s comedic happy ending. In part, this frothiness results from the way that, like *Mukinupin*, *Royal Show* deploys Shakespearean mythopoeitics and dramaturgical techniques to effect its meanings. This contributes significantly to the play’s dominant, comic, tone. Nowra’s challenging use of metatheatre in *Royal Show* is further demonstrated in the play’s similarity to *The Man from Mukinupin*. In particular, in referencing this work, Nowra adopts a metatheatrical strategy of intertextual dramatic reference identified by Hornby and similar to that used by Hewett. Hewett’s play was first performed just three years before the premiere of *Royal Show* and by the time of the Lighthouse production already boasted a solid production history, with separate productions in five Australian states.³⁹ This invites various interpretations. If, on the one hand, the production assumes audience awareness of *Mukinupin*, as the 1982 production may have done, then *Royal Show*’s intertextuality operates as a kind of homage, affirming the importance of *Mukinupin* as a canonical text in a twentieth century Australian dramatic tradition. If, on the other hand, no audience awareness of *Mukinupin* is assumed, then *Royal Show*, metatheatrical in its own right and via its profound intertextual reference to *Mukinupin*, extends the tradition of Australian metatheatre nonetheless.

It is significant that Nowra’s wife at the time of the production of *Royal Show*, composer Sarah De Jong, had worked as musical director on *Mukinupin*, and it could be speculated that Nowra drew upon elements of this production when working on the Lighthouse production of *Royal Show* (for which De Jong composed the music). Indeed, Nowra wrote *Royal Show* only shortly after the Western Australian premiere of *The Man from Mukinupin*.⁴⁰ However, there has, to date, been no comment from Nowra or in any

³⁹ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, 32.

⁴⁰ Louis Nowra, “Louis Nowra interviewed by Hazel de Berg,” recorded on February 5, 1981, Hazel de Berg Collection TRC 1/1213, National Library of Australia. Audiotape.

relevant critical literature on this play's relationship to Hewett's play. Nonetheless the likenesses are striking. Notably, both are set in the recent past of war-time Australia and, through their use of metatheatres invite reflections upon past and present Australian society. In addition, both are structured around a clear divide between day and night-time scenes, the metatheatrical signaling of which is linked into each play's thematic and cultural discourse. The plays also share a generic dimension in the use of Shakespearean comedy and in their adaptation of Shakespeare to Australia. Related to this, *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show* incorporate intertextual Shakespearean reference which forms a significant part of how the playwrights re-play and re-imagine Australia, both historically and theatrically.⁴¹

⁴¹ It is worth noting that, even beyond *Royal Show*, Nowra's work, in its use of metatheatres and non-naturalistic style, bears a number of likenesses to Hewett's. One notable common influence is that of early theatrical experience, a factor reflected in both playwrights' employment of self-referential theatrical styles. In an autobiographical essay, Nowra attributes his early exposure to theatre to his uncle Bob Herbert. Herbert had worked as a theatrical director and stage manager for J.C. Williamson's commercial theatre during the 1950's, and thus he recalls "My first theatrical memories are in fact going to all the musical comedies of J.C.W's, *The Cherry Blossom Shows*, the *Can Cans*, *My Fair Lady*." Louis Nowra, "Autobiography," in *Louis Nowra*, ed. Veronica Kelly. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1887), 30. Here, the playwright reflects that he was lucky to be exposed to theatre on account of his uncle's professional involvement. Given his upbringing in a working class area of Melbourne during the 1950s, he indicates that attending the theatre is:

something that ordinarily would have been impossible for someone like me. I saw many American musicals, including *Camelot*, *My Fair Lady*, *Hello Dolly*, *Mame* and *Can-Can* (of the latter I vividly remember a woman dressed in an iridescent snake costume, writhing her way downstage, causing in my younger self his first sense of his own sexuality). The first musical I ever saw was *The Cherry Blossom Show*, direct from Japan...

He also describes his disappointment when, being taken backstage after the shows, the illusion of the stage appeared drab and washed out:

Backstage was gloomy and grubby, with fake gorilla suits hanging from the wall, two-dimensional trees and ugly people who had been beautiful on stage. I felt as though I had been cheated and I wept. I suppose I never really got over this moment and even today I think there is something fraudulent about it.

These childhood recollections, along with other theatrical influences, have re-surfaced in the playwright's frequently autobiographical works. The quotation immediately above is interesting to consider in relation to *Royal Show* as here, rather than despairing the discrepancy between stage illusion and life, Nowra appears to embrace it, incorporating it into his depiction of the Show's backstage scenes and connecting it to the idea of Australia's rehearsal of identity. Like Dorothy Hewett in her recollection of works seen as a child, the influence of Nowra's early exposure to theatre is not only seen in direct reference to popular and musical theatre, but is arguably pervasive in his employment of metatheatrical techniques.

2.4a SHAKESPEAREAN DIMENSIONS

Nowra's play echoes *Mukinupin* in the way it re-works the generic structure of Shakespearean comedy. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hewett presents the celebratory comic double wedding, borrowing liberally from Shakespearean comedy, but this ending is offset by the addition of the third wedding during the night-time scene of Act Two. In *Royal Show*, this is a single wedding but its resolution partakes in the Shakespearean comic tradition in its tone and effect of tying the play together in its final moments. As in *Mukinupin*, the comic ending of *Royal Show* is deliberately re-worked to temper its otherwise celebratory tone with caution. Nowra's bride and groom are not the young lovers of the Royal Show's "main stage" day-time events, but rather characters from the night-time realm of Sideshow Alley. In what might be seen as a further allusion to *Mukinupin*, the bride is "Ivory" the white Aboriginal woman – an echo of the cultural hybridity and related discourse surrounding Hewett's night-time bride, Touch of the Tar / "Lily" Perkins. In addition, the groom is Billy the Memory Man, the freak show performer who has recently returned from war. Damaged by his war-time experience but unable to forget what he has seen, he represents the Australian war veteran and is an echo of Hewett's night-time groom and returned soldier Harry Tuesday. Thus Nowra, like Hewett, depicts an on-stage wedding in which unresolved elements of Australia's past are united. And here, too, the celebratory tone of the Shakespearean comic ending is complicated, in this case by the relegation of the ceremony to the night-time, where it remains concealed from the main stage of Australian culture.

In addition to the reworking of the Shakespearean comic ending, *Royal Show* also draws upon Shakespeare to expand its scope, conveying a Shakespearean breadth of human experience. It is the expansiveness of Nowra's play that appears to have presented one of the greatest challenges to its production, taking metatheatre to its limits. As in *Mukinupin*, the play's scope is apparent in its intertextual Shakespearean references, the use of real-life references to link the historical contexts within to the world of the audience, and the re-working of the Shakespearean comic ending. The re-working of Shakespeare forms a

vital part of each play's cultural discourse and in both cases it can be seen as a metatheatrical re-telling of Australian history.

The Shakespearean dimension of Hewett's work has, as observed in Chapter One, been frequently noted by critics. Attributable in part to Hewett's time writing plays for The New Fortune (Elizabethan style) theatre at the University of Western Australia, this dimension is evident in the epic structure of many of her plays, from *The Chapel Perilous* (1971) through to later works including *Mukinupin*. Nowra's *Royal Show* is similarly epic in scope. Participants in the Show's events can be seen to reflect not only each aspect of Australian society, but also the full spectrum of life's events, from birth through death and even beyond. Examples are: the lost child, the aging and forgetful gatekeeper of the showground, young lovers, elderly couples, the comic buffoons of the wine-tasting stand and the unborn child of the departed American GI. Particularly important in Nowra's allusion to the cycle of birth and death are the ghost of Mary Watson and the unexpected delivery of a baby in Act Two.

The depiction of the birth of a baby in *Royal Show* contains a mythopoetic quality similar to that observed in Hewett's play and also demonstrates Nowra's attempt to underscore comic cultural celebration with deeper reflection. On the surface, the unexpected birth offers a moment of light entertainment, as mother Julia goes into labour and CWA members Ida and Freda are called upon to assist. Conveniently, it turns out that Ida "was a nurse for many years," and so with the *Royal Show* doctor having already gone home, Ida and Freda, together with midwife Mrs MacPherson "from the chook pavilion" assist in the delivery of the child.⁴² Although comic in the way the frantic events leading up to it are played out, the symbolism of new life is emphasised in a way that adds depth of meaning beyond the play's comedy. In the moments after the birth of the new baby, for example, Ida and Freda speculate upon the child's future, and in a song performed mid-way through a scene, reflect that "Grandchildren [in other words, the new generation] are our hope."⁴³ Nowra also inserts a monologue, delivered by the child's father, Tom, in which, speaking from a future time frame, he reveals that the child and, arguably, at a symbolic level, the future, are not necessarily what one would expect them to be. Tom reflects how, as his wife gave birth to the child

⁴² Nowra, *Royal Show*, 135.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 139.

...I waited, behind a pavilion which overlooked the sideshows. It only took half an hour. The two old ladies were marvelous. I had never been so excited. I felt I was truly home from the war for the first time. While I waited, I imagined our huge family. Adoring wife, five beautiful children. A suburban home. A Heinz dog with a huge, sloppy tongue. If a boy he would be called Andrew. I never contemplated a girl's name because I only wanted a boy. When the old lady called me over and said it was a boy! He was wrapped up in a pale blue blanket, his face yellow and greasy from birth. I was so excited, I nearly dropped him! (*Pause*) Years later I found out that he was not my son but some G.I.'s. By that time I didn't know him anyway. He was an adolescent stranger who looked at me with mistrust and who, if I'm lucky, calls me up on Father's day and says hello to me and because we don't know what to say to each other, I hand the phone over to his mother.⁴⁴

In scenes such as these, Nowra invites a deeper reflection on life, death, disappointment, the end of war and the relationship of Australia's past not only to the present world of the play's 1946 setting, but its future. This reflection, suspended outside the play's present, provides a counter-discourse to the hope expressed by Ida and Freda. In this way, Nowra's work, like Hewett's, embodies Shakespearean epic qualities, and employs these in a theatrical staging of Australian history in order to trouble dominant discourses of nationhood.

Intertextual references to Shakespeare are another striking feature common to *Royal Show* and *Mukinupin*. In Hewett's play, the intertextual quotation of Shakespeare, itself a metatheatrical strategy, is often incorporated into other metatheatrical moments, the performance of scenes from *Othello* by the travelling players of Act One being the most obvious example. Here, in her adaptation of Shakespeare to the local context of *Mukinupin*, Hewett demonstrates a process of re-working the canon. Also, by incorporating travelling players into the play's action, Hewett connects a recognisably Elizabethan tradition (and thereby significance) to a local Australian tradition of travelling performers. These techniques form part of Hewett's theatrical re-telling of Australian history, and importantly, demonstrate how her play makes theatre itself part of that history re-told.

In this respect, Hewett's incorporation of Shakespeare into her theatricalisation of *Mukinupin* and Australia's history, is not only intertextual but references a metatheatrical

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

tradition; in other words, it is a metatheatrical reference to metatheatre itself. The use of intertextual reference to Shakespeare is less pervasive in *Royal Show* than it is in *Mukinupin*, but where it does occur its use is remarkably similar to moments in Hewett's play. Like Hewett, Nowra references *A Midsummer Night's Dream* via a scene in Act Two entitled "Cronics: Well Met by Streetlight," a play on the "Well met by moonlight" of the Mechanicals' first covert rehearsal for their metatheatrical performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe." In Act Two of *Royal Show*, as darkness has started to descend, conman Max strikes a deal with the candidate for the Liberal Party, Sir Sidney Truscott. In a display of smooth talking, Max works his way into a job as public relations representative for Truscott in the upcoming election.

- MAX. Don't worry, sir. I know a way you can be elected this year and if you play your cards right, you could be PM in the election after.
- SIR SID. (*Suddenly interested*) As the hare said 'I'm all ears'.
- MAX. What you need is a public relations man, Sir Sidney. I have been reading about them in American magazines. It's a new idea. I publicise you, package you as it were and you'll be more famous than Churchill.

The deal is struck and, in a direct intertextual reference to *The Dream*, Sir Sid remarks:

It was well met by streetlight, Max when I saw you.⁴⁵

In this scene of budding friendship between politician and conman, Nowra offers a comment on Australian politics; but more than this, by linking the moment to Shakespeare's metatheatre, he highlights the performative aspect of the political exchange. Like the Mechanicals' covert rehearsal in the woods at night, Max's exchange with Sir Sid can be viewed as a behind-the-scenes rehearsal, in this case for the Liberal Candidate's forthcoming challenge to the then-dominant Labor party.⁴⁶ Nowra and the Lighthouse ensemble, in linking the conman's exchange with the politician via

⁴⁵ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 113-15.

⁴⁶ The notion of a Liberal party member waiting in the wings of Australian politics offers a theatrical re-playing of the 1949 election of Robert Menzies Liberal government, following the Chifley Labor government of 1945-1949. This reflection on the theatre of national politics must have been pertinent to the Lighthouse Company's audience of November and December 1982, a performance which took place on the eve of another Australian election. Indeed, within three months of the performance of *Royal Show*, the longstanding Liberal government of 23 years was defeated by Bob Hawke, elected to the role of Prime Minister on March 5, 1983. The depiction of a collusion ("well met by streetlight") between the *Royal Show*'s Liberal politician Sidney Truscott and the shifty con-man Max can, in this respect, be read more broadly as a comment on Australians' and, arguably the typically Labor-leaning Australian theatre community's dissatisfaction with Liberal government.

intertextual reference to Shakespeare, can thus be seen to work theatre into the mythology of Australian politics – not only as an historical comment but in a manner that engages the audience in a mutual reflection on present and past Australia.

Nowra's depiction of a Shakespearean text on stage as a physical object seems to be another uncanny echo of Hewett's work. In *Mukinupin*, Shakespeare is integral to the ceremony depicted within the play, the marriage of Harry Tuesday and Lily Perkins. Moreover, insofar as that particular ceremony is central to the possibility of a kind of cultural reconciliation, the Shakespearean text and its related adaptation to the Australian context, is vital to the play. The appearance of the canonical text in *Royal Show* occurs in Act Two where, as mentioned previously, it is presented as a parting gift from the Duke of Berkshire. The Duke, disgruntled by the Show's poor representation of his country, leaves the text behind as a final legacy. The presentation of the works of Shakespeare, printed on rice paper, represents an act of de-colonisation on the Duke's behalf. This becomes a moment of irony in the play when Fox, recipient of the gift, completely overlooks or fails to recognise the value of Shakespeare. Offended by the Duke's behaviour, Fox remarks that he never liked rice paper anyway. The scene can be read alternatively as a playing out of Australia's failure to recognise what is important to its cultural heritage, or a casting off of its colonial past. On the whole, however, this irreverence for a British literary icon plays comedically, enhancing the lighthearted, frothy tone for which Nowra criticized his own play.

2.4b CHARACTERISATION

One of the most striking resemblances between *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show*, is the presence of a central pair of female. As I have suggested, in *Mukinupin*, Clemmy and Clarry serve as narrators for the play as a whole, providing a framework for its action through metatheatrical reference to the structure and theatricality of the work. The Hummer sisters, I have argued, can also be read as partial embodiments of the playwright. Significant here is that both are former artists, one of them a failed tightrope walker. In ascribing the Hummer sisters both an active role in the play's events and a more objective, outsider status as narrators, Hewett creates a sense that they have seen events of history

and of the play “played out.” In this sense, their function is central to the play’s re-working of history, both culturally and theatrically.

In *Royal Show* the central female pairing is Ida and Freda, (CWA representatives). They are linked to one another, as are Hewett’s characters, via the obvious similarity of their names and shared occupation of the respectable yet still, arguably, outsider status of single, middle-aged women in the aftermath of war. As they reflect in a song towards the end of the play:

Memories are what we live for
when we were young
we always had beaux
Who would have thought
we would end up as widows,
Tottering on high heels
a fox around our neck
a scent too many perfumes
much too much make-up
and serving scones
in the CWA tea rooms.⁴⁷

As in *Mukinupin*, songs such as this one create metatheatrical incursions into the play that can be seen to function in a Brechtian sense - interrupting, creating pause and lending critical distance to the action at hand. Typically, Nowra’s songs relate to the play’s events and characters, whilst also generating a space for the viewer to engage in a broader critical reflection upon the meanings and metaphors underlying the plot. This particular song about “memories” foregrounds memory as a theme of the play and invites reflection on the process of reflection (or memory) itself. Ida and Freda’s reflections also resonate with the Hummer sisters’ musings on the wasted potential of their own lives and theatrical careers, notably in Act One of *Mukinupin* during which they relate their plight to Polly. As Clemmy explains “...but then His Majesty’s burnt down on a Palm Sunday and I fell from the high wire and ended up...in Mukinupin...Dead and buried under a sea of scrub.”⁴⁸

In *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show* alike, these pairings of archetypal spinster/widowed females stand, in a sense, outside the action of events depicted in the play. As older females, both sets of women mediate past and present; their reflections indicate that they

⁴⁷ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 139.

⁴⁸ Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 20.

have experienced life and are able to shed insights upon on it from a future perspective. Significantly, this is the very process that the plays invite the audience to engage in. However whereas the Hummer sisters take on an overtly theatrical role, framing the play's action metatheatrically, in *Royal Show* the device is less obviously foregrounded. Nonetheless, the women do offer reflections on the events being played out on stage, and the operations of the work itself as a memory play, specifically via metatheatrical moments such as the song performed here in Act Two and through their outsider status within the daytime world of *Royal Show*.

2.4c REFLECTIONS UPON AUSTRALIAN HISTORY: MEDIATING TIMEFRAMES

Re-working of the Shakespearean comic ending, along with the other strategies discussed above, is instrumental in both playwrights' telling of Australian history. Through a process of metatheatrical historicisation, both Hewett and Nowra create plays that position their audiences not only to re-view events of Australian cultural history, but to examine them in relation to contemporary cultural events. In Hewett's extensive use of theatrical and intertextual reference, theatre itself becomes part of Australian history re-told. And while the play celebrates theatre and meets its commissioned function of commemorating Australian post-war history, Hewett offsets her play with necessary questions regarding the possibility of reconciliation. Nowra, in his staging of Australian culture via the *Royal Show* construct, uses the reflective monologues of a memory play to mediate the re-telling of Australian history. Through the play's expansive depiction of the make-up of Australian society, the viewer is invited to celebrate Australia but, more importantly, to question the location of marginalised groups such as those depicted in the play, and to consider themselves as part of Australia *as* a kind of subculture.

Like *Mukinupin*, the play depends for its darker tone on its metatheatrical techniques, symbolism, songs, characterisation and dialogue, all of which offer an exploration of innocence and memory in relation to the nation.⁴⁹ *Royal Show*, again like *Mukinupin*, is

⁴⁹ Nowra emphasised innocence and memory as the play's key themes in a letter to Currency Press editor Katharine Brisbane, written during the workshop period for the Adelaide production. Reflecting on the scope (and by implication the related page length) of the developing work, he speculated that it would not appeal to Currency for commercial publication, despite its interest as a work of collaborative theatre. He wrote that "*Royal Show* is progressing nicely. A huge, sprawling play that is more about innocence and memory than a documentary recreation of the Royal Show. It will be interesting to see how it goes, though I believe it's not the kind of play that would interest Currency much." Louis Nowra, letter to

set in post-war Australia (as described above). Both Hewett and Nowra offer reflections upon Australian society around the time of a major world war, *Mukinupin*'s two acts being set before and after the Great War, and *Royal Show*, which also adopts a two act structure, taking World War II as its focus.⁵⁰

In *Royal Show*, Nowra's reflections on Australian culture in the aftermath of the Second World War are presented via a range of overtly theatrical strategies. First, as mentioned previously, the Show represents a microcosm of Australian society. As such, it is clear that each of the pavilions of the Show represents an aspect of Australia's national identity and that the events played out there constitute part of the play's discourse. In addition to the Women's Pavilion, produce stalls and Sideshow Alley already mentioned, one such display is the Quarantine Pavilion, in which the "danger of foreign bugs" to Australia is demonstrated.⁵¹ Here, in a performance reflecting the nation's post-war concern with outside invasion, the control of pests is symbolically played out by an actor dressed as a human fly and a man with a can of DDT.⁵² Ironically, by the time the human fly locates the booth in which the performance of his destruction is supposed to take place, he has already visited most of the pavilions throughout the Royal Show, having wandered around all day looking for his employer. A quarantine man, dressed in a white coat, stands on his demonstration platform and announces:

QUARANTINE MAN.

I am pleased that you have enjoyed the last demonstration for tonight. It's a pity that –

Katharine Brisbane, dated September 17 1982, Records of Currency Press, National Library of Australia, MS8084, Consignment 1990, Box 40.

⁵⁰ I note that the examination of Australia's participation in the wars of the first half of the twentieth century is not, in itself, remarkable. Indeed, many Australian playwrights have taken up war as a theme, for reasons that have been analysed extensively in critical discussions. In particular, Australia's involvement in world politics can be seen to have informed the New Wave project of the nation's theatrical self-definition; as such, discussion of war features, at some level, in the discourse of the vast majority of Australian drama of this era. Key examples include: John Romeril's *The Floating World* (Sydney: Currency Press / Eyre Methuen, 1975) and Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1962). Written in 1958 and first performed in 1960 by the Adelaide Theatre Group, Seymour's play examines the Anzac Legend in relation to the broader theme of generational change; *The Floating World* was first performed at The Pram Factory, Melbourne, on August 1, 1974. As I will go on to discuss, what makes *Royal Show* (and as a comparison, *Mukinupin*) interesting, is the way in which it uses metatheatre to engage with the idea of post-war Australia.

⁵¹ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 35.

⁵² The reference to DDT would have been immediately familiar to the play's 1982 and 1983 Australian audiences. DDT, acronym for the synthetic pesticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane was developed in the 1940s. Initially, it was used for the control of pests in human populations and agriculture. However, concerns over its long term effects began to be publicised as early as the 1960s. The production of DDT was cancelled in the USA in 1972, but its use in Australia continued into the 1980s until it was banned in 1987. See "DDT," United States Environmental Protection Agency website, accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/history/topics/ddt/>.

(he sees someone approach. The human fly jumps up on the platform).

- HUMAN FLY. *(Quietly)* Sorry, I'm late.
- QUARANTINE MAN. Where the hell have you been all day?
- HUMAN FLY. Looking for your booth.
- QUARANTINE MAN. Ladies and Gentlemen. You are lucky tonight. My final demonstration will be of the effects of the new wonder chemical DDT. We have, as you know, managed to keep out foreign bugs, but what about the blowie. *(Showing can of DDT)* Well, here's the answer. One spray. *(He demonstrates. The human fly falls to the ground and undergoes a great death agony).* *(To dying fly)* I don't care what you do, I'm still going to dock your pay! *(To audience)* The Great Australian Blowie is no more!⁵³

This metatheatrical performance demonstrates (among other things) the problem of xenophobia in Australian society. Consequently, it can be read in connection to the history of the White Australia Policy (the governmental policy of restrictions on foreign immigration which had begun at the time of Federation but had begun to dissolve with the loosening of immigration restrictions in 1949).⁵⁴

By looking back at 1946 as an historically significant moment, Nowra connects the Second World War with the nation's coming of age. As Fox remarks in the play's final, reflective line, "We'll never be as innocent again."⁵⁵ Besides the Show's pavilions

⁵³ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 121. It is unclear from Nowra's Working Draft as to who the Quarantine Man's announcement was made to. We can imagine that in production the demonstration could have been presented to either the off-stage (theatre) audience, an on-stage audience made up of some of the play's characters, or both.

⁵⁴ "The "White Australia" policy describes Australia's approach to immigration from Federation until the latter part of the twentieth century, which favoured applicants from certain countries. The abolition of the policy took place over a period of 25 years. Following the election of a coalition of the Liberal and Country parties in 1949, Immigration Minister Harold Holt allowed 800 non-European refugees to remain in Australia and Japanese war brides to enter Australia. Over subsequent years Australian governments gradually dismantled the policy with the final vestiges being removed in 1973 by the new Labor government." See "Fact Sheet 8 – Abolition of the 'White Australia' Policy," Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, accessed December 29, 2012, <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm>.

⁵⁵ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 160.

representing different aspects of Australian society, they also illustrate the nation's performance of identity on the international stage. This, as Veronica Kelly points out, is central to Nowra's depiction of "the post-war process whereby the dominating outside force on the Australian imagination inexorably mutated from British to American."⁵⁶ In *Royal Show*, this process is demonstrated in the executive's mismanagement of the visiting British representative, the pompous Duke of Berkshire, and the substitution of the display of British authority in the Royal Show's Grand Parade with a satirically kitsch tribute to American culture. In this metatheatrical ceremony-within-the-play, the onstage actors are indicated in Nowra's stage directions as transforming "from sheep and people at [a] picnic" into the Royal Show's Grand Parade.⁵⁷ Described in Nowra's stage directions as "a wonderful, wild extravaganza," the parade is hailed by Fox as "the future" Australia.⁵⁸

Fox's reference to the Australian future demonstrates one of the ways in which Nowra's depiction of post World War II Australian society actively invites reflection from the audience upon the play's historical connection to the context from which they are viewing the play's retrospective action: the audience inhabits Fox's Australia of the future. Like Hewett, whose play spans 1912 through 1918 but was written specifically for a national celebration in 1978 and consequently references that context, Nowra mediates history in a number of ways. Three timeframes are salient: firstly the 1946 setting of the play; second, the six year duration of the second world war to which the characters of the play frequently refer; and finally the future date from which the action is ultimately viewed – in the case of the Adelaide production, 1982. Throughout the play, the audience is constantly reminded of all three timeframes through the commentary offered by characters and by a range of metatheatrical strategies that invite viewers to make connections between the war time context and contemporary Australian society.

Several of these mediating moments can be likened to instances in Hewett's play when the audience is reminded of the play's timeframe, and in addition real-life reference is used to extend the audience's awareness beyond the immediate setting of the play. In Act One of *Mukimupin*, for example, the year 1912 is printed on the on-stage portico of the

⁵⁶ Kelly, *The Theatre of Louis Nowra*, 13.

⁵⁷ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 89.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

Mukinupin Town Hall. Beyond simply setting the act in this pre-war context, Hewett highlights the timeframe with a sequence of business just moments into the play when shop-boy Jack Tuesday climbs a ladder at the shop-front and adjusts a sign that is subsequently admired by the characters on stage. As Eek, Edie and Polly Perkins stand at the front of the store, Jack “stuffs the hammer in his pocket” and, after climbing down the ladder, looks at the sign and reads proudly “Perkins’ General Store, 1912.”⁵⁹ The announcement of this timeframe and the theatrical performance connected to the signposting suggests that it is not enough for Hewett to simply set her drama in the past. Instead, she has her theatrical characters literally construct an on-stage history. From this point on, there is a sense in which history itself must be seen as theatrically re-created; like the cardboard items indicated in Hewett’s description of the stage props, it is flimsy and insubstantial, even in its re-creation.

Nowra is similarly concerned with signaling the dates in which the action of his *Royal Show* is set. In dialogue throughout the play, frequent references are made to the fact of this year, 1946, marking the post-war reopening of the Royal Show after its six years of closure. However, whereas Hewett connects the imaginative world of the play to the real world using a series of real-life and theatrical references (both of which relate to Hornby’s tenets of metatheatre – specifically the fourth tenet in his outline of metatheatrical strategies, “real life and literary reference”), Nowra’s engagement with time is more ambiguous. As mentioned previously, his play is punctuated with moments of suspended action during which characters from the play step out of its historical setting and reflect on their memories of the past. However, the future from which the characters speak is not defined, and characters move fluidly between timeframes. This blurring of boundaries between historical, theatrical time and the present, blurs the boundaries between theatre and reality / art and life, inviting the audience to consider links between the play’s fiction and their own social “reality.”

Symbols of innocence and its loss pervade the play. One example is Tom’s realisation that the child he thought was his own was fathered by an American GI, as mentioned above. There is also Desmond, the mentally impaired young boy, who being without prejudice sees beauty in everything and lives without fear or judgment. This character carries traces of a post-colonial Australia. His father has died in the war and, having been

⁵⁹ Dorothy Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 11.

abandoned by his mother, he wanders the showgrounds alone and quickly falls victim to the enterprising conman, Max. In Act One, whilst Desmond is planning which events he would like to see, Max approaches him and, taking advantage of the young boy's innocence, robs him of his one pound note.

MAX. Look, Desmond, you're going about it the wrong way. You see, you've got to have threepences and sixpences to pay for the rides and showbags. They won't take a pound note.

DESMOND. They won't?

MAX. Look. Let me go and get some change for you. Have your pockets got holes?

DESMOND. No, these are my Sunday best.

MAX. Well, I'll bring you back the change and fill your pockets with it.

DESMOND. Thank you, Max.

[...] *Max goes. Desmond begins his long wait.*⁶⁰

Innocence lost is also symbolised in the ghost of Mary Watson who haunts the showgrounds and, in reflective monologues throughout the play, recalls her suicide in at the 1939 Show, after discovering her lover had been unfaithful. Beyond philosophical musings on love lost, her presence gives voice to those whose potential has never been reached and the fact of her death coinciding with the onset of the Second World War is clearly symbolic in this respect. Indeed, Mary's recollection of the 1939 Royal Show explicitly connects her story to that of the larger, national, story:

There was noise. Spruikers. Guns, crying, laughing, all through the game stalls and food wrappers spinning down the avenue, all with bloody blotches of tomato sauce. He got angry when he lost money at the shooting gallery and hoop stall. But I didn't care. I said: 'Do not worry, Peter, I'll give you some.' We walked on in the humid wind. (*She walks, reliving*) He said: 'Look at the late edition – war is declared.' I said: 'Don't worry, Peter, I love you.'⁶¹

Mary's speech, with its references to guns, crying and bloody splotches, powerfully evokes the bloody imagery of war, the young girl's loss of innocence being symbolic of that of the nation. As she later recalls:

⁶⁰ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

I searched for you everywhere, asking everyone I bumped into 'Have you seen Peter?' ... Then I found myself in the alcove in the ghost train section and there, under the dancing skeleton you were making love to another girl.⁶²

Nowra's language is poetically evocative, linking images of death to Mary's recollection of her lost love. When, later, the ghost of Mary appears towards the end of the play's second act, she reflects:

Tomorrow they'll be gone, but I'll be here haunting the showgrounds,
Mary Watson waiting for her Peter to return. My bones will be like iron
and my skin will be like frost.⁶³

Here Mary voices not only her own loss but that of many who waited, often futilely, for sons, husbands, lovers and fathers to return from the war. Her words also suggest that, through her (theatricalised) haunting, their experiences will continue to be part of the Australia represented at the Royal Show. The imagery of iron and frost is powerful here, suggesting that Mary's experience, like the war itself, has become embedded in the nation's foundational structures and landscape.

The image of the spectre, as a figure out of time and symbolic of the persistence of the past in the present, suggests another of Nowra's themes: memory. Memory was in fact integral to the show's making. Reviewing the 1982 production for *The Australian*, Peter Ward explains: "Nowra's method in working up his script started with sessions with the cast in which they recalled experiences they had had at shows."⁶⁴ As a result of this process, real-life memories of Australian Royal Shows became source material for the play. In his review for *The Australian*, Ward attributed the enjoyment of the play to its incorporation of cultural and historical events immediately familiar to Australian audiences. He remarked "...It makes a highly comic ritual, the elements of which are instantly recognised by the audience because they derive from and refer to a shared Australian experience."⁶⁵

Within the play itself, memory is deliberately and overtly thematised via reflective monologues that punctuate Nowra's dialogue. The play is scattered with moments of

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶⁴ Peter Ward, "Sharing a Ritual Stroll down Sideshow Alley," review of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman, Lighthouse Theatre Company, Adelaide, *The Australian*, November 23, 1982, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

suspended action during which characters seem to step out of its historical timeframe and reflect upon the past. These monologues are delivered as though from a future time, perhaps (so the monologue structure would seem to suggest) a future shared by some of the watching audience. As the characters recall past experiences of the Show, Nowra cleverly incorporates references to all the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and physical sensations associated with their memories. For example, as a young boy “*spins across the stage like a piece of paper caught in the wind,*” he “*clutch[es] an invisible adult’s hand*” and pauses to recall the sensation of being caught up in “a flood of humanity.”⁶⁶ In another scene, adolescent Ted looks up at the “Mad Monkey” roller coaster and, “*remembering as he watches,*” describes the sounds and sights of girls above him, “a nirvana of panties...my ears filled with delicious screaming.”⁶⁷ Later, in the Cattle, Swine and Sheep Pavilion, Mrs Field is struck by the memory evoked by the pavilion’s smells. As she remembers, “*the others freeze as if time is suspended*” and Mrs Field explains:

It came to me, suddenly, firmly, like hitting my head against the dashboard of the car – why I was here. That obnoxious smell of animals and excrement. Giving out prizes to bloated cows reminded me of my mother. My whole married life seems to have been spent in cattle pavilions and in our house stuck out in the middle of an horizon. To think I wanted to marry a city boy. And yet I do like the attention paid to me – wife of the well known farmer, Lou Fields, the aristocrat of the squattocracy. And, there are less flies than ever I remember there being. I don’t even remember who I gave the first prize to...anytime I smell cow dung I think of the Show. (*Her memory over, she and Snell walk past the farmer*).⁶⁸

These memories are visceral and, in being related, almost seem to exist in three timeframes: the 1946 setting of the play from which the memories are drawn; the immediate, ephemeral timeframe of the theatre event, and the future, though exactly what that future is we cannot be certain. The immediacy inherent in the detail provided and evoked through the actual presence of the live actor, seems intended to temporally link the character and the audience. There is also a direct sense in which, through the characters’ memories, Nowra connects the Royal Show to the idea of theatre itself. This is clearest in one monologue during which a young girl, Jane, shares her memory of being bought “another fairy floss” by her mother. She explains:

⁶⁶ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

I took it home but I was so full I couldn't eat, so I left it on the kitchen sink overnight and next morning I got up real early to eat it only to find that it had vanished and only the stick was left. I woke up mummy and told her and she said 'the fairies stole it to take back to fairy land where they'll keep it until next year.' (*Child exits, shouting after mother*) I can have it for sweets.⁶⁹

In lamenting the disappearance of the fairy floss, the young girl captures the quality of evanescence shared by theatre and the Show, as well as childhood itself. In the mother's explanation, there is also something of the magic contained in both the theatrical event and the Royal Show with all the hope and excitement it carries for the child.

Other references to memory throughout *Royal Show* include the characterisation of Billy The Memory Man, the war veteran and Sideshow performer whose act involves remembering long lists of information. In one of his early appearances, during a scene "Backstage" in Act One, Billy's fiancée, Ivory the Aboriginal Woman, sings a song to him, the lyrics of which highlight the idea of memories shared. This suggests a linking of elements from both the characters' and Australia's own cultural history; post-colonial Australia's experience of war is linked by implication to a history of its relationship with Indigenous Australians. Another song, sung by Ida and Freda, refers to memories associated with aging, while in Act Two, following the Sideshow marriage and pending the end of the play, Mr Fox drinks a toast to "this night of memories," a reference that once again links directly to the theatre event itself.⁷⁰ Finally, one of the most symbolic moments in relation to the play's depiction of Australian society, is a scene in which Billy, Memory Man, is backstage between the acts of his Sideshow Alley performance. As he lies on the ground, Billy attempts to erase the memories of the previous show from his head, claiming this is something he must try and do before going on to do the next act. It is as though Billy, like Australia as a post-colonial nation, must erase the past before embarking on the future. The irony (or perhaps the lesson) here is that, as we have learned in an earlier scene, Billy is incapable of forgetting.

2.5 SIDESHOW ALLEY AS METATHEATRE

In order to understand the significance of Billy the Memory Man, we need to grasp how Sideshow Alley functions metatheatrically as a counterbalance to the lighter aspects of

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

Nowra's play. The representation of the Sideshow in *Royal Show* gives voice to the nation's marginalised groups, among them: war veterans, foreigners, Indigenous people and the physically and intellectually disabled. In the context of the play's 1946 setting, these are groups whose visibility to mainstream society would, ordinarily, have been concealed via institutionalisation and or the social stratification brought about by Australia's strict immigration policy at the time.⁷¹ The play thus encourages a reflection on Australian society within its historicised setting, but also in the 1982-3 contexts of its productions and (potentially) beyond.

Nowra was referencing a Sideshow culture that was firmly established in Australia in the late 1800s and was considered to be at its heyday during the interwar period. Broome contends that sideshows, as they existed in traditional English country fairs, were part of the cultural memory of British emigrants to Australia. With the development of Royal Agricultural Societies and the subsequent establishment of Agricultural Shows, displays of human and animal freakery made their way into Australian showgrounds where they offered entertainment for patrons and profits for managers and participants. Broome explains that:

By 1910, the Sydney Royal Easter Show boasted an extensive Sideshow Alley. It hosted the tent-boxing shows, variety acts, ghost shows, illusionists, conjurers, Sword swallows and machines to test your lung, punching and hammering power. There were also peep-shows, giants, midgets, snake-charmers, wild animal acts, and innumerable shooting galleries and Aunt Sally knock-em-downs...By the 1930s, Sideshow Alley was in full flourish.⁷²

Broome further explains that following the closure of the city shows during the Second World War, Sideshow Alley made a brief comeback in the post war show revivals before being banned by RAS executives, in line with changing Human Rights and Immigration policies. During the "heyday" of Australian sideshows, performers were often brought to Australia from overseas by entrepreneurial managers, some remaining throughout and

⁷¹ Richard Broome discusses the institutionalisation of intellectually disabled persons during the 1940s in Australia in "Not Strictly Business: Freaks and the Australian Showground World," *Australian Historical Studies* 40, no.3 (2009): 332-41. Elsewhere he discusses the White Australia Policy and deportation of Asian freak show performers following World War II. See Broome, "Windows on Other Worlds: The Rise and Fall of Sideshow Alley," *Australian Historical Studies* 30, no.112 (1999): 19-22.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

following World War II, whilst others returned (or were returned) to their countries of origin.⁷³

Beyond entertainment, the freak show performers of Sideshow Alley offered patrons what Broome describes as “representations of [human] difference.”⁷⁴ This idea is integral to Nowra’s depiction of Sideshow Alley in *Royal Show*, where difference can be viewed not only in relation to the performers, but the freak show itself as a metaphor for Australia’s difference from the outside world. Writing about Sideshow Alley as a feature of the Royal Show, Broome and Jackomos suggest:

Australians became a people because of their historical experiences in this land, and because they came to see themselves as different from the British, Europeans and other groups, from which they derived. In this same way, Sideshow Alley was a mirror to many Australians, who looked into it to see themselves in reverse.⁷⁵

Nowra’s depiction of Sideshow Alley consists of: a brief metatheatrical Sideshow performance witnessed by an on-stage patron in Act One; a number of “backstage” exchanges in which Nowra offers insights into the Sideshow performers behind the scenes; judgmental and other remarks made in passing by Royal Show patrons and the Sideshow Alley performance of Act Two which operates as a kind of play-within-the-play. Also within the realm of Sideshow, is the marriage of Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman and Billy the Memory Man, the ceremony-within-the-play with which *Royal Show* concludes.

Royal Show’s first metatheatrical Sideshow performance occurs early on, just moments after the Show gates have been declared open. A Spruiker is described as presenting his Sideshow act in the form of the freakish frozen woman, Faustine. As the on-stage patrons enter the showgrounds and acquaint themselves with its offerings, the Spruiker “appears,” along with his performer.

SPRUIKER. Yes. Here she is, ladies and gentlemen. Faustine, the most frigid lady in the whole world. She is alive, she is frozen...Does she look frozen to death to you? Come up,

⁷³ In 1948, for example “‘Chang, the pinhead Chinaman’[a microcephalic], the midgets, ‘King Chong’ and ‘Princess Wong’, along with the jugglers of the Chinese troupe, were deported from Australia in accordance with the demands of the White Australia Policy.” See Broome, “Windows on Other Worlds,” 7, 20.

⁷⁴ Broome, “Not Strictly Business,” 329.

⁷⁵ Richard Broome and Alick Jackomos, introduction to *Sideshow Alley* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin) 1998, ix.

take a look...Her hair sings. She is unique! Out of her coffin of ice she flings her hair and it sings ethereal music.

Nowra's subsequent stage direction indicates that:

*The Spruiker keeps talking, his mouth is open but we don't hear him. It is as if the soundtrack of a movie is no longer working.*⁷⁶

This expressionistic performance-within-the-play holds particular appeal for a recently demobilised soldier who enters the stage just at the moment that the Spruiker's sales-pitch begins. Transfixed by Faustine suspended in her block of ice, the soldier (or "Man" as he is referred to in Nowra's script) becomes at this moment an on-stage audience for the Sideshow act, whose personal response to Faustine is in turn shared with the audience at large. Stepping out of the 1946 setting of the Royal Show, the returned soldier speaks to the audience as though reflecting on the event, though we cannot be sure whose future/past he is speaking from. Herein lies one of the ways in which Nowra tests the boundaries of metatheatre; if this metatheatrical performance invites critical reflection from an un-specified future, which future does the audience compare the play's events to? The man says:

I had only been demobbed the day before People's Day. I headed towards the showgrounds. By the time I had reached there I had finished my brandy flask. Drunk and scared of peace I wanted to be happy. Caught up in the happy crowds of People's Day. I do not even remember paying my entrance money, only of suddenly walking through the turnstiles and suddenly coming upon this beautiful woman frozen in a block of ice. I didn't know if I was dreaming or hallucinating.

At this point, Faustine:

breaks out of her block of ice and walks towards him. She embraces him and then moves away. She spins, her hair 'sings.' She moves away, back to the Spruiker.

SPRUIKER. Come up and inspect her yourself, sir, don't be afraid.

The Spruiker and Faustine vanish into darkness. The man is left alone.

⁷⁶ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 19.

THE MAN. I thought she had whispered in my ear 'Welcome Home, Soldier boy.'⁷⁷

Within this Sideshow performance, the frozen woman, Faustine, becomes a mirror for the soldier who, on return from war, is both emotionally frozen and frozen in time; Faustine and the returned soldier each exist in a suspended state. There is also at play, the idea of theatre, through Faustine's performance, enabling a certain freedom, a singing. This singing offers Faustine, as a freak (and social outsider) an expression she is not afforded elsewhere in the play or, arguably, in society. It is also significant that the metatheatrical performance of the Sideshow act, though beginning within the temporal framework of the busy showground, is distorted into both a private moment between Faustine and the soldier and a reflection to which only the "real" audience are privy.

Nowra powerfully communicates the returned soldier's psychological experiences using a number of theatrical effects. Sound and image become distorted, exotic and magical as the soldier transcends the "real-time" of the 1946 setting. Significant also in the depiction of this metatheatrical performance, is the Man's recollection of Faustine's whispered line "Welcome Home, Soldier boy."⁷⁸ It is as though Faustine, in this moment of recognition, has identified with a kindred spirit, an identification which, again, reinforces the symbolic connection between the soldier and Faustine in their respective conditions of life suspended.

This temporal distortion demonstrates the kind of blurring of life and art that critics have identified as being central to metatheatrical discourse. Nowra's mediation of timeframes also relates to his broader reflection on the social makeup of Australia in 1946 and its relationship to the "present." This scene is significant as it takes the Sideshow performance outside the acceptable, allocated space of Sideshow Alley, and into the grounds of the Show amidst its other, "mainstream" events. Notably, the scene is positioned early in the sequence of *Royal Show's* events; the audience is thereby introduced to the idea of "difference" and its representation in the Sideshow from the very beginning of the play. Particularly important, is the Man's connection with Faustine as one of the showground "freaks"; in making this connection, the returned soldier is implicitly included in the subcultural and imaginative world of Sideshow Alley.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Ultimately, it is in his connection with and recollection of Faustine's performance, that the returned soldier finds a way of expressing his own experience of returning home from war. The metatheatrical demonstration of this connection, first witnessed as a performance-within-the-play, then narrated through the soldier's memory, becomes a way in which the audience is invited to reflect on the voiceless subcultures of Australian society and even beyond this to find a mirror for their own condition as postcolonial subjects in the process of de-colonising. In the silent depiction of Faustine's singing hair, Nowra also suggests a demonstration of how theatre itself offers a voice for such experiences.

How, though, could such lyricism be performed? Notes in the existing Sound Script and a number of still photographs offer insights into how the scene was portrayed by the Lighthouse Company's Adelaide production. Faustine and the Spruiker were positioned on a tower constructed of simple scaffolding, a multi-purpose set piece which was used for a number of scenes, including the backstage conversations between the Sideshow performers, an element that I will discuss shortly. Nowra indicates that the on-stage actors standing at ground level rotated the tower whilst the actor playing Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman, sang.⁷⁹ This gives some idea of how the effect of Faustine's hair singing was evoked in staging terms. It can be speculated that the effect of ice was indicated using stage lighting, as there are no references in the Assistant Stage Manager's extensive detail of costuming and props, that any other techniques were employed. Photographs from the production illustrate how the scaffold was also used for the Sideshow Alley backstage scenes (fig.2.9).

It could be argued that, to some extent, the way in which Faustine and her singing hair were realised in this production, fell necessarily short of the way it is described in Nowra's text. In the New Moon production of 1983, the frozen woman was not given a physical embodiment, existing only in her description by the returned soldier. A related programme note describes his exchange with Faustine as a "drunken vision."⁸⁰ This inevitably changes the viewer's experience of the soldier's recollection, from a more subjective and arguably sympathetic one in which they share the vision he describes, to a more objective

⁷⁹ Nowra, *Royal Show*, Lighthouse production script.

⁸⁰ Programme copy for *Royal Show* and Programme for *Royal Show* 1983 tour, New Moon Theatre Collection, 388R, NEWM/PUB/24.

view of his remembered vision. There is no indication in the New Moon archival records as to why the decision was made to omit Faustine. Perhaps describing rather than presenting the frozen woman was intended to enhance the idea of her existing only in the imagination of the returned soldier. Yet in the context of a touring production with already high production costs, the decision not to “embody” Faustine theatrically could also be seen to have eliminated the need to solve one of the script’s most difficult challenges.

Another important aspect of Nowra’s depiction of Sideshow Alley is the way in which he introduces its characters from behind-the-scenes. It is “*Backstage*” at Sideshow Alley, some moments after Faustine’s performance, that the majority of the play’s Sideshow performers are introduced.⁸¹ The characters, including Dahlia the fat woman, Bruno the world’s ugliest man, Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman, Billy the Memory Man and Lotte the Wild Girl, do not appear in their performance mode but, rather, in private, behind-the-scenes conversation, biding time before their evening show. Nowra’s use of the characters’ real names in the play text – i.e. Dahlia, Bruno, Ivory, Billy and Lotte - highlights their status as individuals rather than as the freak show acts for which they are known to the public. Nowra thus encourages the audience to see the performers as real members of Australian society, facilitating a reading of the Sideshow as representative of Australia itself – a place of difference inhabited by everyday Australians.

⁸¹ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 20.

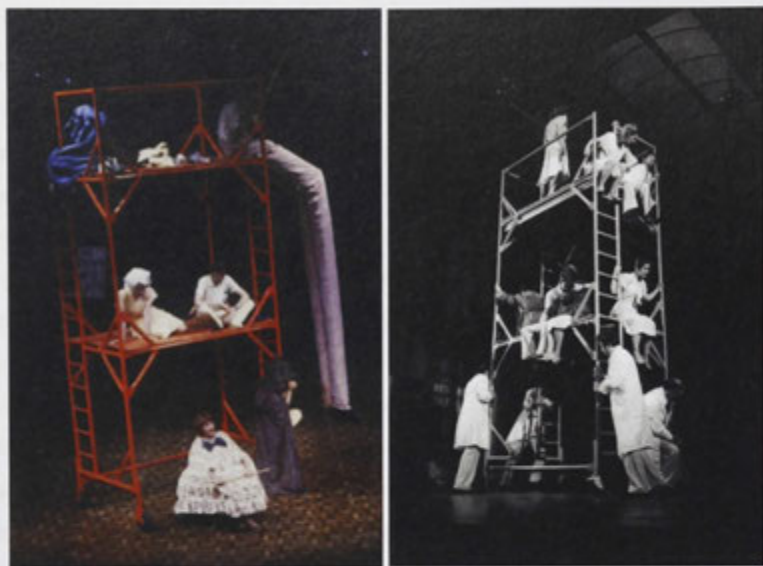


Fig.2.9. Images of the moveable scaffolding used in the 1982 production of *Royal Show* directed by Jim Sharman for Lighthouse Theatre Company, South Australia. Note that Faustine, the woman with singing hair, is not pictured in these images although it is likely that this scene was performed from the scaffolding. Photographs provided here by photographer David Wilson.

Crucial to this intended effect is the way in which the conversations that take place behind the scenes deal with mundane concerns. Dahlia, the fat woman (fig.2.10), laments the fact that she cannot find a toilet seat big enough to accommodate her oversize frame. Howard, the tall man, awakens from a dream of fishing, a remarkably quotidian pastime. Ivory, who that night is set to make her first appearance (as the Albino Aboriginal) nervously and quietly awaits her performance. While conducting their mundane backstage conversations, the performers are dressed in overtly theatrical costumes. Paradoxically, the very theatricality of these costumes highlights the performers' humanity, as the characters' dialogue is made more human, conspicuously *not* performative, when delivered in contrast with their physical appearances.

There also is a sense in which, by depicting the preparations for the Royal Show's daytime events in Act One, before its official opening, Nowra stages a rehearsal for the Show. To the extent that the Show represents the performance of Australia on the international stage, these scenes become part of a metatheatrical rehearsal of Australian identity. This depiction of rehearsal, which Nowra engages with in a number of his plays, but most notably *Cosí*, links his work to a longstanding metatheatrical tradition of the rehearsal

play, which has been adopted by other twentieth century playwrights including Timberlake Wertenbaker in *Our Country's Good*.



Fig.2.10. Image of the costume worn by Dahlia the Fat Woman played by Jacqui Phillips in the 1982 production of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman for Lighthouse Theatre Company. Photograph provided by David Wilson.

In Act Two, the Sideshow is the setting of a play-within-the-play involving a sequence of bizarre events which are witnessed by the audience along with a selection of on-stage patrons who stumble upon the event. First in the sequence is the gruesome re-enactment of the execution of a war criminal. Seemingly constructed in celebration of the defeat of Japanese invaders, this act features a Japanese General (fig.2.11) who, after confessing his heinous crimes, is decapitated by an on stage executioner. As the general's head is severed from his body, a voice delivered over the Royal Show's P.A. system draws attention to the fact that the "execution" is an illusion created by Corvo the world renowned magician.⁸² This reminder of the Show's artifice seems intended to encourage a critique of the content of the General's speech; in other words, once the artifice of the act has been highlighted, the speech itself must also be read as artifice – in its post-war context, a contrived example of anti-Japanese war propaganda, emphasised by the extreme nature of the Japanese General's confession, in which he admits to eating and enjoying his victims. Following this staged execution, the Liberal politician Sir Sidney

⁸² Nowra, *Royal Show*, 146.

Truscott stumbles upon Sideshow Alley. Searching for someone to light his cigarette, he approaches a gentleman, Robert, who, turning, reveals his female half, Roberta – this person, seemingly an everyday patron, is in fact the half man, half woman freak. As subsequent patrons stumble upon the Sideshow, they become the on-stage audience, whose responses to the acts of illusion are witnessed by the audience itself.

These reactions resonate with a comment made earlier in the play by CWA member Ida. Although Ida is intrigued by the Sideshow, she has never visited it, remarking that visitors to Sideshow Alley invariably find reflections of themselves in its displays. Thus, young Desmond, the intellectually handicapped child, is captivated by the Sideshow's wonders. Unafraid of the growling "Wild Girl," Lotte, he walks through the Sideshow calmly and with an open mind. Charlie the aging gatekeeper wanders by, lost and confused. Looking for the "five legged sheep" he had seen in the pre-war Sideshow displays, he finds himself in a world he no longer knows. For Charlie, the Sideshow reflects a world of change and the sadness of the recent war, symbolised in his attempt to seek direction from a woman dressed in black (fig.2.12) who, upon being spoken to, begins to shed tears of blood. The metatheatrical Sideshow takes its audiences, both onstage and off, through a sequence of illusions and overlapping sound effects, narrated over the P.A. system. In addition to those already mentioned, the characters of the Sideshow are Lilly, the beautiful hermaphrodite (fig.2.13), a man with a parasite twin (fig.2.14), the Albino Aboriginal Woman (Ivy) and the armless and legless man (fig.2.15).

In the final moments of the freak show, the conman Max, recently acquainted with Sidney Truscott, appears, looking for his friend. He is approached by a man who at first glance, appears to be just another showground patron, but in fact turns out to be a freak show performer, the man with elastic skin. Approaching Max, the man envelops him in his web of skin and the scene fades to darkness as Max is entrapped and then attacked by the freak show's Snake Woman. This transaction, at first seemingly little more than a confusing trick may in fact be intended as a comment regarding the power of real art. In his failure to recognise the trick being played by the elastic skinned performer, Max's entrapment bears testament to the power of the freak's artistic performance over Max's own kind of illusion (he has spent the entire day defrauding the Royal Show's patrons). Following Max's disappearance into the darkness of Sideshow Alley, the freak show ends with an appearance by The Geek who, against the overlapping sounds of "Walzing Matilda" and

echoes of the voices from previous acts, performs his gory act of biting off a chicken's head. This is humourously counterpointed in the following scene when, awaiting the night-time wedding of her Sideshow Alley colleagues, Dahlia the Fat Woman comments on her appetite for poultry.



Fig.2.11. Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, Japanese General costume, 1982 Lighthouse Theatre Company production of *Royal Show*, designer Stephen Curtis. Image scanned from Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman. Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide.

LADY WEeping BLOOD
 ½ PUPPET - ACTOR MELISSA.

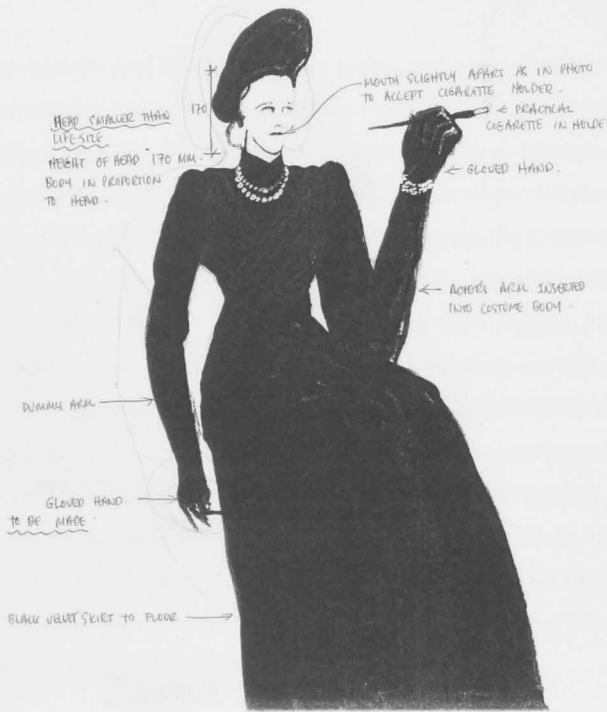
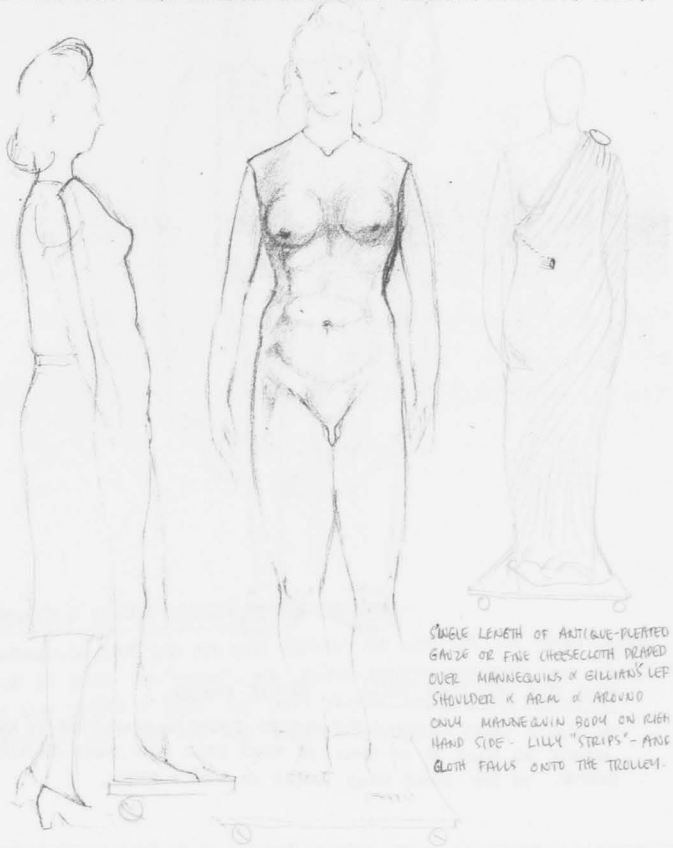


Fig.2.12. Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Lady Weeping Blood, 1982 Lighthouse Theatre Company production of *Royal Show*, designer Stephen Curtis. Image scanned from Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman. Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide.

ROYAL • SHOW

WARDROBE LILLY HERMAPHRODITE

BEAUTIFULLY MODELLED 3-DIMENSIONAL FIGURE - HEAD & ARMS ARE THOSE OF GILLIAN (BEHIND - THE FIGURE WILL NEED TO BE MEASURED TO SUIT HER - HEIGHT SO THAT FIGURE ON TROLLEY ALIGNS WITH GILLIAN'S FACE FIGURE NEEDS TO BE VERY DETAILED MODELING - LIKE CLASSICAL GREEK SCULPTURE, ALSO REMINISCENT OF MODERN DRESS DUMMIES - FINISH - ULTRASMMOOTH MARBLE QUALITY - TRANSLUCENT BLUEISH VEINED QUALITY.



SINGLE LENGTH OF ANTIQUE-PLEATED GAUZE OR FINE CHESEBROUGH DRAPED OVER MANNEQUIN'S & GILLIAN'S LEFT SHOULDER & ARM & AROUND ONLY MANNEQUIN BODY ON RIGHT HAND SIDE - LILLY "STRIPS" - ANGE CLOTH FALLS ONTO THE TROLLEY.

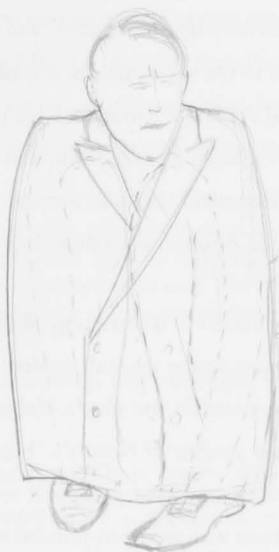
Fig.2.13. Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Lilly Hermaphrodite, 1982 Lighthouse Theatre Company production of *Royal Show*, designer Stephen Curtis. Image scanned from Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman. Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide.



MAN WITH PARASITE TWIN . ROBERT MENZIES.

THE TWIN IS SIMPLY A SINGLE-ARMED HEADLESS DUMMY (MINIATURE) HELD BY ROBERT AGAINST HIS BODY AS HE SPEAKS. THE TWIN'S LEGS & ARMS SHOULD BE SLIGHTLY JOINTED. THE SUIT SHOULD MATCH ROBERT'S IN COLOUR & STYLE.

Fig.2.14. Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Man with Parasite Twin, 1982 Lighthouse Theatre Company production of *Royal Show*, designer Stephen Curtis. Image scanned from Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman. Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide.



ARMLESS & LEGLESS PERSON - ROBYNNE:

ROBYNNE, ON TIPTOE WITH HER KNEES AGAINST HER CHEST HAS HER HANDS INSIDE SHOES ON WHICH SHE "WALKS". THE DOUBLE-BREASTED PINSTRIPE COAT SHOULD BE LONG ENOUGH TO COVER HER FEET. IT MAY NEED A STRAP AROUND THE INSIDE OF THE COAT TO KEEP ROBYNNE TOGETHER.

Fig.2.15. Preliminary design sketch for the Sideshow sequence, costume for Armless and Legless Person, 1982 Lighthouse Theatre Company production of *Royal Show*, designer Stephen Curtis. Image scanned from Records of the 1982 production of *Royal Show*, directed by Jim Sharman. Archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Adelaide.

In the final example of the importance of the Sideshow as metatheatre, Nowra presents a wedding ceremony in which the chief executive of the Show, Mr Fox, acts as celebrant and the bride and groom are Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman and Billy the Memory Man. Billy, as audience members have by now learned, is a performer whose talent is his memory. This is equally a curse in the sense that he is unable to forget. Contributing to the Sideshow's representation of Australia's marginalised groups or subcultures, Nowra suggests that Billy has recently returned from the war, and now suffers from the trauma of things seen which cannot be forgotten. He looks forward to finding solace in marriage to another social outcast, the white Aboriginal woman, Ivory.⁸³

It is significant that the wedding occurs in the evening, at the end of the show, long after most of the visitors have gone home and as the stall holders have already packed up from the day's trade. These facts are stated in the play's dialogue and work, in a sense, to transform the wedding scene into another of Nowra's "backstage" Sideshow events. Its participants are members of the marginalised groups of society, but as Fox points out, membership is not exclusive. Those who are open-minded are welcome to "stay here and see the wedding," itself arguably a symbol of a better future.⁸⁴ Nowra's play, in its depiction of a backstage, Sideshow wedding, ultimately highlights the idea of Australia's future originating in a subculture akin to a Sideshow. Yet, as I have argued, the realisation of this discourse in production has been limited by the play's broad scope. In this sense, *Royal Show* stretches boundaries of metatheatre and theatre itself in a way that limits its own interpretation.

Like *Mukinupin*, *Royal Show* is split into day and night time scenes that correspond with social divisions in the world depicted in the play. In performance, this was emphasised by the set, which Ward described as "determinedly 'institutional'," incorporating "green walls, brown paneling and linoleum floor, high skylight, rows of bright industrial lamps with green enamel shades, 1940s veneer and chrome doors."⁸⁵ Evocative of the play's post Second World War setting this design seems intended to present a contrast with the more colourful and diverse Sideshow elements of the play, thereby highlighting the

⁸³ The symbolism of a man who can't forget being wedded to an Aborigine whose treatment Australia has tried to forget will be discussed below.

⁸⁴ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 156.

⁸⁵ Ward, "Sharing a Ritual Stroll down Sideshow Alley."

difference between the “presented” (or performed) Australia of the Royal Show and the imagined or future Australia symbolised in the Sideshow.

Just as *Mukinupin*'s transitions into night-time scenes are accompanied by the soundscape of Jim Cotter's “Weird Night Music,” the same transition in Royal Show is indicated by a soundscape, followed by a narrative announcement that could easily be mistaken for a line from *Mukinupin*. Nowra describes his soundscape as progressing from

a cacophony of voices: P.A., stallholders, tent spruikers, judging results, ghost train times. Suddenly, running across the stage is the ‘nun,’ screaming. He is so quick that it is hard to take in what we saw. The blindman, Jacko, taps his cane and walks slowly across the stage. Fox enters.

FOX. Ah, dusk coming. Day into night. Reality into dream. Fact into magic.⁸⁶

As the day-time visitors of the Royal Show “weave their weary way toward the exit” the play moves towards its depiction of a night-time world remarkably similar in its demographic to that of *Mukinupin*.⁸⁷ Indeed, Fox's announcement of the day/night transition neatly summarises what could be seen as the defining distinctions between day and night in either play. So similar is the announcement of the transition between day and night, that it must surely be seen as an intertextual echo of *Mukinupin*. As in *Mukinupin*, the day-time of *Royal Show* represents, broadly, the legitimate world of social appearances while night-time is host to the illegitimate contingent of Australian society, a point emphasized by references made throughout the play to the location of the side-show in the night-time realm.

That the performances of Sideshow Alley always take place at night is a point emphasised by Nowra and can be seen as a parallel between the “freaks” of *Royal Show* and Hewett's night-time outcasts. When, in a “backstage” moment during Act One, Mr Fox of the Royal Show executive, promises, unaware of this scheduling requirement, to “try and see all the acts [that] afternoon,” Dahlia “The Fat Woman” corrects him, explaining that the performance will take place at night. “We belong,” she says, “to the night, not daylight... We're dreams and nightmares, not fairy floss and showbags.”⁸⁸ Other instances

⁸⁶ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 91.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

throughout Nowra's play show how, like the night-time characters of *Mukinupin*, the freaks of Sideshow Alley occupy a marginalised status in Australian society. A key example of this is a moment when a teacher instructs her young student not to mention the Sideshow; the same teacher later ushers her pupils away from the showground as dusk falls and the Sideshow Alley performances begin.⁸⁹ In a separate scene, a nun expresses intrigue in the Sideshow but resists the temptation to pass through it.⁹⁰ Here the Sideshow takes on associations of repressed sexuality, intrigue and the exotic – all elements that pervade the night-time rituals of *Mukinupin*.⁹¹ Nowra's division of *Royal Show* into day and night-time scenes can thus be seen, like Hewett's, as a theatrical representation of the divided nature of Australian society both historically and more recently. The metatheatrical depiction of night-time scenes, in particular, offers a useful way of symbolising Australian society's treatment of marginalised groups including Indigenous Australians, women, criminals and immigrants – groups with whom Nowra and Hewett are concerned throughout their dramatic oeuvres.

In both *Royal Show* and *Mukinupin*, the marginalised characters of the night-time realm are presented using metatheatrical performance strategies. In the case of *Mukinupin*, these are varied and, as discussed previously, include the ritual of the Hobby Horse, the function of the theatrical Clemmy Hummer as a mistress of ceremonies and the use of songs. The mode of presentation is self-consciously theatrical though it must be noted that theatrical performance is not used exclusively in the night-time scenes of *Mukinupin* – it is more a case of how that performance differs from the kinds of day-time performances offered. Specifically, the metatheatrical performances of the day-time world of *Mukinupin*, like many of the day-time stalls of *Royal Show*, are legitimate cultural events. Notably, the performance of "The Strangling of Desdemona," while adapted to its Australian context and re-worked to the demands of its on-stage audience, is played out as a welcome and accepted theatrical production. In contrast, the night-time performances of *Mukinupin* and Act Two of *Royal Show* are depicted as exotic and dangerous. Further, to the extent that

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 31, 90. On p31, the Teacher warns her pupil "Never, never go to Sideshow Alley. That is where the criminal, obscene elements of our society hang out. Everything in Sideshow Alley is corrupt and nasty. It is a nightmare, a cesspool, a morass of sin and deformity..."

⁹⁰ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 48.

⁹¹ It is during the second night-time scene of *Mukinupin* that Hewett depicts the summons of the Hobby Horse, a fertility ritual played out by Harry Tuesday, the Flasher and other marginalised characters of the town. Symbolic of heroine Polly Perkins' coming of age (and metaphorically, it could be argued, Australia's own maturity), the ritual involves Polly's capture by the Hobby Horse, having stumbled upon the event arguably on account of her *own* intrigue.

both plays invite the interpretation of theatre as a metaphor for the performance of Australian culture, it is clear by the end of both Nowra and Hewett's work that the stage remains divided. This point is highlighted in Hewett's play when Lily, Polly's Indigenous half-sister returns from a failed theatrical venture with Jack and Mercy Montebello, the travelling Shakespearean performer. Having been costumed by Jack in Polly's likeness before their hasty departure, Lily returns to Mukinupin where, costume disheveled, she re-appears during one of the night-time rituals. That Lily has not been able to maintain her place on the mainstream theatrical stage is possibly symbolic of Australia's unfulfilled attempt at racial reconciliation. This is a point subtly highlighted by Hewett during the play's final moments, when Mercy Montebello, speaking of the half Indigenous girl's departure from her company, explains "I'm afraid she just ... didn't fit in."⁹²

So too, in *Royal Show*, questions remain regarding the society's capacity to allow space for marginalised groups on the national stage. Indeed, while the play offers a happy ending in the marriage of Ivory and Billy, questions have already been raised as to their future livelihood as performers, on account of the imminent ban of freak shows. And although their wedding is all inclusive, welcoming as its guests a number of on-stage Royal Show stragglers from the younger generation, the stage on which it is performed, at night, is still concealed.

Nowra's *Sideshow* offers a way of including marginalised social groups in the picture of Australian society presented by the Royal Show and thereby offers a fuller picture of twentieth century Australian society in 1946 than a visit to a Royal Agricultural Show (or indeed, a snapshot of Australian society) at this time would afford. The *Sideshow* can also be seen as a mirror for Australia as it defines its own difference from colonial Britain.

⁹² Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin*, 113.

2.6 PROBLEMS WITH STAGING: SIDESHOW ALLEY AS METATHEATRICAL FAILURE

As we have seen, Nowra deploys a number of techniques to expand the play's scope. It references its 1982 contexts; it references Shakespeare's engagement with a breadth of human experience from birth to death; it references previous examples of metatheatre, including Hewett's; and its characters step out of the diegetic present to present their memories of the Royal Show. These temporal disjunctions in particular, but also the way the play multiplies its references and its temporal locations, creates a looseness or lack of fixity around the representation of time, so that the play opens itself to the future. On the one hand this suggests that the play should have ongoing relevance in terms of its applicability to Australian culture in future generations. On the other hand, when compared with works such as Hewett's *Mukinupin*, the lack of containment of Nowra's play, creates an obstacle to production that ultimately undermines the power of the work. The metaphors of day and night in *Mukinupin* provide a tight structure which confines it as a work of theatre, whilst allowing for critical analysis beyond. Nowra's use of metatheatre is less confident or, perhaps, less *tidy*, and in the face of the play's scope and openness, the potential of his metatheatrical Sideshow to offer critique and comment is overwhelmed by the larger performance of the Royal Show and its light-hearted celebration of Australian culture.

In addition to its expansiveness, the production of *Royal Show* is made problematic by its use of metatheatrical casting, in which (as previously noted) each actor was required to play multiple roles. In a document attached to one of the copies of the working draft held in the State Theatre Company's archive, Jim Sharman identifies this aspect as a particular challenge in staging Nowra's play. In a statement that conveys a sense of both the scope and ambition of Nowra's play, Sharman writes:

There are approximately ninety roles in the working draft, some casting will evolve in rehearsal, some a result of the only possible doubling/tripling quadrupling, etc.

He then goes on to list the casting of the major roles, explaining:

In the script they sometimes enter a scene as a character (i.e. Daughter or woman) and later acquire a name (i.e. Daphne or Mrs Field). Billy in the Wine Tasting is not Billy the Memory Man, there are two "Micks,"

beyond this the script is as clear as such an expansive work can be at this stage.⁹³

Although Sharman signed this document with his own name it appears that he later attempted to delete his identity from the record by whiting it out. The failure of this act of erasure can still be seen on the document as the white out follows the shape of his signature. This record also leads to a reflection on questions of authorship; if the performance of *Royal Show* in 1982 represents the authoritative text, then surely Jim Sharman, as initiator and director of that project, can be acknowledged, in part, for the play's genesis. Yet the deletion of his name can be seen to operate (whether intentionally or otherwise) as a denial of such a claim.

Lighthouse and *New Moon* each faced problems with staging the darker, metatheatrical, sections including *Sideshow Alley* and this contributed to perceptions of the play as superficial and "frothy." These challenges to production are reflected in reviews, which were largely focused on the play's celebration of Australian culture, as demonstrated in their emphasis upon the "day-time" stalls and events and the elements of plot connected with that strand the play. While there is some evidence that the Townsville production was slightly more successful in its staging of *Royal Show's* darker undertones, it appears on the whole that the perceived "failure" of this work, and its subsequent critical neglect, can be attributed to the difficulty of producing those metatheatrical elements upon which the more serious discourse on Australian culture relies.

Although some critics were able to detect the presence of serious or "latent" meanings, the comic elements of *Royal Show's* day-time spectacle were regarded as more successful than the darker elements in the 1982 Adelaide production.⁹⁴ This, as I have suggested, may also account for Nowra's own dismissal of the play as superficial, or frothy. Criticisms were leveled against the play's depiction of *Sideshow Alley*, which Nowra had tried to use to depict marginalised social groups and to suggest an analogy for decolonising post-colonial Australia. Peter Ward, reviewing for *The Australian*, remarked

⁹³ Nowra, *Royal Show*, Lighthouse production script.

⁹⁴ In discussing "latent meanings" I refer back to Kelly's suggestion that often characters in Nowra's plays use metatheatrical strategies, for example, the performance of plays-within-plays in order to express ideas that they would otherwise struggle to communicate. These latent meanings often relate to or shed light upon the thematic discourse underlying the main plot of Nowra's plays. I am using this concept in its broadest sense, my suggestion being that Nowra's use of metatheatrical elements unfolds latent meanings underlying the plays themselves.

that this section “flags a little and needs tightening.”⁹⁵ Likewise, Tim Lloyd of *The Advertiser* saw this aspect of the play as “more ambitious and interesting” than its other scenes “but unfortunately heavy handed... Luckily,” he concluded “the whole thing finishes in a mass of bright balloons, streamers and good fun, like any good Royal Show.”⁹⁶

Reviews of *Royal Show* in its North Queensland production indicate a varied critical and public reception in each of the four cities to which it toured. Most vocal among dissenters was Terry Carroll who, reviewing the production for the Townsville *Bulletin*, considered the play to be unnecessarily lengthy. While crediting the actors for tackling the demands of playing multiple roles, Carroll’s review was critical of Nowra’s script and, while he appreciated the play’s nostalgic element, Carroll considered most of the songs, particularly the Act Two duet between the Memory Man and the Albino Aboriginal Woman (characters from the play’s metatheatrical Sideshow), to be irrelevant.⁹⁷ This perception is unfortunate, as it negates the fact that the lyrics of the duet in fact invite the audience to consider why it is that, in contemporary Australian society, the wedding of this pair is viewed as unusual. Billy and Ivory sing:

Our love should be secret
Done behind closed doors
Strange love is whispered
Shared only on distant shores.

Our love is strange
As strange as love should be
When other lovers
Seek out the day
We seek out the night
Our love is strange
Our love is strange
Our love is strange.⁹⁸

Yet Carroll was not alone in his confusion about the significance of this song and of Nowra’s Sideshow characters to the play’s discourse. Nor was he alone in his perception of the play as primarily a nostalgic celebration of Australian culture. A performance report written by a member of the Australia Council’s Theatre Board praised the company’s

⁹⁵ Ward, “Sharing a Ritual Stroll down Sideshow Alley.”

⁹⁶ Tim Lloyd, “Roll On Up, Folks,” review of *Royal Show* directed by Jim Sharman, Lighthouse Theatre Company, Adelaide, *Adelaide Advertiser*, November 22, 1982, 13.

⁹⁷ Terry Carroll, “Royal Show’s Too Long,” review of *Royal Show* directed by Terry O’Connell for New Moon Theatre Company, Townsville, *Daily Bulletin*, July 9, 1983.

⁹⁸ Nowra, *Royal Show*, 109.

acting, describing the "Performance Standards" as "very good, with fine portrayals of Sideshow characters emphasising both humour and pathos. The rapid change of costume and complete change of character," the board member noted, "reflected well on the performers." Again, though, criticism was leveled at the play's content, the report noting "I felt that the content of the material of the entertainment rather flimsy, and the issues involved rather weak, making the task of the performers largely up to their own merits to leave any lasting impression on the audience."⁹⁹

Public reception appears, on the whole, to have been more positive than this, despite some qualifications regarding the script. S. Woodward of Aitkenvale, Townsville wrote to the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*:

New Moon, I think you are terrific! Contrary to the opinion of *The Bulletin* reviewer, Terry Carroll, I think one of your greatest strengths as a company is the quality and clarity among your singers. Should not the criticism of length and play and irrelevance of songs be leveled at the playwright?¹⁰⁰

This Townsville resident also mentioned, in response to Terry Carroll's charge of lengthiness, that the play had in fact been cut "quite dramatically" since the time of its Adelaide premiere. Unfortunately, however, no details are provided either here or elsewhere in the New Moon Theatre Company records as to exactly what was cut from the production and as no copy of the script used by the company remains, it is difficult to determine (beyond the clear omission of Faustine from the play's action) where such cuts were made.

In an indication of the play's reception in Townsville, Woodward describes a "packed house on opening night that loved, laughed and applauded from beginning to end. Thank you, New Moon, for giving us a fine and enormously entertaining season."¹⁰¹ Elsewhere, positive headlines announced "Show Fun a Theatre Joy," "New Moon Rises on Royal Show" and "Good Show from Days of Fair Go."¹⁰² Some reviewers, however, noted the serious undercurrents of the play, highlighting its use of the Sideshow and the themes of

⁹⁹ Performance Report, *Royal Show*, Pilbeam Theatre Rockhampton, July 30, 1983, New Moon Theatre Collection, 387M, NEWM/MISC/2.

¹⁰⁰ S. Woodward, "Praise for Royal Show," letter written by audience member of *Royal Show*, directed by Terry O'Connell for New Moon Theatre, Townsville, *Daily Bulletin*, July 16, 1983.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Reviews of 1983 production of *Royal Show* directed by Terry O'Connell for New Moon Theatre, New Moon Theatre Collection, 388R, NEWM/PUB/24.

memory and innocence that Nowra had identified in his letter to Katharine Brisbane. Linda Turnley, writing for the *Gladstone Observer*, reported:

Royal Show is funny and comic...But beneath the humor and the fun lies the sad memory of Australian war heroes and visiting American soldiers wooing the young 'naïve and innocent' Australian lasses into unobtainable dreams. The shattering of British ties and the corruption of Royalty are another two message themes coming to mind. And the sad fate of those people made public spectacles because of their differences, the carnival freaks, is highlighted with the appearance of 'The Albino Aboriginal' and 'Billy the Memory Man.'¹⁰³

In a similar vein, Judith Anderson's review stated:

Although the show is primarily a celebration of nostalgia, through it all runs the bizarre thread of an escaped Italian prisoner of war disguised as a nun...the tattered ghost of a 1939 ferris-wheel suicide...and an insight into the dream and nightmare lives of sideshow freaks. Staging, lighting and musical backing are all up to the standard of excellence New Moon fans have come to expect – a thoroughly satisfying evening's theatre and a reminder, 40 years on that as Mr Fox the show official says 'We'll never be as innocent again.'¹⁰⁴

In spite of its largely positive reviews in Queensland, the production was not successful in box office terms. Beyond the 1983 tour by the New Moon Theatre Company, the production history of Nowra's *Royal Show*, as recorded to date, ended in July of that year. The popular and critical emphasis upon the play's lighter elements suggests its potential discourse on Australian culture, specifically, via the symbolism of the metatheatrical Sideshow, was never fully manifested.

The final moments of Nowra's play warrant further consideration in light of this apparent failure in production. In particular, the idea raised in the Sideshow of a "white" (albino) Aboriginal woman marrying a war veteran who cannot forget raises a host of questions about what possible meanings, ideas and reflections Nowra and the Lighthouse company were trying to evoke through the metatheatrical marriage ceremony. It is clear that the Aboriginal character's depiction as a "freak" in the Sideshow is connected to the notion of Indigenous people being marginalised in postcolonial Australian society, but her "whiteness" adds a further racial dimension that is ambiguous and potentially confusing. Was Nowra, like Hewett in *Mukinupin* with her depiction of Touch of the Tar, alluding

¹⁰³ Linda Turnley, "New Moon Shows Off its Talent," review of *Royal Show*, directed by Terry O'Connell for New Moon Theatre Company, *Gladstone Observer*, July 30, 1983.

¹⁰⁴ Judith Anderson, "Good Show for Days of Fair Go," New Moon Theatre Collection, 388R, NEWM/PUB/24.

to a process of racial mixing and a vision of future “reconciliation”? If so, what does it mean that both *Ivory and Touch of the Tar* are married, on-stage, to Australian war veterans? Does this suggest an attempt to redress Australia’s forgetfulness of its past mistreatment of Indigenous people by symbolically marrying the idea of Aboriginality to a representation of twentieth century war-time trauma? And more problematically, how does the casting of a white actor as an Albino Aborigine reflect upon, problematise and even demonstrate the problems connected with “white” Australia’s recognition (or lack thereof) of Indigenous arts practice? These are questions that are unresolved through a reading of Nowra’s Working Draft and for which no interpretation is suggested in accounts of the plays’ production. Indeed, it is possible that because the metatheatrical Sideshow Alley was underdeveloped when the play was performed, these ideas themselves were never fully developed in this play (although Nowra’s later works reveal an ongoing concern with Indigenous issues). In spite of its ambiguity, the deployment of the metatheatrical wedding ceremony-within-the-play and the use of (metatheatrical) cross racial casting illustrates the potential contained within *Royal Show*’s metatheatrical approach for generating a process of questioning and critique of Australian society and culture. In the following chapter, a similar potential is explored in my discussion of how Timberlake Wertenbaker presented the character of the Aboriginal Australian in her 1988 play *Our Country’s Good*.

2.7 CONCLUSION

Like Hewett’s *The Man from Mukinupin*, *Royal Show* is a significant work within the tradition of Australian metatheatre, despite the fact that it remains outside the canon. Thoroughly metatheatrical, this play relies heavily upon three of the metatheatrical techniques outlined by Hornby; this chapter has demonstrated how these strategies – the Sideshow as play-within-the-play, the ceremony-within and dramatic and real-life reference – have been deployed by Louis Nowra, as well as the challenges these techniques have presented in productions of the play. In relation to *Royal Show*’s significance to the study of Australian metatheatre, this chapter has illustrated how the failure of metatheatre in productions of *Royal Show* has impacted upon the play’s production history and subsequent scholarship. In retrieving the play from the archives, I have demonstrated how in the early 1980s, Nowra experimented with metatheatre as a way of giving voice to darker elements of Australia’s national self-performance, including the marginalisation of groups such as Indigenous Australians and war veterans. Though

unsuccessful in conveying these ideas to their full potential to audiences in 1982 and 1983, this retrospective study of *Royal Show* has allowed us to assess what the company were trying to achieve. It has also shown how this neglected play fits into a broader metatheatrical tradition that was continued in Nowra's later work and in subsequent works, by other playwrights, performed upon the Australian stage.

CHAPTER THREE: TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER'S *OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

I have argued that *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show* each use metatheatrical techniques to comment upon, examine and respond to society at moments of national significance. Hewett's play does this in relation to a particular celebratory event, the West Australian sesquicentenary, while Nowra's play reflects upon Australia in the early 1980s at a time of political change ahead of the national election. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988)¹ was also written at a time of social and political significance: the celebration of the 1988 Bicentenary of British settlement. Although the play was not conceived in Australia, it was first performed in September of the Bicentennial year and was based upon Australian author Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* (1987),² a novel written in the lead-up to the Bicentenary which gives an account of the first theatrical production in the British colony of Sydney Cove. This production, of George Farquhar's Restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), was performed by convicts on June 4 1789, just one year after British arrival in Sydney Cove. The event, as Alexander Feldman attests, formed part of the "celebration of [King] George III's fifty-first birthday."³

Our Country's Good stands in contrast with *Royal Show* in the sense that it boasts an extensive, international, production history. It has recently been described as having "canonical status" in the UK where it was first staged under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company at Royal Court Theatre, and is now taught regularly

¹ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*. This edition of the play (first cited in my Introduction) was published to coincide with the premiere production at the Royal Court Theatre. A revised edition was published in 1991. This revised edition reflected minor changes made to the script throughout the early production history of the play. It also included additional paratextual material such as details of a correspondence between Timberlake Wertenbaker and Joe White, a prisoner at Wormwood Scrubs who had performed in a production of the play. Unless otherwise specified, I shall refer to the first edition of the play throughout my chapter. For details of how the editing of the play text for publication took place alongside the ensemble rehearsal and Timberlake Wertenbaker's revisions to the text throughout the rehearsal period, see Max Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George: The account of a rehearsal* (London: Nick Hern Books: 1989), 184-87.

² Thomas Keneally, *The Playmaker* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987).

³ Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 152.

in British secondary schools.⁴ Due to its thematic relevance to Australian colonial and post-colonial history, *Our Country's Good* also occupies a place in Australian theatre that, while recognised, particularly on the occasion of the Royal Court's 1989 tour of the production to Sydney, has been little examined. Discussions of the play have tended to focus on the British contexts in which the play was first produced. Despite wide recognition of its Australian origins in Keneally's novel, critical reception of the play has been guided by the multiple contexts – theatrical/industrial, political and social - of its first production in Britain.

This focus on the play's British contexts may result in part from the play's widely recognised "dialogue" with past theatrical traditions.⁵ Like *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show*, both of which locate their own theatricality within longstanding metatheatrical traditions, *Our Country's Good* engages with Shakespearean, Restoration and late eighteenth century theatrical conventions in its depiction of Farquhar's text as a play-within-a-play. In its metatheatrical depiction of the rehearsal of *The Recruiting Officer*, *Our Country's Good* has typically been viewed as a celebration of theatre and an argument for the social value of the Arts during the fraught political climate of late Thatcherite Britain.⁶ Despite the arguments of some critics that *Our Country's Good* privileges this celebration of theatre and theatricality at the expense of the more critical examination of the process of British colonisation offered in Keneally's *The Playmaker*, others have contested that the play engages with the power politics of empire in ways that challenge and, at moments, subvert, its celebratory theme.⁷ Sara Soncini, for example, argues that the play's metatheatrical depiction of the rehearsal of *The Recruiting Officer* can be viewed as a project of empire building in which the convict cast, despite their apparent enjoyment of and temporary sense of liberation gained from rehearsals are, ultimately, oppressed colonial subjects.⁸ Soncini posits that the play's critical elements are symptomatic of its status as a play commissioned by a company renowned for its left-wing political approach

⁴ Sophie Bush, *The Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 118-19.

⁵ Sara Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration: Metatheatre as a Strategy of Appropriation in Contemporary Rewritings of Restoration Drama* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1999), 69-95. As will be discussed, Soncini describes both Wertenbaker's play and the Royal Court ensemble production as a "dialogue with the Restoration."

⁶ Stephen Weeks, "The Question of Liz: Staging the Prisoner in *Our Country's Good*", *Modern Drama* 43.

⁷ In addition to Sara Soncini whose perspectives are discussed here, Stephen Weeks forwards this argument in "The Question of Liz," 147-56.

⁸ Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 94-95.

and struggling under the specific political and theatrical/industrial contexts in which it was being written. She also demonstrates how the related incorporation of metatheatrical techniques, including the rehearsal for the play-within-the-play, works to highlight the theme of colonisation and thereby generate a critical tension between celebration and critique.⁹

Despite Soncini's recognition of the usefulness of metatheatricality to the play's critical discourse, the question of how metatheatricality relates to the play's Australian elements remains largely under examined, both in studies of the play text and production. My examination of *Our Country's Good* repositions it within the context of Australian drama. Here, in its close relationship with previously considered works *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show*, *Our Country's Good* can be seen as part of an Australian metatheatrical tradition and a play that, through its own, historicised, metatheatrical approach, stages Australian history and culture. I argue that the staging of *Our Country's Good*'s convict rehearsals not only occupies part of this tradition, but can also be seen as an analogy for the rehearsal of nation. By offering a closer examination of metatheatrical strategies in *Our Country's Good*, including in the play's Australian productions, this chapter offers an insight into how metatheatricality contributes to the work's distinctively Australian cultural value. In particular, I argue that the role described in the dramatis personae as the "Aboriginal" can be understood as one of the play's metatheatrical interventions. A more thorough understanding of this role as metatheatrical is vital to a full realisation of the play's critical capacities.

When *Our Country's Good* is viewed, as traditionally it has been, as a metaphor for the status of British theatre and society in the 1980s, the Australian setting of its events can arguably seem secondary. Yet certain aspects have been crucial in cementing its position in Australian theatre history. The specific historical circumstances of this play's origins are frequently reiterated in critical discussions.¹⁰ Wertenbaker's depiction of the first performance of a play by British convicts in the new colony is clearly significant in this respect and, as Hiley observes in a review of the original London production, it is in the play's final moments as the *Recruiting Officer* "goes on" that Australian theatre "is

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-86. Soncini also discusses the way in which the depiction of the penal colony of 1789 Sydney within the play can be viewed as a metaphor for the British penal system under Thatcher, an idea that I will discuss later in the chapter.

¹⁰ See, for examples, Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 152; Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, 112.

born."¹¹ Central to this depiction of the "birth" of British colonial theatre in Australia, is the play's indebtedness to Keneally's novel and the research on Australian history which, through the Royal Court's ensemble workshops, became incorporated into the play.¹² Historical source material drawn from Robert Hughes' popular history *The Fatal Shore*,¹³ along with extracts from the diary entries of First Fleet officers, were not only referred to by the company but, through improvisations and analysis, worked into the scenes and dialogue of Wertenbaker's text. Similarly, accounts of the Fleet's experiences on the journey to Australia were embedded in the play's dialogue. The result is more than an account of this history; rather, the play is a celebration and theatrical examination of this moment in Australia's history, granted from an outside perspective.

3.2 BACKGROUND

The first British production of *Our Country's Good* was staged at London's Royal Court Theatre in September 1988, directed by Max Stafford-Clark and performed by an ensemble of 11 actors. Stafford-Clark, then Artistic Director of the Royal Court, had commissioned Wertenbaker to write the play after reading Keneally's *The Playmaker* the previous year. Searching, as he then was, for a play to programme as the Court's "bi-annual classic," Stafford-Clark imagined that a theatrical re-working of Keneally's novel might be played as a companion piece to a production of the classic intertext, Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*.¹⁴ The plays were performed in repertory in a three month London season, the same cast performing in both Farquhar's and Wertenbaker's play.¹⁵

Now twenty-seven years since its London premiere, *Our Country's Good* is Wertenbaker's best known and most frequently performed play. Recently staged in a 2012-14 revival directed by Stafford-Clark for Out of Joint and the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, it has also been performed in Australia, the United States and throughout

¹¹ Jim Hiley, review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford Clark for the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Listener*, September 22, 1988.

¹² This workshop process is discussed in detail in Stafford-Clark's *Letters to George*. See also, Sarah Sigal, "Creating *Our Country's Good*: Collaborative Writing Practice and Political Ideals at the Royal Court in the 1980s," in *The Theatre of Timberlake* Wertenbaker, ed. Sophie Bush (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 143-61.

¹³ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

¹⁴ Stafford-Clark, *Letter to George*, xi.

¹⁵ Both productions were directed by Max Stafford-Clark, with *The Recruiting Officer* opening on July 28 and *Our Country's Good* added to the repertoire on September 10, 1988.

Europe.¹⁶ Its popularity among theatre practitioners and audiences alike has been demonstrated in its production by professional and amateur companies as well as by student groups, and while part of the play's appeal must be attributed to its theme of the celebration of theatre, Wertenbaker's text, as Susan Carlson demonstrates in a discussion of its varied receptions on three continents, has proven to resonate for audiences in markedly different and varying ways.¹⁷

Carlson attributes this quality of multivalence to the play's genesis as the product of an ensemble workshop process. Detailing how Wertenbaker wrote the text using the Royal Court's collaborative method (a period of joint research by the company followed by production of a draft script by the writer and subsequent refinement via the writer's presence in rehearsals), she suggests that this approach resulted in a script that engages in an active dialogue about a range of issues including theatre, "identity, nationality [and] colonization," rather than a singular argument.¹⁸ This has led to diverse interpretations, both in production and reception. In Australia, for example, while reviewers continued to focus to some extent on the play's celebration of theatre, there was a marked shift in emphasis from this theatrical theme to the question of how the play engaged with the nation's colonial history.¹⁹

Our Country's Good was first performed in Australia in June 1989, in two simultaneous productions, one a touring production by Stafford-Clark's British ensemble, performed at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) Wharf Theatre, the other an Australian production for the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC), directed by Roger Hodgman and performed at The Playhouse. These productions, staged in the aftermath of Australia's Bicentennial celebrations, garnered a range of critical responses on their positioning relative to that event. The metatheatrical project was also noted for its commemoration of the bicentenary of the first convict production in Australia, the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney Cove for the occasion of King George III's birthday.²⁰ By staging productions of

¹⁶ When it opened in 2012, the Out of Joint / Octagon Theatre production marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the London premiere. Between 2012 and 2014, this production toured the UK, Toronto, Minneapolis and the Hague. For details, see "Our Country's Good," Out of Joint webpage, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://www.outofjoint.co.uk/production/our-countrys-good>.

¹⁷ Susan Carlson, "Issues of Identity, Nationality, and Performance: the Reception of Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker," *New Theatre Quarterly* 9, no.35 (2009): 267-89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 274-86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 279-82.

²⁰ Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, xi.

the same play two hundred years on, alongside Wertebaker's metatheatrical exploration of the convicts' rehearsal process, the companies, both of which performed *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country's Good* in repertory, offered what was at once a celebration of, and an opportunity to critically reflect upon, a moment in Australian theatrical history.

An understanding of the intertextual relationships between *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country's Good* is useful in demonstrating how this repertory pairing (itself described by Feldman as a "metatheatrical arrangement"), opens up colonial themes for investigation.²¹ Paradoxically, critics have argued that an overemphasis in reviews upon the repertory stagings, and therein a focus on the relationship between Wertebaker's play with the Farquhar text, has tended to obfuscate the presence of other themes that, albeit less pronounced than in Keneally's novel, do exist within Wertebaker's play text. Carlson, for example, argues:

A direct effect of the reportorial focus was that many reviewers had scant space in which to consider [*Our Country's Good's*] abundance of extra-theatrical ideas. Most strikingly, reviewers note the portrayal of the play's outsiders only passingly.²²

Feldman, however, has recently addressed this concern via a discussion of the nature of the Farquhar intertext and, in particular, the sections chosen by Wertebaker for incorporation into the metatheatrical rehearsals within her play.²³ In articulating the thematic links between the two plays more thoroughly than previous critics have done, he demonstrates that the pairing works not only to highlight Wertebaker's play's celebration of theatre (which it does by showing how the convicts and their officers are mutually transformed through the theatre making process), but that it highlights the ideas of empire making and nation. These ideas, as the following synopses demonstrate, are common to both plays and also pertinent to the productions' Australian reception.

²¹ Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 155.

²² Carlson, "Issues of Identity," 276.

²³ Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 153-73.

3.3 THE RECRUITING OFFICER AND OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD – SYNOPSES AND CONTEXTS

First performed in London in 1706 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, *The Recruiting Officer* is set in 1704 during the War of the Spanish Succession.²⁴ Irish playwright George Farquhar, a former lieutenant and recruiting officer for the British Army, is believed to have drawn upon his own military experience when writing the play. Locating its action in Shrewsbury, then a remote country town, Farquhar satirises the pursuits of Captain Plume and his fellow officers as they employ diverse methods of trickery to recruit the town's men for military service, while simultaneously (and in a play upon the meaning of "recruitment"), pursuing romantic affairs with its women.²⁵ In the course of the play, Plume himself becomes the subject of a "recruitment" plot when wealthy heiress Silvia secures his affections by means of her own sequence of deceptions and disguises. In doing so, she also succeeds in evading her father's plans to secure her a more financially compatible husband. Typical of the intricacies and overt theatricality of its genre, this Restoration comedy demonstrates a concern with issues of social status, class and marriage. As Feldman explains, part of Farquhar's comedy lies in his characters' manipulations of contemporary social boundaries. Silvia plays with class, along with gender boundaries when (adopting the convention of the breeches role) she dresses down, in class terms, as a male recruiting officer, in a scheme to marry herself to Captain Plume. Meanwhile, country servant Lucy challenges class boundaries in the opposite direction, taking on the persona of her mistress, the wealthy Melinda, in an ultimately thwarted attempt to win over Captain Brazen.

²⁴ Michael Shugrue, introduction to *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar, ed. Michael Shugrue (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), xiii. Subsequent references to the play will be cited as Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*.

²⁵ In *Dramas of the Past*, Feldman suggests that Shrewsbury's distance from London gave it a sense of geographical remoteness from the nation's cultural and political capital. He proposes that in *Our Country's Good*, the deployment of British soldiers such as Lieutenant Ralph Clark to the colonial project of Australian settlement works as a kind of parallel for Farquhar's depiction of the colonial project of recruitment in "remote" Shrewsbury. He suggests:

The association of these two 'obscure corners' [Sydney Cove and Shrewsbury] is relevant to this argument by virtue of the soldiers stationed there. Australia is to England as Shrewsbury is to London, and though neither Wertenbaker nor Farquhar can be said to have 'chosen' their locations, there is something strategic in the use to which they put them. In both cases, those who wait with apprehension in history's wings – on the social and geographical margins of society – are enlisted to further the aims of their governments in far-flung parts of the world.

See Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 166.

The range of possible meanings effected by the repertory pairing of classic and more recent works has been of interest to critics, notably Soncini who, examining the use of metatheatrical techniques such as character doubling (which occurred both within and between productions in the Royal Court staging) skillfully articulates the repertory and its entire production process as a "dialogue with the Restoration."²⁶ This perspective is reflected in Stafford-Clark's published account of the company's rehearsals, structured as an imaginative correspondence with Farquhar and titled *Letters to George*.²⁷ Written primarily as a reflection upon the company's approach to *The Recruiting Officer*, *Letters to George* also includes discussion of the overlapping rehearsal period during which the company rehearsed Wertebaker's text by day while performing *The Recruiting Officer* at night.

Set at the moment of Australia's British colonisation, *Our Country's Good* begins on board the hold of a convict ship. The play is comprised of twenty-one short, episodic scenes, each with its own explanatory title. The use of scene titles is one of the Brechtian metatheatrical techniques indicated by the text and which critics and reviewers have frequently noted in their broad recognition of the play's theatricality.²⁸ Employed as a way of foregrounding the action or theme within each scene, the idea behind the use of such titles is that by hearing the scene announced in advance of its performance, audiences will be detached from the narrative and freer to engage critically in the action at hand.²⁹ Wertebaker's scenes are accordingly given titles indicative of their key themes and events, for example "The Voyage Out" (Act One, scene one) and "The First Rehearsal" (Act One, scene eleven). When performed by the Royal Court ensemble, these titles were announced by the play's officer characters.³⁰ Together, the scenes dramatise

²⁶ Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 73.

²⁷ Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*.

²⁸ Peter Kemp, review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Independent*, September 12, 1988. Kemp described the production as "stagily artificial throughout," referring to the company's method of introducing scenes "with Brecht-like summaries of their content."

²⁹ For discussion of the theory behind Brecht's use of scene titles, see John Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: A study from eight aspects* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1959), 174. Several reviewers commented upon *Our Country's Good's* use of metatheatrical techniques as being "Brechtian," including, for example, Charles Osborne, "Transports of Laughter," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Daily Telegraph*, August 14, 1989.

³⁰ Royal Court Theatre, Sound Recording of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, September 28, 1988, Tape B8983 1/1 Reference T1048Y, T1049Y, British Library, London. As no indication is given in the published script as to which character delivered which title, it is only possible to determine from the tone and accent of delivery of the actors in the sound recording that the scene titles were presented by officer characters and not convicts. In

the making of the theatrical production commissioned by Captain Arthur Phillip, first Governor General of New South Wales. As well as depicting the convicts' challenges in performing Farquhar's characters, the play presents arguments from the colony's officers, both for and against the production of the play. Phillip, whose conception for the production aligns with his plan for the foundation of the new colony underpinned by the principles of reason exemplified by the Enlightenment, sees the project as a means of establishing a social "contract" with the convicts.³¹ As Michael Thomas explains:

Phillip's vision of society is a participatory democracy, one whose citizens have learnt to accept laws and authority for the good of the whole. It is one that seeks to include those previously excluded by virtue of their criminal actions or indeed their criminal class origins.³²

It is to these ends that Phillip appeals to Lieutenant Ralph Clark to oversee the project of staging *The Recruiting Officer* and, while rehearsals do proceed, his plan for the convict production is met by oppositional views from several officers. Most vehement among them is Major Robbie Ross who, in the aforementioned debate, expresses concern over the subversive potential of theatrical performance, arguing:

I will not accept this... You don't take anything seriously, but I know this play – this play – order will become disorder. The theatre leads to threatening theory and you, Governor General, you have His Majesty's commission to build castles, cities, raise armies, administer a military colony, not fangangle about with a lewdy play! I am going to write to the Admiralty about this.³³

When read in light of the British contexts that informed the play, Ross's response can be interpreted as a critique of the late 18th-century conservative government's attitude towards the kind of political theatre traditionally produced by the Royal Court.³⁴ Ross' objections can

the video recording of the 1998 production of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for Out of Joint at the Young Vic, London, a similar approach appears to have been taken, with the announcement of scene titles altering between officer characters.

³¹ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 59. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt, Weeks offers a discussion of "subversion and containment" in the play in which he demonstrates how Governor Phillip's views can be seen to reflect the emerging liberal ideologies of his historical period. He also examines Governor Phillip's vision for the new colony in relation to John Locke's social contract theory. See Weeks, "The Question of Liz," 147-56.

³² Michael Thomas, "Our Country's Good: From 'canting' slang to 'refined, literate language,'" 18.

³³ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 27.

³⁴ In *Letters to George*, 77-78, Stafford-Clark describes how, in order to involve the actors more closely in the debate played out within this scene, a rehearsal exercise was conducted in which the scenario was changed to a contemporary context. In this exercise, the actors of the Royal Court ensemble were asked to play "citizens of Shrewsbury" and debate the issue of whether the local council should "give money to the local dramatic society." This, according to Stafford-Clark, led to an enlivened debate in which the actors articulated passionate arguments for and against the funding of theatrical projects and their value (or lack thereof) to the community.

also be read in relation to the play's portrayal of empire. Ross, unlike the more liberal and, in Wertenbaker's depiction, sympathetic character of Phillip, considers his role in the foundation of the colony as being to oversee the convicts' exile and punishment.³⁵ His concern, shared in varying degrees by several officers, is that the liberties afforded to convicts by participation in the play will lead to "insubordination, disobedience, revolution."³⁶ A particular anxiety is that the characters in *The Recruiting Officer* include soldiers whose behavior is less than exemplary. As Feldman explains, the notion of allowing convicts to first impersonate officers, but then also portray them in an ironic light, presents a real threat to Officer Ross as it undermines his very concept of colonial hierarchy.³⁷

In response to his opposition, Phillip argues for a less punitive approach to nation making. As he explains to Lieutenant Clark during the play's second act, "I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannise over a group of animals."³⁸ In presenting a view of theatre as a civilising agent, he determines that the largely illiterate convict community will benefit from the opportunity to learn the refined language of the nation's theatrical heritage. Phillip argues:

The theatre is an expression of civilisation. We belong to a great country which has spawned great playwrights: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, and even in our own time Sheridan. The convicts will be speaking a refined, literate language and expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to.³⁹

The Governor General also argues for the community-building value of a project involving officers and convicts, contesting that:

³⁵ Ann Wilson describes Wertenbaker's treatment of Governor Phillip as largely sympathetic, particularly when compared with Keneally's depiction of the Governor General in *The Playmaker*. She argues that:

Wertenbaker's adaptation simplifies many of the characters, most notably Ralph Clark and Arthur Phillip, the Governor-in-Chief of the colony of New South Wales. In *The Playmaker*, Clark's and Phillip's personal relationships with the colonized – the convicts and the aboriginals – are extensions of their public roles as officers who are the agents of colonization; in *Our Country's Good*, both are represented as essentially good men under whose benevolent aegis the convicts produce the play, create a community and recover their humanity which gives them true freedom.

See Ann Wilson, "Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation in Wertenbaker's Adaptation of *The Playmaker*," *Modern Drama* 34, no.1 (1991): 23.

³⁶ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 26.

³⁷ Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 160-64.

³⁸ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

We, this colony of a few hundred will be watching this together. For a few hours we will no longer be despised prisoners and hated gaolers. We will laugh, we may be moved, we may even think a little.⁴⁰

In offering these sentiments, Phillip articulates a vision of theatre as a socially beneficial, democratic and ultimately educative force. Prior to Wertenbaker drafting the text, this idea had been explored at length during the Royal Court's workshop process; as part of their research, Stafford-Clark and the company had visited British prisons and researched inmates' experiences of performing in prison theatre productions. Detailed in *Letters to George*, this research directly informed the play's argument for the transformative effects of theatre, with Wertenbaker and the actors exploring parallels between eighteenth century and contemporary attitudes towards criminals.

In view of the Royal Court ensemble's approach when researching the play, the critical reception of this work as an argument for the transformative power of theatre is hardly surprising. That the convict rehearsal proceeds in spite of the protests outlined above and that, ultimately, the convicts stage their production, appear to support this reading. Importantly, the production of the play-within-the-play as depicted by Wertenbaker can be seen as *mutually* transformative; not only does the production allow the convicts to transcend their immediate circumstances (an idea that will be discussed in more detail shortly), but its rehearsal also effects change among the officers, notably the director Ralph Clark. Clark is further implicated in the theatrical event when, during the rehearsal process, the convict playing Plume, the "Recruiting Officer," becomes incarcerated. In the aforementioned intertextual twist on Farquhar's word play with the idea of "recruitment," Clark, having already recruited the cast in his capacity as director, now takes on the role of the eponymous "Recruiting Officer" within the inner play. Clark's involvement as an actor leads to a closer identification with the convict cast. In part, his taking the role of a convict actor effects a kind of symbolic status reversal: just as the production allows the lower class of convicts the opportunity to play above their class, Clark "steps down" in acting as substitute for an incarcerated actor. The officer's transformative involvement in the production culminates in the development of a romantic relationship with the female lead, convict Mary Brenham. Here Wertenbaker indicates a merging of art and life, as the romance of Farquhar's play-within-the-play is echoed in the development of a relationship between officer and convict. This is

⁴⁰ Ibid.

significant in relation to the play's depiction of theatre and its transformative potential, particularly when viewed in light of Clark's attitudes to women at the beginning of the play. As illustrated in a discussion with colleague Harry Brewster, Clark initially views the convict women uniformly as moral outcasts, referring to them as foul-speaking "whores" who "behave often no better than animals."⁴¹ Clinging obsessively to the memory of his wife Betsey Alicia, whose name suggests both her location in and symbolism of the England of his past, he is barely able to conceive that convict women could transcend their status. Harry, who is romantically involved with young convict Duckling Smith, argues:

HARRY. These women are sold before they're ten. The Captain says we should treat them with kindness.

RALPH. How can you treat such women with kindness?

[...]

I read *The Tragedy of Lady Jane Grey* on the ship. It is such a moving and uplifting play. But how could a whore play Lady Jane?⁴²

Viewed in contrast with these early sentiments, Ralph's development of a romantic relationship with one of the convicts represents a remarkable shift in his attitude towards women from the lower class. This transformation demonstrates the way in which rehearsal for *The Recruiting Officer* enables a personal transformation beyond the theatrical project.

In a more overt, metatheatrical commentary, the idea of theatre's transformative potential is expressed by one of the convicts at a moment later in the play. During the scene titled "The Meaning of Plays," Wisehammer comments directly on the way his theatrical role-playing allows him to transcend his situation. Unlike Dabby Bryant who seeks to identify with the play's characters, Arscott explains:

I don't want to play myself. When I say Kite's lines I forget everything else. I forget the judge said I'm going to have to spend the rest of my natural life in this place getting beaten and working like a slave. I can forget that out there it's trees and burnt grass, spiders that kill you in four hours and snakes. I don't have to think about what happened to Kable, I don't have to remember the things I've done. When I speak

⁴¹ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 20, 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

Kite's lines I don't hate any more. I'm Kite. I'm in Shrewsbury. Can we get on with the scene, Lieutenant, and stop talking?⁴³

In this passionate appeal, Arscott offers a striking description of the situation that binds him and, ultimately, the escape that theatre provides. His references to the harsh Australian environment convey the sense of imprisonment he feels within the confines of the convict settlement. Outside the world of the play he is a prisoner of the settlement and of his memories of the past. His plea to "get on with the scene" reflects his desire to forget the past and, in so doing, move on to an imagined, future space. Here, Arscott's musings demonstrate the influence of the Royal Court company's research on theatre in the British prison system. As indicated above, the impetus behind this work had been to explore some of the social factors underlying criminal behaviour. It was felt that such research would be useful in understanding the convict characters upon whom Wertebaker's play would ultimately be based. Stafford-Clark, recalling the prison performance of Howard Barker's *Love of a Good Man* explains:

The part of the effete Prince Edward had been played by a chunky, black cockney who had been a body builder before he came in. He had killed a bloke who had been harassing his sister. Onstage, he seemed charming, witty and rather camp. Offstage, I realized this had been character work of a high order. He was still charming, but definitely not the kind of bloke whose drink you would want to spill in the pub. The men said things like 'Rehearsing is the only time you're not in prison.' They had clearly been obsessed with rehearsing...⁴⁴

The impact of theatre upon prisoners in the British justice system was clearly impressed upon Stafford-Clark and the Royal Court ensemble. As reported by the director, and elsewhere by Timberlake Wertebaker, this research became a significant part of the play's source material. A detailed correspondence between Wertebaker and one of the prison actors, Joe White, emerged as a result of these visits and was published in the 1989 edition of the script. Notably, on his release from prison some years later, White embarked on a theatrical career and was Assistant Director for the 1998 revival of *Our Country's Good* at the Young Vic Theatre, London.⁴⁵

⁴³ Wertebaker, *Our Country's Good*, 46.

⁴⁴ Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 44.

⁴⁵ Programme for *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for Out-of-Joint and Young Vic Theatre Company, Young Vic, London, Folder: *Our Country's Good*, Young Vic, London, October 31, 1998, V&A Museum, Theatre and Performance Archive; Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertebaker*, 130.

Ultimately, the insights offered by some of the London prison inmates and Wertenbaker's subsequent depiction of the convicts in her play, demonstrate the transformative potential of the theatrical event. The transition from illiteracy and the use of convict slang at the beginning of the play, to the eloquent discussion of theatre that takes place between the convict actors in this scene, might be read as a testament to Governor Phillip's earlier arguments regarding the educational benefits of theatre.

Reviewers of early productions drew attention to this aspect of Wertenbaker's play. Michael Coveney, for example, acknowledged the play's basis on *The Playmaker* and its incorporation of material from Robert Hughes' historical account of the Sydney colony, *The Fatal Shore*, but credited the production with a "dimension" unique to its agency as theatre.⁴⁶ Likewise, the *Guardian's* Michael Billington, though initially apprehensive about the adaptation of Keneally's novel, considered that the production benefited from its ability to show its theatrical theme using the mechanisms of theatre itself.⁴⁷ This, he believed, was especially powerful during the play's second rehearsal scene, in which the convicts' attempts to rehearse *The Recruiting Officer* are stalled by the presence of two officers who have objected, previously, to the production.⁴⁸ When asked by Ralph Clark to allow the ensemble privacy for the purpose of rehearsal, officers Ross and Campbell assert their authority by systematically exposing and humiliating the convicts. By commanding them to engage in a range of submissive behaviours, Ross in particular substitutes the empowering performance of rehearsal in which they have been engaged with the performance of what he perceives to be their "animal" status. He orders the convicts to display scars acquired from previous punishments, to reveal hidden tattoos and, finally, to stand "on all fours" and bark for food. Part way through this sequence, however, two of the convicts attempt to subvert the Major's display of authority, breaking into an impromptu rehearsal of the dignified characters of the play.⁴⁹ Though truncated by the Major's order to begin the public flogging of one of their fellow convicts, and therefore only partly successful in its subversion, this powerful theatrical moment reflects something of the capacity of theatre, in allowing its actors to engage in a performative

Bush reports that White "played Ralph Clark in the first prison production of *Our Country's Good* and went on to work in professional theatre."

⁴⁶ Michael Coveney, review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Financial Times*, September 12, 1988.

⁴⁷ Michael Billington, review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Financial Times*, September 12, 1988.

⁴⁸ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 42-43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

resistance to their circumstances. Indeed, this moment of theatrical incursion into Major Ross' attempts to humiliate the convict cast could be viewed, in E.P. Thompson's terms, as a moment of counter-theatre.⁵⁰ Christina Parolin describes the political function of counter-theatre as a "mocking or lampooning of the texts, offices and ceremonies of the establishment" in order to "undermine traditional authority."⁵¹ In this scene, the convicts' deliberate performance of Farquhar's military class undermines Ross' attempts to humiliate them and destabilises the very concept of class itself, by demonstrating – through performance – the idea that class itself is (in this moment, at least) an illusion. This moment might also be seen as an example of a performance which fails yet requires all of the actors to participate (a possible metaphor for the prison colony itself).

Although it has remained central in critical receptions of the play, the transformation of convicts and their supervising officers through the process of theatre making has taken on different meanings in new production contexts. This was the case in Australia where, despite the Royal Court's attempts to explain the work as a British and *not* an Australian story, the play was interpreted in relation to Australian colonial and post-colonial history and the politics of empire. The production's "cultural transfer" from London to Sydney was complicated by several factors, one of which was its physical dislocation from the Royal Court.⁵² At the Royal Court, staged amidst funding cuts and the related threat of closure, the play had operated as a subversive celebration of theatre.⁵³ In the tour to Sydney, this impact was inevitably dissipated by the production's change in location and also, significantly, its material circumstances. The Royal Court production in Australia was made possible via the support of producer Diana Bliss, corporate sponsorship and the co-production of the work with the Sydney Theatre Company. As one of Australia's two major subsidised theatres at that time, the host venue was relieved, both physically and fiscally, from the pressures that had impacted upon the Royal Court. In this sense,

⁵⁰ E.P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, no.4 (1974): 382-405. For a discussion of counter-theatre, see Christina Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of popular politics in London, 1790-c.1845*. (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2010), 225-26.

⁵¹ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, 226.

⁵² Carlson, "Issues of Identity," 279.

⁵³ Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, 133-34. See also Benedict Nightingale, "Serving Playtime," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, *Young Vic Theatre*, London, *Times*, September 18, 1998. In this review of the Out-of-Joint, Young Vic co-production that was staged ten years after the Royal Court premiere, Nightingale reflects upon how in its original performance context, the play's celebration of theatre resonated against the background of cuts in funding to theatre and the Arts more broadly.

the production was distanced from the industrial and political contexts that it had first set out to critique.

In addition, although the Royal Court's production remained essentially unchanged, its interpretation by Australian audiences was guided by a different set of social and theatrical circumstances from those that had informed the play's London reception. Notably, the setting of late eighteenth century Sydney Cove, which had served as a metaphor for contemporary Britain, was no longer historicised in the same way. Upon arriving in Sydney, Stafford-Clark and the Royal Court ensemble were struck by the fact that their performances at the STC's Wharf Theatre, would be taking place just "half a mile away from the site of the original historical performance."⁵⁴ Moreover, the "historical names" of the play's dramatis personae were names familiar to Australian audiences.⁵⁵ This level of immediacy, disrupting as it did, the reading of the play as British metaphor, explains the Australian production's focus upon colonial history. As mentioned previously, this effect was likely heightened by the production's proximity to the Bicentenary, an event that had brought the politics of Australia's colonial and post-colonial history to the forefront of national consciousness.

The play's connections to Australian history were mediated by the Australian media's coverage of the Royal Court tour. *Our Country's Good* was billed as both a convincing "Convict Play," and the "Inside story of the birth of theatre in Australia."⁵⁶ The play's immediate relevance to Australian audiences was further foregrounded by references to the historical characters and events referred to within it. For example the *Sydney Morning Herald* mentioned "Robert Sideway," explaining how this character, a convict and former pickpocket, had become "the colony's first theatre producer after making his debut in *The Recruiting Officer*" in 1789.⁵⁷ In the history from which the play is drawn, Sideway is

⁵⁴ Carlson, "Issues of Identity," 279.

⁵⁵ Ibid. See also, Max Stafford-Clark, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, August 22, 2013. Appendix C.

⁵⁶ John Carmody, "Convict Play Convincing," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Sydney Theatre Company Wharf Theatre, Sydney, Sun Herald, June 11, 1989; Karen Lateo, "Inside Story of the Birth of Australian Theatre," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Sydney Theatre Company Wharf Theatre, Sydney, *Sunday Telegraph*, June 11, 1989.

⁵⁷ Bob Evans, "A Double Bill of Spell-Binding Performances," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Sydney Theatre Company Wharf Theatre, Sydney, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 5, 1989.

notable for having opened Australia's first colonial playhouse, only seven years after the convict production of *The Recruiting Officer*.⁵⁸

3.4 THE REHEARSAL-WITHIN-THE-PLAY

The most prominent metatheatrical technique deployed by Wertenbaker is that of rehearsal-within-the-play, for which it draws upon a long tradition. The idea of rehearsal is pervasive in Wertenbaker's text; in fact, given that the convicts' performance of *The Recruiting Officer* does not commence until the final scene, and even then, significantly, its full production is never seen, it is primarily rehearsal with which the play is concerned. The depiction of rehearsal is also a source of comedy throughout *Our Country's Good*, and several critics have perceived a connection to a longstanding tradition of metatheatrical rehearsals-within-plays, from Shakespeare's mechanicals through the popular rehearsal plays of the Restoration and beyond, to more recent examples including Louis Nowra's play *Così* (1992).⁵⁹ A discussion of both the comic aspects of Wertenbaker's rehearsal-within-the-play, and the analogy between rehearsal and nation-making is offered in the following section.

Michael Coveney, in his review of the original Royal Court production, described the character Sideway, played by Nick Dunning, as "the first antipodean Nick Bottom," a comparison that has subsequently been made by numerous critics.⁶⁰ Indeed, like Shakespeare's character, Sideway is a source of comedy in his enthusiasm for all things theatrical and, as a self-appointed key player in the rehearsal process, he asserts his position as a theatre-maker on several occasions. This is demonstrated to great effect during the scene of "The First Rehearsal" in which Sideway takes it upon himself to induct the convicts in the theatrical customs of his age. For instance, when Dabby Bryant questions Officer Clark's gesture of "introduc[ing] the company," Sideway explains:

SIDEWAY. ...It's a theatrical custom, the company is formally introduced to each other, Mrs Bryant.

DABBY. Mrs Bryant? Who's Mrs Bryant.

⁵⁸ Robert Jordan, "The Barrington Prologue," *Script & Print* 31, no.1 (2007): 42.

⁵⁹ Louis Nowra, *Così* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1992).

⁶⁰ Michael Coveney, review of *Our Country's Good*.

SIDEWAY. It's the theatrical form of address, Madam. You may call me Mr Sideway.

RALPH. If I may proceed - ⁶¹

Part of the humour of this scene lies in its juxtaposition of Sideway's mannered address to his fellow actors with the language used by the convicts outside of rehearsals. Thematically, this moment also demonstrates how from the outset of the first rehearsal, the convention of referring to fellow actors by their title effects a disruption of the social hierarchy, albeit a temporary one. The strangeness of these titles to the convicts is demonstrated, possibly to comic effect, when Dabby fails to recognise herself as the "Mrs" Bryant to whom Sideway refers.

During the initial stages of rehearsal, Sideway's earnest attempts to incorporate pre-conceived ideas of acting technique into his performance are also a source of comedy. Critics have described these attempts as a parody of the "grandiose eighteenth century theatrical poses," though ironically, the subject upon whose performance Sideway is based is actor David Garrick who, as Stafford-Clark explains in *Letters to George*, was known in his day for the relative naturalness of his performance.⁶² Sideway's impersonation of Garrick is, first and foremost, amusing for its 'Bottom'-like enthusiasm. This moment occurs during the "First Rehearsal" of Act One, when Sideway is first attempting to grasp his role as Captain Brazen.

Sideway has dropped to his knees and is sobbing in a pose of total sorrow.

RALPH. What are you doing down there, Sideway?

SIDEWAY. I'm being melancholy. I saw Mr Garrick being melancholy once. That is what he did. Hamlet it was.

He stretches his arms to the ground and begins to repeat.

'Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt.

Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt. Oh that this too –

RALPH. This is a comedy. It is perhaps a little lighter.⁶³

⁶¹ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 33-34.

⁶² Verna N. Foster, "Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*," *Connotations* 7, no.3 (1997/98): 426; Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*; for discussion of Garrick's relative naturalness of performance see also Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (USA: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 1-14, 58-59, 111.

⁶³ In this instance I have cited the later edition of the play, in which Sideway's recitation of the line from *Hamlet* is extended. In the 1988 first edition, Sideway said "Oh that this too, too -" and was then cut off by Clark. In a reprint of the 1991 revised edition, as I have quoted, the additional repetitions add to the comic effect of the scene, as well as making it clearer to the audience that the source text is *Hamlet*. See Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 2003), 44.

Part of the irony inherent in Ralph's critique of Sideway's performance is that the convict, in his embellished rendition of Garrick's *Hamlet*, has missed the tragedy altogether, unintentionally striking a comic register. In fact, Sideway's attempts at acting are similar to the Montebello's "Strangling of Desdemona," in the sense that both performances transform the tragedy of Shakespeare's play into a comedy. When interpreted through the lens of Helen Gilbert's post-colonial analysis of the *Mukinupin* play-within-the-play, as discussed in Chapter One, Sideway's demonstration can similarly be seen to operate as a kind of canonical counter-discourse, demonstrating a "fundamental change in the Shakespearean text" by virtue of its performance (or re-performance) in a new, post-colonial, setting.⁶⁴ With each gestural and recitative repetition of the lines "Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt," Sideway is attempting to generate a more authentic imitation of Garrick's *Hamlet*. With each re-iteration, however, his own performance becomes more comical – further removed from the canonical text and its staging by Garrick. If this is read in terms of Gilbert's post-colonial analysis, Sideway's performance becomes a powerful metatheatrical demonstration of the way in which imperial texts are inevitably altered when displaced from their original contexts.⁶⁵ It is of course important to note here that, like the version of *King Lear* which the Tasmanian outcasts in Nowra's *The Golden Age* use as the basis of their own performance, Sideway's performance is itself based upon an adaptation: Garrick's eighteenth century interpretation of the earlier, Shakespearean, text. There is a sense, then, in which his repetition of Hamlet's line, cut off in the end only by an interruption from Clark (and almost suggesting that Sideway would have gone on infinitely repeating it), demonstrates the way in which texts not only change when performed in new contexts, but *continue* to change with each performance, and over the course of time. Read in this light, Sideway's repetition of Hamlet's lines becomes more than a comically pathetic attempt at recreating Garrick's performance. It is itself a performance of the ongoing, changing and ever adapting nature of performance and a demonstration of the way in which theatrical traditions, such as Shakespearean performance, have perpetuated throughout history.

As well as adding colour and levity to the depiction of how the convicts grapple with rehearsals, Sideway's metatheatrical moment in rehearsal can be seen as part of the play's broader consideration of the purpose of acting. This, in turn, reflects Stafford-Clark's

⁶⁴ Gilbert, *Sightlines*, 174-75.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

interest in the ways in which conventions of acting have changed over time – a theme touched upon in *Letters to George*.⁶⁶ While Sideway, ultimately, is able to find an approach that enables him to play his role successfully, Wertenbaker's reflections on acting styles both here and throughout the play reflect Stafford-Clark and the company's exploration of the relationship between acting and life.

Given the play's intertextual relationship with Farquhar's Restoration comedy, its employment of the rehearsal-within-the-play as a source of comedy may also be seen as a metatheatrical nod to a tradition of British rehearsal plays that began during the Restoration with Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671) and continued to be popular through to Garrick's era and beyond. As Tiffany Stern explains, the main generic feature of the Restoration rehearsal play is the burlesque of theatrical conventions.⁶⁷ Viewed in relation to the comic approach seen in *The Rehearsal* and, later, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779), Wertenbaker's depiction of rehearsal, though certainly comic at times, operates less as a theatrical burlesque and more as a vehicle examining the purpose of theatre and its relationship to life.

That *Our Country's Good* references past theatrical traditions, including the rehearsal play, is nonetheless important. For in the metatheatrical staging of the first play by British convicts, viewers become witness to the emergence of a new theatrical tradition. A vital aspect of Wertenbaker's staging of this tradition is her acknowledgment of the theatrical, and indeed metatheatrical heritage, out of which that tradition (post-colonial Australian drama) has emerged.

In relation to the tradition of Australian metatheatre, the depiction of Sideway is remarkable in its likeness to another metatheatrical theatre aficionado, Roy, the asylum patient and would-be director in Louis Nowra's *Così*. Like Sideway, Roy is a key player within the staging of a metatheatrical rehearsal. Here the work being rehearsed is a production of Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*, for a production to be performed by and for asylum inmates. If Sideway can be described as the "Nick Bottom" of 1790s Australia, then Roy must be the "Bottom" of the 1990s. His enthusiasm for theatre is apparent from

⁶⁶ Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 70-73.

⁶⁷ Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). For discussion of the tradition of the rehearsal play as developed and exemplified in plays including *The Rehearsal*, see also Dane F. Smith, *Plays about the Theatre in England from The Rehearsal in 1671 to the Licencing Act in 1739* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936).

the outset in *Così* when student director Lewis offers the inmates some suggestions as to what play they might perform, only to find that Roy has already made a selection. As Roy exclaims “No, no, no! We’re wasting time! I’ve already chosen what we’re doing. *Così Fan Tutte*.”⁶⁸ Upon discovering that “*nobody has really heard of it*,” he proceeds to launch into an animated synopsis of the entire opera, vehemently defending his commitment to the project when questioned about the plot line by other inmates.

CHERRY. *This Così Tutti –*

ROY. *Così Fan Tutte*

CHERRY. Thing is just another thing about the battle of the sexes?

ROY. I suppose so, if you could describe the Crusades as a sightseeing lark on the way to Jerusalem. Look, everyone, show some enthusiasm. This is a masterpiece. [...] It’s all in my head. Without this, the world wouldn’t be the same. It would break, like a voice in despair shattering glass. There is the harmony of the spheres and that harmony is Mozart’s music. *Così Fan Tutte*.⁶⁹

As metatheatrical descendants of Shakespeare’s own metatheatrical theatre enthusiast, Wertebaker’s *Sideway* (1988/1989)⁷⁰ and Nowra’s *Roy* (1992) both demonstrate the influence of past traditions upon the development of Australian metatheatre. As *Così* was written just three years after *Our Country’s Good* first appeared on the Australian stage, it is possible that Nowra’s characterisation of Roy drew directly on Wertebaker’s *Sideway*. Regardless of whether or not this is true, however, the presence of what might be termed a metatheatrical character type in both plays illustrates how Australian metatheatrical works have not been developed in isolation, but in continuation of traditions of metatheatre established both historically and internationally. This reaffirms the idea explored in Chapter One in relation to Hewett’s *Mukinupin*, that Australian playwrights’ use of metatheatrical strategies situates Australian metatheatre itself within a broader metatheatrical tradition. As such, Australian metatheatre cannot be fully understood independently, but must necessarily be studied in relation to that broader landscape of which it is a part.

⁶⁸ Nowra, *Così*, 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

⁷⁰ These dates reflect the first production in the United Kingdom and the first Australian production in Sydney.

3.5 REHEARSAL OF NATION

In its Australian context, the rehearsal-within-the play takes on a particular resonance as an analogy for the rehearsal of the nation. Throughout *Our Country's Good*, Wertebaker draws a parallel between the convict actors' rehearsals for *The Recruiting Officer* and the rehearsal for the new society in Sydney Cove. This is presented through her staging of the play making process, from the initial stages of casting in a scene titled "An Audition" to the final moments "Backstage" before the production commences. By means of the analogy she sets up within the text, the ending of Wertebaker's play signifies both the opening of *The Recruiting Officer* and the beginnings of a new society. Not yet fully independent in its operation, this "infant" nation and the cast who comprise it entertain hopes for a bright future, but also a sense of uncertainty.⁷¹ As Clark cues the convict Arscott for his first entrance, the actor, amidst the general flurry of backstage excitement, almost forgets to carry on one of his props. Remembering it in the nick of time, he is retrieves it from one of his fellow actors, then "goes upstage and off," to deliver his opening line. According to Wertebaker's stage directions, the play concludes with a behind-the-scenes perspective, as "*Backstage, the remaining actors listen with trepidation to [Arscott's] first speech*" and finally "*to the triumphant music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the sound of applause and laughter from the First Fleet audience, the first Australian performance of The Recruiting Officer Begins.*"⁷²

The analogy between rehearsal of play and rehearsal of nation is not unique to Wertebaker's play. Most famously, perhaps, this idea was invoked in 1948, in Carl Van Doren's *The Great Rehearsal*.⁷³ In his discussion of the foundations of the United States Constitution, Van Doren drew parallels between the experimental conditions of the foundation of North American society and ideas of theatrical rehearsal. In Wertebaker's play where this analogy is presented in reverse, the late eighteenth century colonial experiment is linked to the rehearsal for the play-within-the-play. Notably, the idea of rehearsal that is applied in this analogy is consistent not with eighteenth century theatre

⁷¹ Charles Spencer, review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Daily Telegraph*, September 12, 1988.

⁷² Once again, in this instance I am citing the 1991 revised edition, as the 1988 edition did not include the detail of Arscott almost forgetting to take his prop on stage with him, nor did it include the final stage direction describing the use of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, although it is clear from the audio recording of the production that this music was used. See Timberlake Wertebaker, *Our Country's Good*, 2nd ed., 91.

⁷³ Carl Van Doren, *The Great Rehearsal: The story of the making and ratifying of the Constitution of the United States* (London: The Cresset Press, 1948).

practice but with the theatre and rehearsal practice exemplified in the late twentieth century by the Royal Court ensemble. As Tiffany Stern explains in *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan*, the ideas of “ensemble,” “harmonious team work,” and even experiment, are relatively modern concepts in the history of rehearsal.⁷⁴ This point is acknowledged by Stafford-Clark in *Letters to George*, where the director acknowledges that his “ideals of theatre,” the same ideals that are echoed in Arthur Phillip’s vision for the new Australian colony in *Our Country’s Good*, are based in his own mid to late twentieth century theatrical experience.⁷⁵

The idea of rehearsal of the nation is explored in various scenes, often in the form of overt metatheatrical comment. Phillip’s aforementioned reference to theatre as an “expression of civilization” is one example, and Wertenbaker draws attention to this perspective (as well as the views of those who oppose it) by having the scene announced under the title “The Officers Discuss the Merits of Theatre.” This is also the longest scene in *Our Country’s Good* – another indication of the play’s emphasis upon theatre, both its transformative potential and its relevance to nation making. Further references to the convict production as a rehearsal for the new colony include Captain David Collins’ view of the project as an “experiment” and a later description of the play as a microcosm.⁷⁶ As Feldman argues, Arthur Phillip’s vision of *The Recruiting Officer* as “a world in itself – a tiny colony” reflects his notion that the process of play making will encourage a sense of community that will in turn “infiltrate the colony at large.”⁷⁷ It is clear that the idea of theatrical experimentation is analogous with Phillip’s social experiment. This is further articulated in Act Two scene two, entitled “His Excellency Exhorts Ralph.” Here, Governor Phillip explains the nature of his social experiment in more detail, describing the convicts’ production as a trial for the kind of society he wishes to create. Phillip even extends the rehearsal analogy through a reference to the convict Fleet’s journey to Australia; in exhorting Ralph to continue directing the production in the face of opposition, he argues “...we have embarked, Ralph, we must stay afloat.”⁷⁸ Phillip’s reference to a ship that will either float or sink, reflects the extent to which, in his mind, the success of the new colony is contingent upon the success of convict production,

⁷⁴ Stern, introduction to *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan*, 1-21.

⁷⁵ Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 3-4.

⁷⁶ Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good*, 41.

⁷⁷ Wertenbaker, cited in Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 156.

⁷⁸ Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good*, 41.

suggesting that “rehearsal” has in fact begun well before the moment of arriving on Australian shores. Moreover, there is a sense in which, by describing the production/society as “afloat,” Phillip also suggests it has yet to arrive at its destination. The theatrical/social project is highlighted, here, as a distinctly colonial enterprise (and vice versa) but one in which the outcome remains both undetermined and unseen.

Beyond the kinds of references described above, the analogy of theatrical rehearsal as a rehearsal of nation is demonstrated throughout the convicts’ preparations for their production. Wertenbaker’s depiction of various stages in the theatrical project serves to illustrate the cast’s acquisition of skills that Governor Phillip has established as essential to the kind of society he envisages. From the outset, the casting of *The Recruiting Officer* is dictated by the circumstances in which Phillip’s colonial experiment is being conducted. Though Officer Clark in his capacity as overseer of the production (a role that Wertenbaker imbues with the qualities of a late twentieth century theatre director) has some agency in selecting his cast, the production, like the new society, must necessarily be created from the convicts who have journeyed to Australia as part of the First Fleet. Decisions pertaining to the inclusion or exclusion of individual convicts in the play can in turn be seen to reflect decisions made about the nature of Australian society. Here, the Governor-in-Chief’s suggestion that hardened criminals like Liz Morden should be cast in the production, demonstrates his vision of a more inclusive social structure. As he explains to Ralph in the second act:

- PHILLIP. Liz Morden – (He pauses.) I had a reason for asking you to cast her as Melinda. Morden is one of the most difficult women in the colony.
- RALPH. She is indeed, Sir.
- PHILLIP. Lower than a slave, full of loathing, foul mouthed, desperate.
- RALPH. Exactly Sir. And violent.
- PHILLIP. Quite. To be made an example of.
- RALPH. By hanging?
- PHILLIP. No Lieutenant, by redemption.⁷⁹

Casting for the new Australian society is not only dictated by the historical circumstances of the Fleet’s population and decisions made by authorities. Indeed, from the earliest

⁷⁹ Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good*, 40.

moments, the convicts themselves become involved in the casting process, self-selecting, in certain instances, the roles they wish to play, and asserting their will to be involved, even when this involves overriding Clark's directorial authority. This is played out to great comic effect during "The First Rehearsal" when "Black Caesar," a convict of Madagascanian origins, casts himself in the production.⁸⁰ Here, as in the characterisation of most of the play's convicts, Wertenbaker draws upon Keneally who in researching transport lists from the First Fleet, had taken a reference to "one 'John Cesar,' originally from Madagascar," and adapted it into *The Playmaker's* "John Caesar."⁸¹ Known as "Black Caesar" among the convicts, this character appears early in the novel where he insists upon his inclusion in the convict production. In *The Playmaker*, however, Black Caesar does not go on to perform a role, as he does in *Our Country's Good*. Caesar, whose racial origins and skin colour afford him a marginal status within British society, arrives at rehearsal after the production of *The Recruiting Officer* has officially been cast. Despite the fact that he was not invited to audition, Caesar insists, with absolute confidence, on the need for him to be cast. "There is always a black servant in a play," he argues in this scene. Then, standing next to Sideway who is already on stage rehearsing, he argues "There is always a part for Caesar. I will be his [Sideway's] servant."⁸²

Caesar's insistence upon the creation of a role for him to play exemplifies the possibilities articulated by Phillip for a more inclusive society. Here, in the context of rehearsal, Black Caesar acquires a certain agency in which, using his knowledge of theatrical conventions ("there is always a black servant"), he is able to rehearse the notion of a society in which he claims a place. This idea of inclusiveness within the play and, by analogy, the new colony, is not, however, without qualification. Notably, the role into which Caesar casts himself is a subservient one; even in his eagerness to be involved, the convict is aware of his limitations within the British class hierarchy. As critics have argued, Phillip's colonial project, regardless of what degree of agency it appears to offer its subjects, is ultimately still contained within the power politics of empire.⁸³ And while those convicts who, like Caesar, were previously marginalised in British society (on racial or other grounds) may

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁸¹ Bligh's reference is to historical transport lists from the First Fleet. See Kate Bligh, "Oppositional Symmetries: An Anthropological Voyage through *Our Country's Good* & *The Poetics*," in *International Dramaturgy: Translations & Transformations in the Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, eds. Maya E. Roth and Sara Freeman. (European Interuniversity Press, 2008), 183.

⁸² Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 35-36.

⁸³ Weeks, "The Question of Liz," 147-56.

acquire a new status of belonging in the colony, there are others, in particular the Aboriginal Australian, who remain excluded from both the production and the new society.

Black "Caesar's" name warrants consideration, for whilst it describes his difference as a "Black," convict, it also aligns him with the cultural hegemony of empire through association with the figure of Julius Caesar. This association operates on multiple levels; Caesar was not only a Roman politician, credited historically with his achievements in expanding the Roman empire, but also the figure of Shakespeare's history play of the same name. In the context of Wertenbaker's play, Caesar's name describes the physical strength and potential violence of the Madagascan convict through association with the Roman warrior, but also the idea that the former criminal, in spite of his marginal social status as a "Black" man, is entitled in his claim to a place in the British cultural and empirical project. This operates at the level of the theatrical production and, by analogy, the new society. The characterisation and related naming of Black "Caesar," with its connotations of empire and nobility may also be read in relation to Enlightenment ideas of the "noble savage."⁸⁴ Connected with a "rhetoric of primitivism," the noble savage is described by Edna L. Steeves as having "enjoyed a vogue in the age of enlightenment [with] examples, both real and fictional, of the ideal type abound[ing] in the literature of the period."⁸⁵ Black Caesar's connection to the classical world, implicit in his name, signifies the qualities of the noble savage as the "perfect model" of the primitive man.⁸⁶

Caesar's determination to create a part in spite of the fact that "All the parts have been taken," further demonstrates the *cast's* ability to play an active role, not only in rehearsals for *The Recruiting Officer*, but beyond this in determining the nature of Australian society.⁸⁷ During rehearsals, the convicts develop a capacity for a new kind of co-operation. This is seen, on one occasion, when the cast comes together to ensure Black Caesar's wish to be involved in the production is realised. In rehearsal, when Clark

⁸⁴ For discussion and debate surrounding the definition of this term and, in particular, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's connection with its usage, see Terry J. Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Also Peter France, "Primitivism and Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Scots," *Yearbook of English Studies* 15 (1985): 64-79.

⁸⁵ Edna L. Steeves, "Negritude and the Noble Savage," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no.1 (1973): 93.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* It is also interesting to note that, in *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes suggests that the myth of the noble savage likely informed British settlers' views of Indigenous Australians. See Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, 7.

⁸⁷ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 35.

reminds Caesar that he is not, in fact, in the play, convicts Liz Morden and Robert Sideway assert “Yes he is, Lieutenant,” with Sideway adding “He’s my servant.”⁸⁸ One possible reading of this moment is that it offers a powerful demonstration of the community process at work in the play’s rehearsals. By analogy, viewers can see how the fledgling society, like the production, is developed and changed to accommodate those willing to participate – albeit on the condition that they qualify as subjects of the British empire.

Here and in other moments, the convict rehearsal process demonstrates how skills of improvisation and a willingness to re-write classic texts are vital in the context of the nation making project. Both of these qualities are demonstrated in Caesar’s invention of a role to play in Farquhar’s comedy. As Caesar says during the “First Rehearsal”:

CAESAR. I speak French. That makes him [Worthy, played by Sideway,] a more high up gentleman if he has a French servant, and that is good. Now he gets the lady with the black servant. Very chic.⁸⁹

Caesar’s re-writing of the classic text is based on a quick, improvisatory assessment of the resources at hand – in this case the actors on stage who include convict “Duckling” as servant Lucy (played in the Royal Court production by British West Indian actor Alphoncia Emmanuel).⁹⁰ It is also pertinent that despite his own illiteracy, Caesar is able to take the classic text and icon of culture, so-described by Arthur Phillip, and use it to “write” a new character to his specifications. At the same time, Caesar’s suggestion demonstrates an awareness of how his re-writing will disrupt the text’s social hierarchy by elevating “Worthy” (and by association the convict actor, Sideway) to a higher social standing. This disruption is symbolic of the way in which the production itself proposes to alter the social hierarchy of the new colony by allowing the convicts to transcend social class through role-play. That the cast is willing to accommodate this re-writing of classic text (as empire) highlights their ability to generate a new text (nation) from the old. In line with Billington’s observation discussed above, this idea becomes all the more potent in the context of Wertenbaker’s play, as this process can be shown theatrically.⁹¹ Caesar’s

⁸⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁹⁰ “Alphoncia Emmanuel: Biography” IMDB, accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0256456/>.

⁹¹ Billington, Review of *Our Country’s Good*; Coveney, Review of *Our Country’s Good*.

metatheatrical, improvised self-casting is especially powerful, as it demonstrates the capacity of a largely illiterate convict cast to generate a new performance text in an embodied and cooperative way.

An alternative way of looking at Black Caesar's incorporation into the convict production would be less as a comment on theatre's democratising function and more as a reflection on racial relations. The white convicts' acceptance of a black player in their production could be seen as a metaphor for the terms upon which "white" post-colonial Australian settlers were prepared to accept "black" people, including Indigenous Australians, into the new society (hence the black convict's selection of the subservient role, as discussed above). In this scene it could be argued that although willing to incorporate Caesar into the production, the convicts are *only* prepared to do so on the grounds that he play a servant. This moment could thus be read to reflect the unequal terms upon which racial relations in the colony were established. Such a reading is enhanced when we consider that Wertenbaker wrote the roles of Black Caesar and the Aboriginal Australian with the idea that the same actor would play both parts. The play therefore incorporates a strategy of metatheatrical character doubling that invites a comparison between these roles and reflection upon the meanings of that doubling in terms of a colonial and post-colonial racial discourse. The fact that this discourse seems not to have been picked up by audience members and reviewers of early productions could be due, in part, to the reduction in size of the role of the Aboriginal Australian during the play's development, as I will discuss later in the chapter. It is, nonetheless, possible to see the potential for this character doubling, combined with the nature of Black Caesar's incorporation into the convict production, to operate as part of Wertenbaker's analogising of the rehearsal of play and the rehearsal of nation.

This analogy is developed further as the convict cast move closer to their production. While, initially, the actors struggle with Farquhar's unfamiliar language and characters, as rehearsal progresses they adapt to the production's requirements through a process of personal identification with the roles they will be playing and the learning of new, necessary skills. These skills and their implementation during the rehearsal process affirms the convict cast's potential for developing a rich, multi-faceted society. For example, the Jewish convict, Wishammer (another character marginalised within the

British society of his origin), discovers a passion for writing.⁹² By the end of the play he expresses a wish to develop his newly found skill in playwriting. This is an important moment in *Our Country's Good* as it shows that the convict production of *The Recruiting Officer* is not an isolated cultural event, but the beginning of an ongoing theatrical tradition, of which this cast is a part.

Wisemhammer's love of language is highlighted throughout the play, as has been noted by a number of critics.⁹³ Particularly important regarding the depiction of the founding of a new society is a scene in Act One in which, prior to the convicts' first rehearsal, "Wisemhammer and Mary Brenham Exchange Words."⁹⁴ As Mary, according to a stage direction, makes a handwritten copy of *The Recruiting Officer* (she is one of the few convicts who can write), Wisemhammer contemplates the English language, pointing out the irony behind the double meanings of many of its words. In a reflection that reveals the ironies within his own society, and that also points to the multivalence of the play's title, he presents the example of "country," a word that in his experience can convey conflicting meanings. He reflects:

Country can mean opposite things. It renews you with trees and grass, you go rest in the country, or it crushes you with power: you die for your country, your country doesn't want you, you're thrown out of your country.⁹⁵

In the subsequent dialogue, Wisemhammer recalls the source of his interest in language. His father, he explains, whilst clearing out "the houses of the dead to sell the old clothes to the poor houses by the Thames" had come across part of a dictionary.⁹⁶ A relic left behind by a person long since dead, this text, "Johnson's dictionary," was "as big as a Bible" but, notably, incomplete, covering only the letters A through L.⁹⁷ The idea of the dictionary, as the record of foundational components of a language, being uncovered from a place of the dead is especially powerful, symbolising the convicts' process of

⁹² Wisemhammer's social marginalisation on account of his Jewish heritage is apparent in an exchange with Liz Morden. Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 39. Ann Wilson argues that this marginalisation receives only limited attention in the play and is, in this sense, indicative of the play's broader marginalisation of the "whole concept of colonization." See Wilson, "Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation," 276.

⁹³ See, for example, Michael Thomas "Our Country's Good: From 'canting' slang to 'refined, literate, language.'" *The English* 7, no.1 (1996): 18-21.

⁹⁴ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 32-33.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

uncovering the “refined [and] literate” language of Farquhar’s play and, in so doing, forging new modes of communication.⁹⁸ The dictionary, like the convicts’ exercise in play/nation making, represents a departure from tradition – both a tradition of place, here symbolised in the dictionary’s connection to its London origin, and cultural tradition, implied through the comparison of the dictionary with a Bible. Since the discovered dictionary is incomplete, there is an implication that by creating an ending for this partial text, the new society is departing from a tradition that is not only long established but intrinsic to the hegemony of British empire.

Wishammer’s speech can also be interpreted in relation to the character’s own departure from his family tradition, seemingly reflected in the structure of his name, Wise/hammer.⁹⁹ His father, presumably a tradesperson, in “clearing the houses of the dead,” is connected with a past to which Wishammer no longer has access on account of his transportation to Australia.¹⁰⁰ Yet a connection is maintained via the dictionary the convict has read and absorbed. The self-proclaimed lover of language therefore moves beyond his father’s practical trade and through his discovery of playwriting uses this relic of his heritage to invent new meanings. Wishammer’s role can be seen as broadly analogous to that of the contemporary playwright, and perhaps even Wertebaker herself; in taking and re-writing old meanings, he “clear[s]” the past in a way that echoes but also moves beyond tradition.

It is during rehearsals for the metatheatrical play-within-the-play that Wishammer, having identified the power of language, uses it to write an alternative prologue for the convicts’ production. Arguing that Farquhar’s original prologue (on the art of recruitment) holds no relevance for the convict community, he works to create a more meaningful introduction, with help from Mary. In the wording of this prologue, Wertebaker drew on lines from the “so-called Barrington prologue.”¹⁰¹ As Robert Jordan explains, the “real-life,” 1789 production of *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney Cove had indeed begun, as was customary, with a prologue. However, the prologue used

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25. This description is part of Governor Phillip’s argument for the value of the convict theatre project.

⁹⁹ Verna N. Foster, “Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting,” 427–28. Foster also discusses the meanings built into Wishammer’s name and the way in which the playwright’s use of names echoes Restoration theatrical traditions.

¹⁰⁰ Wertebaker, *Our Country’s Good*, 33.

¹⁰¹ Robert Jordan, cited in Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 157.

on that occasion was not the one cited by Wertenbaker in *Our Country's Good*. Wertenbaker's citation is, in fact, from a satirical poem, written by Henry Carter of Leicester in the *manner* of a theatrical prologue. He titled it "Prologue, supposed to have been spoken at the [1796] Opening of the Theatre at Botany Bay."¹⁰² Carter attributed the delivery of the piece to known pickpocket and transportee, Thomas Barrington, possibly to add to the comic effect of his work. Subsequently, as Jordan points out, Carter's poem "has come down to us as the 'Barrington Prologue,'" erroneously thought to have been actually delivered on that night. Employing this poem for the purpose of her play, Wertenbaker attributes it to the convict Wisehammer. It is from here, in part, that the title of Wertenbaker's play is drawn.¹⁰³ As Wisehammer, rehearsing the poem for Lieutenant Clark, announces:

WISEHAMMER. From distant climes o'er wide-spread seas we come,
 Though not with much éclat or beat of drum,
 True patriots all; for be it understood,
 We left our country for our country's good;
 No private views disgraced our generous zeal;
 What urg'd our travels was our country's weal,
 And none will doubt but that our emigration
 Has prov'd most useful to the British nation.¹⁰⁴

Wisehammer's prologue is not only significant as a re-writing of Farquhar's text (not to mention Carter's), but also in the way the production's fictional director, Ralph Clark, receives it. Here Wertenbaker depicts a contrast between Wisehammer's first proposal of the new text, in which Clark is largely dismissive of the idea, and the final scene of the play. Although in the last scene Clark is demonstrably more receptive than he had been previously to the idea of the new prologue, he ultimately determines that the message contained within Wisehammer's text is too subversive for the play's on-stage audience. For this reason, the prologue and notably, as Stephen Weeks points out, the words that make up the title of the play at large, are ultimately omitted from the performance of the

¹⁰² Robert Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788-1840* (Strawberry Hills, N.S.W: Currency House, 2002), 34-38. Jordan also gives an account of the opening of the first major playhouse in Sydney, which opened on January 16, 1796. A former convict by the name of Robert Sidaway (upon whom Keneally and Wertenbaker's character Sidaway is based) is thought to have been instrumental in the building and management of this theatre.

¹⁰³ For further discussion of the play's title, see for example Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁴ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 53.

metatheatrical play-within-the-play.¹⁰⁵ Commenting on Wertenbaker's deliberate use of irony in staging the omission of these lines, Weeks remarks that:

Hamlet, that other notable subversive, gets his sixteen-line insertion into 'The Murder of Gonzago,' but Wisehammer gets only a platitude from Ralph about 'private sacrifices made for the good of the whole.' That the play's title is taken from the line left out, the subversive sentiment contained, is another instance of a persistent irony that underlines even the moments that most strongly affirm the theatre's progressive, redemptive power.¹⁰⁶

What is most striking about Wertenbaker's "backstage" depiction of the decision to omit Sideway's prologue is that the text of the prologue (subversive in this context because of the way it presents the convicts' expulsion from their homeland as a form of patriotism) is omitted from its performance in the staged historical event, but audiences of the late twentieth century / early twenty-first century are privy to the subversive text by seeing it "rehearsed." As Sideway offers a backstage performance of the prologue for Lieutenant Clark, the audience hears the text and also watches its reception by the appreciative convict cast.

RALPH. When Major Ross hears that, he'll have an apoplectic fit.
 MARY. I think it's very good.
 DABBY. So do I. And true.¹⁰⁷

It is here that Wertenbaker succeeds, ultimately, in complicating the celebratory tone of the play's final scene, so that as *The Recruiting Officer* opens "to the triumphant music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the sound of applause and laughter from the First Fleet audience," viewers are aware that a text more relevant to the convicts' experiences has been excluded from the historical performance.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Weeks, "The Question of Liz," 152.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 53.

¹⁰⁸ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 2003), 91. As mentioned previously, the 1988 edition did not include the final stage direction describing the use of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, although it is clear from the audio recording of the production that this music was used.

3.6 BACKSTAGE

In Chapter Two I argued that Nowra's *Royal Show* included the metatheatrical depiction of "backstage" Australia. Nowra's staging of moments played out "behind-the-scenes" was shown to demonstrate how marginalised members of Australian society, though able to find voice in the realm of after-hours Sideshow performance, were not accepted within the Royal Show's main events. Similarly, in *The Man from Mukinupin*, a play to which Nowra's work is clearly indebted, Hewett's "outsider" characters are depicted as belonging to the night. Here, in night-time ceremonials, the town's eccentrics, artists and war veterans, along with Indigenous half-caste Touch of the Tar, find a space which they would not have been granted in the "day-time" world of *Mukinupin*.

In *Our Country's Good*, as in *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show*, the metatheatrical portrayal of "backstage" is once again important. Like Hewett and Nowra, Wertenbaker's use of this device conveys the idea that the "Australia" being rehearsed behind the scenes is different from the one presented to its wider audience. This implies an inconsistency between the projected image of Australian identity and the true nature of Australian society and culture. Indeed, in Hewett's and Nowra's plays, this technique has been shown to operate as a comment on Australian culture – both historically (that is in relation to the historicised settings of *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show*) and more immediately, in reflecting the contexts in which the plays were first performed.

Wertenbaker's depiction of "backstage" is similar to Hewett and Nowra's in the sense that it portrays a kind of behind-the-scenes rehearsal – specifically that of Wisehammer's alternative prologue – of an oppressed or marginalised group. As Weeks suggests, the staging of Clark's decision to censor this prologue reflects the fact that, although the rehearsal process itself has afforded Wertenbaker's convict cast a "limited" agency, their performance in Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer* is ultimately contained within the parameters of the colonial project.¹⁰⁹ The production of *The Recruiting Officer* can be seen as an act of colonisation because, as Wilson explains, it involves the "imposition of one culture on another."¹¹⁰ This is demonstrated in the way in which the participating convict cast is required to adopt the language of Farquhar's text, a language representative

¹⁰⁹ Weeks, "The Question of Liz," 152.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, "Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation," 33.

of the “oppressive force.”¹¹¹ There are moments during the convicts’ rehearsals when this language appears to give the cast a newfound expressive agency. Yet, ultimately, as Weeks contests, this agency is contained, as seen in the censorship of the prologue Sideway has written using the very King’s English the convicts have acquired. The containment of possible subversion of the colonial project is played out in Clark’s insistence that the original prologue of Farquhar’s text be retained.¹¹² By denying the convicts’ proposed substitution of the prologue, Clark not only suppresses their attempt to perform a new text but ensures the play maintains its connection to British empire by retaining the idea of “recruitment” within its introduction.

Beyond its depiction of the convicts’ position within the colonial project, Wertenbaker’s “backstage” scene reflects another aspect of Australian cultural history in its portrayal of the Aboriginal Australian’s status within the new society. Like the censorship of Wischammer’s alternative prologue, the treatment of the Aboriginal Australian both here and throughout the text, contains the potential to disrupt the play’s otherwise celebratory tone. Critics have viewed Wertenbaker’s depiction of the Aboriginal Australian as one of the work’s most problematic aspects.¹¹³ Even prior to *Our Country’s Good* being staged in Australia, Billington and other reviewers had expressed disappointment in the play’s diminution of what had occupied a more central place in Keneally’s novel.¹¹⁴ In *The Playmaker*, the impact of British colonialism upon Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants is explored at length. Indeed, the importance of this theme is highlighted by a dedication to “Arabadoo,” the Indigenous Australian man whose “real-life” capture and secondment to Arthur Phillip occupies one strand of Keneally’s narrative. Keneally depicts Arabadoo as the subject of a colonial experiment. Forcibly removed from his own tribe, he is adopted by Phillip whose initial aim is to groom him as a kind of intercultural ambassador. Displaced from his people, Arabadoo ultimately accepts Phillip as his guardian, referring to him as “Beanna,” meaning father.¹¹⁵ Drawing upon historical accounts from *The Fatal Shore* and other sources, Keneally’s text outlines the process of Arabadoo’s cultural

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Weeks, “The Question of Liz,” 152.

¹¹³ Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, 118-19; Max Stafford-Clark, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, August 22, 2013.

¹¹⁴ Billington, review of *Our Country’s Good*.

¹¹⁵ Keneally, *The Playmaker*, 137.

displacement. Dressed by Phillip in the clothing of a colonial officer, Arabanoo remains in the Governor-in-Chief's care, never returning to his tribe.

The treatment of the Aboriginal Australian in *Our Country's Good* was viewed by many critics as tokenistic.¹¹⁶ Unlike the novel, Wertenbaker's play does not include any active exchange between the Indigenous and British colonial communities, despite that she had explored this possibility when writing the play.¹¹⁷ Bush explains that Wertenbaker had initially wanted to allocate more space to exploring the relationship between British colonial and Indigenous cultures. Evidence of this is found in early draft material, in particular a scene in which an Aboriginal Australian and a convict attempt to communicate with one another, each speaking in their own language. Within this draft scene, both the convict and the Aboriginal Australian express their wish to "go home" – a mutual sentiment designed to highlight a shared status as "subjects" of the colonial experiment. As Bush explains, the ultimate omission of this material from *Our Country's Good* reflects Wertenbaker's realisation that she lacked "the language" to accurately represent the Aboriginal voice.¹¹⁸ Consequently, although the play does not ignore the question of colonial/Indigenous relations, the depiction of the Aboriginal Australian is vastly reduced. Verna Foster describes this as "a reduction [of the novelist's] treatment of colonization to four brief choric appearances by a lone bemused and ultimately diseased aboriginal," and while critics have broadly viewed this aspect of the play as being under-written, it is nonetheless worth considering further.¹¹⁹ In what follows, I argue that the very stripping away of the Aboriginal role to four brief choric appearances, Wertenbaker imbues the role, consciously or otherwise, with a metatheatrical function. Within this function lies the potential for a powerful social critique.

Wertenbaker's Aboriginal Australian appears in four short moments throughout the play. Upon the first appearance, which occurs in Act One scene two, Wertenbaker uses a metatheatrical scene title to establish the character's function from the outset. As the "Lone Aboriginal Australian describes the Arrival of the First Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788," he is established as both an on-stage audience to the colonial

¹¹⁶ For example, Ros Asquith, review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, *City Limits*, September 15, 1988; Peter Kemp, review of *Our Country's Good*; Billington, review of *Our Country's Good*.

¹¹⁷ Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, 119.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Verna N. Foster, "Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting," 418.

project and a character who exists outside of it.¹²⁰ From this moment, the Aboriginal Australian plays a similar role to that played by Hewett's Hummer sisters, appearing on the margins of the stage, and comparable to a Greek chorus (a point acknowledged by several critics) in his function of providing commentary on the events at hand.¹²¹ Soncini argues that this use of the Aboriginal Australian as an on-stage audience member foregrounds the act of viewing for the audience at-large.¹²² This metatheatrical strategy highlights the spectacle of the First Fleet's arrival and allows the audience to see the process of colonial arrival played out as though it is a theatrical event.¹²³ The language used by the Aboriginal Australian, along with his physical placement (always at a distance from other characters) enhances this effect.

The convict Fleet's arrival is described as a kind of other-worldly vision, or nightmare: a "dream which has lost its way."¹²⁴ As the Aboriginal man watches this historical event unfold, he interprets it using language evocative of Aboriginal "Dreaming" mythology.¹²⁵ This language signifies the character's use of his own cultural understandings as he attempts to make sense of the unfamiliar event before him. His conclusion, perhaps based on a sense of impending danger, is that it would be "best to leave it alone."¹²⁶

In writing this scene, Wertenbaker drew on research conducted during the Royal Court ensemble's workshop, in which the company had spoken with Thomas Keneally.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 2nd ed., 2. In the first edition the scene is titled "Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788." See Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 17. Despite their differing scene titles, the same action occurs in both editions.

¹²¹ For discussions of Wertenbaker's depiction of the Aboriginal see, for example, Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 92-93; Carlson, "Issues of Identity," 280-81; Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, 118-19.

¹²² Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 92-93. The foregrounding of the act of viewing can be seen to relate to Hornby's sixth tenet of metatheatre, the depiction of perception as a theme within the play. See Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, 32.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹²⁴ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 17.

¹²⁵ For discussion and definitions of Australian Aboriginal "Dreamtime," or "Dreaming," see A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974); "Creative Spirits: What is the 'Dreamtime' or 'The Dreaming?'" Creative Spirits website, accessed February 17, 2014, <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/spirituality/what-is-the-dreamtime-or-the-dreaming>. Here, Australian Aboriginal Mudrooroo's definition of 'Dreaming' is offered as follows: "'The Dreaming,' or 'the Dreamtime,' indicates a psychic state in which or during which contact is made with the ancestral spirits, or the law, or that special period of the beginning." It is noted that there is, in fact, no exact English equivalent for the ideas contained within this Indigenous spiritual concept.

¹²⁶ Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, 17.

¹²⁷ This is detailed in Stafford-Clark's *Letters to George*, in his account of the rehearsal of Monday June 13, 1988. See *Letters to George*, 59.

While talking to the cast in rehearsal, Keneally is said to have been “particularly helpful on [the subject of] Arabanoo and the aborigines,” with Stafford-Clark noting that “the confused and touching relationship between the liberal Governor [Phillip] and the first captured aborigine [Arabanoo, was] a successful theme in the novel.” As well as discussing Indigenous Australian spiritual beliefs and customs, the novelist had explained that “at first [the native inhabitants of Australia] imagined the white invaders were fallen stars.”¹²⁸

Wertenbaker’s use of the word “dream,” as well as evoking an idea relevant to Aboriginal culture, creates a link with another notion of “dreams.” Notably, dreams had been part of Keneally’s inspiration behind *The Playmaker*. The novelist had been drawn to the diaries kept by Lieutenant Ralph Clark, in which Clark describes the vivid and often disturbed dreams he experienced during the early days of settlement in Sydney Cove. Consequently, Clark’s dreams, and his attempts to purge himself of them, are incorporated into Keneally’s narrative in *The Playmaker*. Beyond this, dream imagery is central to the play’s metatheatrical staging of British colonial settlement. In describing the arrival and subsequent activity of the convict Fleet as a kind of dream, the Indigenous man casts the event into a kind of spiritual realm, a realm that, like theatre itself, is somehow suspended from everyday reality – a strange, magical event like the singing hair of Faustine in *Royal Show* or the night-time ceremonies of *Mukinupin*. Through his metatheatrical narrative, the Aboriginal Australian creates the analogy of the Fleet’s activities as a performance – specifically, the performance of British colonisation upon Australian shores.

The beginning of the play’s last scene represents an important moment in the Aboriginal Australian’s viewing experience. Here he questions the relationship between dreams and reality in his interpretation of the British community’s presence. By this time afflicted with smallpox, a disease unknown in Indigenous communities before British settlement, the Aboriginal man appeals to the off-stage, contemporary audience “Look. Oozing pustules on my skin, heat on my forehead. Perhaps we have been wrong all this time and this is not a dream after all.”¹²⁹ Not only does the character describe his condition, but by

¹²⁸ Ibid. During this visit, Keneally also talked about some of the “real-life” characters who were depicted in his book.

¹²⁹ Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good*, 51. For a discussion of the Aboriginal Australian’s last appearance in which he is “dying of smallpox, the most immediate consequence of the plague of British colonialism,” see Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 93.

directing the audience to “Look,” he once again highlights the act of viewing. Here, though, rather than outlining what he sees (as he has done in each previous appearance), the Aboriginal man turns the audience’s gaze upon himself for the first time. In viewing the dream that “is not a dream after all” but ultimately the historical event of Australia’s British colonisation, the audience is in this way invited, in the final scene, to consider the impact of colonisation upon the Indigenous people. The character’s metatheatrical direction of the audience to “Look” at him, effects both a different *kind* of viewing (as the subject of the gaze has changed) and a looking *back*, upon Australian history. Here the final scene’s title, “Backstage,” is significant and, to some extent, explains the limited representation this character throughout *Our Country’s Good*. The relegation of the Aboriginal Australian to this kind of “behind-the-scenes” appearance can be read as a comment on the minor part into which he has been cast by the British settlers. In this way, like the metatheatrical “backstage” performances of Hewett and Nowra’s plays, Wertenbaker’s metatheatrical depiction of the Aboriginal man operates as a comment on the marginalisation of Indigenous Australians both in the play’s historicised 1789 setting and beyond. Moreover, that the Aboriginal character belongs to the “other” world, a world outside the British colony, enables a kind of metatheatrical performance that challenges both his status as “other” and the dominant hegemony itself.

The Aboriginal man’s exclusion from the performance event (in both senses - both the convicts’ production of *The Recruiting Officer* and the performance of the new society that this performance represents), is emphasised in the lines that follow. Observing that the local tribespeople have gathered around before the pending production, the convicts remark:

- MARY. Are the savages coming to see the play as well?
 KETCH. They come around the camp because they’re dying:
 smallpox.
 MARY. Oh.
 SIDEWAY. I hope they won’t upset the audience.¹³⁰

Sideway’s comment relates, on one level, to the on-stage audience of the 1789 performance. On another level, however, it can be applied to the wider audience of the present-day viewer. If recognised by the viewer in the moment of performance (or even

¹³⁰ Wertenbaker, *Our Country’s Good*, 51.

afterwards) this comment may work to engage the audience in a critical reflection upon Indigenous Australians' marginalisation.

In expressing his concern about the audience's response to an Aboriginal presence, Sideway places the needs of the production, and arguably the colonial project, ahead of the Indigenous community who are visibly dying. As Soncini argues, this moment, in spite of its brevity, complicates the reading of the celebratory ending that follows. In her analysis of this scene she explains that "the convicts' solidarity," though enhanced significantly by their involvement in the theatrical project, "does not comprise their Indigenous fellow oppressed, who are therefore automatically banished from both the enjoyment of culture and the colony's social experiment."¹³¹

In an early draft of the play now held in the British Library, the convicts' concerns with the Indigenous presence at their first performance were even more detailed than they are in the play's published editions.¹³² Following Sideway's announcement that after his sentence he intends to "start a theatre company," Mary says "there are some sick aborigines around the stage, can we have them removed?"¹³³ The deletion of this line from the script before the Royal Court premiere can be seen to soften the play's critique, particularly as it alludes to the historical "removal" of Aboriginal people from Australian society due to sickness and by other means. Yet the deletion of the line between rehearsal and first production has not been accounted for in any relevant criticism to date. One possible explanation for this is that it may have been seen as likely to reduce audience sympathy for the character of Mary, or to detract too much from the play's celebratory ending. As demonstrated above, Wertenbaker uses the strategy of metatheatrical narration to encourage audience reflection on this subject. The fact that this reading, if realised, sits uncomfortably alongside the celebratory tones of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and the related mood of theatrical triumph that ends this play, ultimately demonstrates the play's capacity to hold multiple perspectives in tension. As the following discussion of approaches taken in production illustrates, this tension is a productive one in the sense that it invites reflection upon the play and ultimately upon society, long after the production ends.

¹³¹ Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 93.

¹³² Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, Draft Manuscript, MS PS3997, British Library, London.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 137.

3.7 THE METATHEATRE OF "THE ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN" IN PRODUCTION

The approach taken to the Aboriginal role was a major point of contrast between the Royal Court's Sydney production and the simultaneous production by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1989. Unlike the Melbourne production, Stafford-Clark's cast did not include an Indigenous Australian actor but rather maintained the original casting, as it did for the majority of roles. Thus, in Sydney as in London, the Aboriginal Australian was played by Jude Aduwudike, a British actor of Nigerian heritage, who also played Captain Watkin Tench and the convict Black Caesar. During the planning of the Royal Court's visit to the Sydney Theatre Company, the casting of a non-Indigenous actor in an Aboriginal role was perceived to be a potential problem by Richard Wherrett, then Artistic Director of the STC. Wherrett's concerns were acknowledged by Stafford-Clark in a facsimile sent in March 1989, three months before the company's tour. The British director writes:

I certainly understand your concern about the aboriginal role although I'm not sure how to set about resolving it. There seem to be three possible solutions: the first would be to confront criticism, say this is an English company and to point to the lack of aboriginal actors in London. A second could be, as you suggest, to re-cast. I am loath to do this as part of the impact with both pieces is in seeing a close company at work, and absorbing an eleventh actor with a few days rehearsal would work against that. Our budget is stretched already. A third possibility would be to drop the part altogether. I think it's one of the least successful themes of the play: ironically, we had therefore been preparing to expand the role! In any case, I will talk to Timberlake and the actors as soon as we begin rehearsals.¹³⁴

This letter, previously unexamined by scholars, highlights the Aboriginal role as a particular challenge in the cultural transfer of *Our Country's Good* to Australia. Wherrett's suggestion that the role be re-cast to incorporate an Indigenous actor is understandable in the Australian context of the Bicentennial celebrations that had just passed and which, as previously discussed, had been a site of particular anxiety for many Australians.¹³⁵ In making the suggestion that Stafford-Clark re-cast the role, Wherrett was

¹³⁴ Max-Stafford Clark to Richard Wherrett, facsimile March 30, 1989, Papers of the English Stage Company, THM/273/4/1/230, V&A Museum Theatre and Performance Archives.

¹³⁵ Also the fact that there were, at this time, a number of outstanding Indigenous actors working in Australian theatre. For a further discussion of the Australian Bicentennial contexts (beyond that offered in my Chapter One discussion of *Mukinupin*) see Denis O'Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair* (Crow's Nest, NSW: ABC Enterprises, 1991).

undoubtedly attempting to avoid a negative backlash against what, in the aftermath of the Bicentenary, viewed by some as commemorating two hundred years of Indigenous cultural dispossession, could be perceived as a further colonising project.¹³⁶ The fact that within Australian theatre at that time significant attempts had been made to ensure that Indigenous playwrights, actors and plays were given a place on the Australian stage, likely contributed to Wherrett's concern.¹³⁷

Stafford-Clark's focus on the importance of the British ensemble, a focus which was maintained in spite of Wherrett's concern, could be construed as an echo of the very colonial project that is played out in the final scene of *Our Country's Good*. Here, as in Wertebaker's "backstage" scene, the bonds between the British cast who had worked on the making of the production were privileged over and above the inclusion of an Indigenous Australian actor in the theatrical event. In a further colonising gesture, these concerns were countered by the British company, who emphasised in publicity material that this was a British, not an Australian production and that, as such, Australian audiences "shouldn't be looking for a specifically Australian experience."¹³⁸ In this way they reclaimed this moment of Australian history as particularly British.

While the British touring production was received in largely positive terms by Sydney reviewers, the Royal Court company's emphasis upon the contexts that had shaped the play originally did not prevent some critics from expressing anxieties about the colonising aspects of the project itself. Schafer, for example, has examined what she terms the unfortunate "reinscribing of empire and colonial politics" that occurred during the Royal Court's Australian tour, describing how, at the invitation of one of the British cast

¹³⁶ O'Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair*, x.

¹³⁷ As Elizabeth Schafer suggests, Helen Gilbert's analysis in "Monumental Moments: Michael Gow's *1841*, Stephen Sewell's *Hate*, Louis Nowra's *Capricornia* and Australia's Bicentenary," *Australasian Drama Studies* 24 (1994): 24-45 is relevant here, while Geoffrey Milne's account of the surge in production of "plays by and/or about Aboriginal people" is also pertinent. Milne, "Black and White in Australian Drama: Melbourne 1988," *Meridian* 9, no.1 (1990): 33-43. See Schafer, "Whose Country's Good?," *Anglo-Australian Bicentennial Exchange*, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13, no.2 (2010): 57.

¹³⁸ Stafford-Clark, cited in Schafer "Whose Country's Good?," 63. See also Michael Morley, "An Historic Double Playbill," *Financial Review*, June 2, 1989. Morley quotes Stafford-Clark's statement that:

An Australian audience shouldn't be looking for a specifically Australian experience – be it of prisons, or of the social history. Improvisation sessions have come from the performers' and director's own experiences and, inevitably, 'Australian' element were not as familiar to us. We were less able to explore that sort of experience. We would have liked, for example, to take the Aborigine-Governor relationship further, but that would have called for a type of understanding we couldn't tap into.

members, the “cast and audience at the matinee on 12 July stood in respect and marked the death of Laurence Olivier, by applauding him.”¹³⁹ This event, doubly commemorated via its reporting in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, exemplifies the way in which the production reinscribed empire by celebrating an icon of British theatre whose “relations with Australia” and Australian theatre, as Schafer argues, “were always in the high colonial vein.”¹⁴⁰

Although the Aboriginal Australian’s casting seems to have been accepted in Sydney on the understanding of this being a touring production, reviewer John Carmody observed that the treatment of the role itself seemed “gratuitous ...neither long nor artistically secure enough to make any worthwhile dramatic or ethical contribution to the play.”¹⁴¹ Carmody was also among the few critics to qualify the play’s depiction of the “first Australian play,” beginning his review with the observation that “theatre, in the form of the corroboree, has an exceedingly long history in this country; by contrast, English-language theatre is, according to our best records, precisely two hundred years old.”¹⁴²

In drawing attention to corroboree as an ancient cultural – and theatrical – practice, Carmody highlights a further colonising dimension of the Royal Court British tour. In a similar vein, Christine McPaul examines corroboree as one of the earliest forms of inter-cultural contact between Indigenous communities and British settlers, and also a continuing tradition in Australian theatre.¹⁴³ In relegating the Aboriginal Australian to the margins of the stage, Wertenbaker’s play occludes an acknowledgment of corroboree as both cultural practice (a form of theatre) and inter-cultural exchange. Moreover, given that the Royal Court’s repertory staging of *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country’s Good* was billed as commemorating the bicentenary of a colonial theatrical event, the

¹³⁹ Elizabeth Schafer, “Whose Country’s Good?,” 64.

¹⁴⁰ Review of *Our Country’s Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company, Sydney Theatre Company Wharf Theatre, Sydney, *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 13, 1989, cited in Schafer “Whose Country’s Good?,” 64.

¹⁴¹ John Carmody, “Convict Play Convincing.”

¹⁴² Ibid. See also Geoffrey Milne, “MTC’s Rewarding Repertory,” review of *Our Country’s Good*, directed by Roger Hodgman for the Melbourne Theatre Company, The Playhouse, Melbourne, *Herald*, June 7, 1989.

¹⁴³ Christine McPaul “Corroboree, Performativity and the Constructions of Identity in Australia c1788-2008,” (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2009).

production might be seen, in the same way as the Bicentenary of nation had been seen by many Australians in 1988, as a sidelining of Indigenous Australian culture.

While several critics have commented on the colonising dimensions of the Royal Court project, few have examined how the Aboriginal role was handled in the Australian production, nor how, when the metatheatrical dimensions of this role are realised to full effect, the role can lend a powerful element to the play's production.¹⁴⁴ The recent contribution to a chapter on stagings of *Our Country's Good*, written by Roger Hodgman (director of the MTC production), describes how this role was cast differently from its casting in the British touring production.¹⁴⁵ This casting, I suggest, reveals the metatheatrical potential of the role of the Aboriginal Australian, through which the play's critique of the process of British colonisation can best be realised in production.

The simultaneous timing of the 1989 Sydney and Melbourne seasons attracted considerable attention from reviewers, some of whom combined their assessment of each company's approach into a singular, comparative, review.¹⁴⁶ Most significant among the differences observed was the Melbourne Theatre Company's all-Australian casting, including popular Indigenous actor and musician Tom E. Lewis, who doubled as the Aboriginal Australian and Black Caesar. At the time of casting, Lewis was best known for his lead role in the 1978 film *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, a film that adapted Thomas Keneally's Booker-nominated novel of the same name. Also highly regarded for his theatrical roles, Lewis' casting brought a new emphasis to the role, lending it both authenticity and authority.¹⁴⁷

For reasons previously outlined, it is not surprising that Australian directors of *Our Country's Good* have wanted to make more of the Indigenous role. Hodgman, for one, was acutely aware that in the aftermath of the Bicentenary, many Australians had renewed appreciation for the fact that what to some had been a "celebration" had, to others, been

¹⁴⁴ Schafer, in "Whose Country's Good," offers a discussion of the role of the Aboriginal as realised in the MTC production but does not discuss its metatheatrical dimension.

¹⁴⁵ Hodgman, Rodger, "Our Country's Good in Melbourne," in Bush, *Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, 161-66.

¹⁴⁶ For example, see Rosemary Neil, "Another Searing Experience from Another Country," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Roger Hodgman for the Melbourne Theatre Company, The Playhouse, Melbourne, *Herald*, June 7, 1989.

¹⁴⁷ "Tommy Lewis: Biography," IMDB, accessed February 17, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0507835/>.

"the anniversary of an invasion and the beginning of a threat to their ancient civilization."¹⁴⁸ In discussing his direction of the 1989 MTC production, Hodgman describes how, rather than focusing on the fact that the role appeared to be "under-written," he tried to approach the play's inclusion of an Indigenous character as an opportunity to "at least touch upon this vital strand of our history."¹⁴⁹ Without altering Wertenbaker's dialogue in any way, Hodgman emphasised both the Aboriginal man's presence and, paradoxically, his marginalisation in the society depicted within the play. The casting of a well-known actor was one of the ways in which the character's presence was enhanced. In addition, rather than have the actor exit between his few brief speeches, Hodgman had Lewis remain on stage throughout. Highly visible, the Aboriginal Australian was perceived as a "powerful presence," "hovering at the fringes of most of the action," a contrast with the Royal Court's "minimal, perhaps token" representation.¹⁵⁰

Hodgman further extended the presence of the Aboriginal Australian by having Lewis incorporate sound into his performance. The actor/musician, whilst still visible in his position on the margins of the stage, played a didgeridoo as an aural motif throughout the play. Besides adding a strong, distinctive, Indigenous sound to the production, what is remarkable about this staging is the way in which it *physically* incorporated Indigenous performance into the play's own theatrical celebration. By staging Lewis' performance of the didgeridoo, Hodgman's production played out a resistance to the idea of the colonial performance as Australia's first theatre. Here, as a metatheatrical performance *within* a metatheatrical performance, the MTC acknowledged a theatrical tradition that long pre-dated the one celebrated in *Our Country's Good's* convict production.

The Melbourne Theatre Company's staging of the Aboriginal Australian was undoubtedly one of the factors that contributed to observations among reviewers that this production had a darker edge than the Royal Court production. Another, related, factor was the different approach that Hodgman took to staging the "backstage" scene. Feldman has discussed how this scene, as written by Wertenbaker, works to involve the theatre audience in the play's celebration of theatre and its transformative effect upon the convict

¹⁴⁸ Hodgman, "Our Country's Good in Melbourne," 163-64.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ John Larkin, "History, in Stages," review of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Roger Hodgman for the Melbourne Theatre Company, The Playhouse, Melbourne, *Sunday Press*, June 11, 1989; Neil, "Another Searing Experience from Another Country."

cast.¹⁵¹ In line with this view, the Royal Court production, as described above, showed the convict actors on stage, as though preparing to go out in front of a curtain (positioned up stage). The theatre audience was thus positioned as though they were part of the on-stage convict cast. From this vantage point, they were both included (and arguably swept up) in the convicts' preparations and excitement as the play ends and the production of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* begins.

While this approach to staging encourages the audience to participate in the exciting energies of the backstage moment, a different approach, as taken in the Melbourne production, invites a more qualified response. Here the staging was reversed to show the convict cast upstage, facing the theatre audience who thereby became analogous with the audience of the 1789 convict production. Oakley, reviewing the production, argued that the result was "anti-climactic"—suggesting that the celebratory energies of the play were complicated by this change in spectatorial position.¹⁵² However, positioned this way, audience members were forced to take up the subject position of a British convict and, as a result, were also implicated in the marginalisation and exclusion of the Aboriginal man. Carlson argues:

because this second staging maintains a traditional distance – and a tension between those on stage and those off, and because it conflates those in the audience with the oppressive colonizer, it is more in keeping with the hard edge of the Melbourne production.¹⁵³

As demonstrated in these key differences between the British and Australian productions of 1989, Wertebaker's play resonates in differing ways depending on the approach taken in its staging. In particular, the treatment of metatheatrical dimensions including the "backstage" scene and the Aboriginal character, can impact upon the extent to which the play is received as celebratory, critical, or indeed as Soncini argues, both.¹⁵⁴ Soncini maintains that, even when the backstage scene is presented from its more engaging perspective, locating the audience alongside Wertebaker's convict actors:

[the play's] festive ending could be understood as a shrewd trick to involve, and thereby implicate the audience. It is upon leaving the

¹⁵¹ Feldman, *Dramas of the Past*, 153.

¹⁵² Barry Oakley, "A Review of Two Cities," review of *Our Country's Good* directed by Max Stafford Clark for the English Stage Company, Melbourne and Sydney, *The Independent Monthly*, July 1989, cited in Carlson, "Issues of Identity," 282.

¹⁵³ Carlson, "Issues of Identity," 282.

¹⁵⁴ Soncini, *Playing with(in) the Restoration*, 95–96.

auditorium that disturbingly mixed feelings about the meaning of one's response to *Our Country's Good* begin to surface.¹⁵⁵

It is in this post-show reflection, the critic argues, that audiences are best able to reflect upon the play and here, too, that they realise that the celebration of theatre is at once a celebration of its transformative powers, its colonising powers, and a comment on its exclusion of Indigenous Australian culture.

3.8 CONCLUSION

While *Our Country's Good* offers a celebration of theatre and theatricality that was compelling in its original contexts, over time and particularly in its Australian production contexts, more critical elements connected with colonial and post-colonial themes have become salient. This discussion has illustrated the importance of the play's metatheatrical strategies in realising these themes in production. In particular, the recognition of the Aboriginal Australian as a vital metatheatrical component of the play opens up opportunities for more nuanced productions of *Our Country's Good*. This chapter identifies the rehearsal-within-the-play as both a variation of Hornby's first metatheatrical tenet, the play-within-the-play, and as part of a longstanding metatheatrical tradition. Moreover, in identifying the importance of the play's depiction of "backstage" and the Aboriginal Australian as a kind of narrator and on-stage audience member, it raises the question of whether these strategies might be added to Hornby's list of possible metatheatrical approaches, or whether indeed these techniques are particularly important in the Australian context. The depiction of "backstage" realms in *Mukinupin* and *Royal Show*, along with Hewett's depiction of the Hummer sisters as narrators and on-stage audience members, points to this possibility – at least in the plays considered in the present thesis. Finally, this chapter has demonstrated *Our Country's Good's* contribution to Australian metatheatre despite (and in some respects because of) its British origins. Indeed, the common metatheatrical history shared by this work and the other plays examined in this thesis has highlighted the fact that an understanding of the nature of Australian metatheatre is best achieved through a consideration of the broad historical and international landscape of which it is a part.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

CHAPTER FOUR: PETA MURRAY'S *THINGS THAT FALL OVER* – AN (ANTI-) MUSICAL OF A NOVEL INSIDE A READING OF A PLAY, WITH FOOTNOTES, AND ORATORIO AS CODA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

First performed in 2014 at the Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne, Peta Murray's newest play is an innovative metatheatrical work that takes the audience "backstage" into the process of mature-age female artistic practice. Originally written as part of an MA in practice-led research awarded by Queensland University of Technology (2012), the script (Appendix D) is provocatively titled: *Things That Fall Over – an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*.¹⁵⁶

In its feminist aims and stylistic hybridity, Murray's play continues and extends the dramatic legacy forged by Hewett in the mid-twentieth century. Murray's staging of female voice upon the contemporary Australian stage both recalls and responds to the tragedy of Hewett's best-known and most autobiographical heroine, Sally Banner who, in *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), lamented "I had a tremendous world in my head, and more than three quarters of it will be buried with me."¹⁵⁷ By staging the process of writing and performing her own work as a mature-aged, female, artist, Murray uses metatheatrical performance to perform the challenges faced by those who, like Sally Banner, continue to struggle within the contemporary theatrical and social contexts of artistic practice.

This chapter examines the "genesis" of *Things That Fall Over* (TTFO) as a response to a perceived artistic crisis, both in Murray's own career and in the conditions for theatrical production in Australia more broadly. It argues that, unlike Hewett, who responded to a similar crisis by metatheatrically re-working the conventional form of the comic romantic Shakespearean ending (as seen in *Mukinupin*), Murray responds by creating a work that is at once metatheatrical, paratheatrical, explosive in the sense that it breaks open the boundaries of theatre itself, and thoroughly original.¹⁵⁸ Embodying and questioning

¹⁵⁶ Murray, "TTFO: Final Draft." (Appendix D).

¹⁵⁷ Hewett, *The Chapel Perilous*, 88.

¹⁵⁸ I am using the term paratheatrical in a manner that relates to, but varies slightly from, the definition of paratheatrical offered by Patrice Pavis in his *Dictionary of the Theatre* (1998). Drawing on four discrete uses of the term throughout the late twentieth century, Pavis suggests it "refers to a dramatic activity –

theatrical traditions and new textual forms, this work guides its audience through the messy, protracted, amorphous and ultimately ephemeral process of theatre making and demonstrates the importance of female artistic practice historically, in relation to the current moment and for the future.

The first and most important point to note here is that, at the time of submitting this thesis, Murray's play boasts neither a published script nor a formal archival history, though the reporting of its creative development through social media networks and a blog has generated an archive in the making. Why, then, consider a work that is "incomplete" and so slippery for definition? Unlike the three plays considered previously in the thesis, I first encountered *this* play not through a performance, script or written archive, but through a personal discussion – a "backstage" encounter of sorts. Discussing my thesis topic with a friend who was, at that time, a theatrical agent, she was reminded of a play that had recently come into her office and which my reflections on Australian metatheatre caused her to recall.¹⁵⁹ At that time, Peta Murray's work was going through a process of creative development. Having received some funding from the Australia Council and other sources, Murray was working with actors and a composer to build and refine the script that she had first written as part of an MA thesis in practice led research. I subsequently contacted Murray and arranged an interview.¹⁶⁰ Conducted in April 2013 (see Appendix E), this interview became the starting point for my analysis of *Things That Fall Over* as an emerging, innovative and contemporary work of metatheatre.¹⁶¹

Although it can be located within the tradition of Australian metatheatre outlined in this thesis, *Things That Fall Over* is remarkable in a number of respects, one of which is its

theatrical in a loose sense," which "happens outside the mainstream." Where my description of Murray's play as paratheatrical differs from Pavis' definition is in his suggestion that paratheatrical activities are not carried out with the aim of producing an "aesthetic creation." Murray's play was written with the aim of being performed as a work of theatre, yet its generic hybridity and mutability, qualities that I will discuss further, take it beyond the boundaries of the performed event. Pavis also refers to twentieth-century Avant Garde theatre practitioner Grotowski's use of the term paratheatre, describing Grotowski's movement, during the latter part of his career, towards exploring a kind of sociological, participatory "theatre" that incorporates its audience more fully. This approach suggests a breaking down of boundaries between a performance and the social world out of which it has emerged. I suggest that Murray's play, in its paratheatrical openness, performs a similar function, both in including its audience into the performance and in its incorporation of mechanisms via which the play extends itself, more than usual, into the social world; cf. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 249-250.

¹⁵⁹ For Hilary Linstead and Associates, theatrical management agency based in Sydney, Australia. See <http://www.hlamgt.com.au/>.

¹⁶⁰ Funding sources included the Besen Foundation and funds raised through private donations.

¹⁶¹ Peta Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, April 5, 2013, Appendix E.

existence outside the realm of state-subsidised theatre. Murray's play is the only one of the four discussed in this thesis that was not written out of a commission by a subsidised theatre company. As I have noted previously, *The Man from Mukimupin* was commissioned by Stephen Barry, for the National Theatre Perth's commemoration of the sesquicentenary, *Royal Show* was commissioned by Jim Sharman for performance by another state theatre ensemble, *Lighthouse Theatre Company*, while *Our Country's Good* was commissioned by Max Stafford-Clark for performance by actors at the Royal Court, London.

One of aims of this thesis is to demonstrate how, in the Australian production contexts of the plays considered, metatheatrical offers subversive reflections upon Australian culture, while also locating the works themselves within a tradition of Australian metatheatrical. In the three plays discussed previously, subcultures or marginalised groups including war veterans, artists, women and Indigenous Australians have been depicted within metatheatrical ceremonies, narrative choral roles or performances-within-the-play. These metatheatrical frameworks have been shown to generate a number of perspectives and possible meanings. For example, in *Mukimupin*, the depiction of the Aboriginal girl, Lily Perkins, within the night-time ceremonials, highlights her marginal status within Australian society but also encourages comparison of this treatment of race with the treatment of other groups (such as the war veteran) who are represented in the same ceremonials. A similar effect is at play in *Royal Show*, in which marginalised individuals (again including an Aboriginal girl and a war veteran) are members of the freak show that is performed after the end of the day's business. As shown in Chapter Two, Nowra challenges the way in which Australian society receives and casts those who are different. By showing the *Royal Show's* "freaks" backstage in the throes of everyday conversations and rituals, he challenges the audience to look beyond the socially constructed freak personae to the humanity underlying the performance.

Another metatheatrical function at play within the works discussed above is seen in the way in which Hewett, Nowra and Wertenbaker all complicate traditional dramatic structures to create endings that are open and in which catharsis is, at some level, denied. This was seen in *Our Country's Good* where the exclusion of the Aboriginal from the audience of the metatheatrical performance-within-the-play sits uncomfortably (and, as it was argued, intentionally so) with the play's otherwise celebratory ending. Similarly, in

Mukinupin, Hewett presents what on the surface appears to be a kind of Shakespearean comic romantic ending, the conflicts of the main plot being resolved in the double wedding of Act Two. However, I have argued that the playwright offsets the comedy and catharsis afforded by this ending with her depiction of Harry Tuesday and Touch of the Tar in a contrasting wedding ceremony performed by night. By casting doubt upon the notion of the outcasts' future happiness, Hewett plants questions and doubts in the minds of her play's audience.

In all three plays, such questions and doubts are generated via the incorporation of metatheatrical techniques and, in this sense, all three plays have been shown to embody a Brechtian function of generating critical reflection, specifically on the connections between the dramatic worlds depicted within them, and contemporary society. In light of this argument, metatheatre has been shown to perform a kind of opening or illuminating function whereby the works' possible meanings are laid open for broader consideration; the plays are also laid open, metatheatrically, in the sense that by referencing other metatheatrical works, they locate themselves within a broader (metatheatrical) landscape.

Although Murray employs techniques similar to those used by Hewett, Nowra and Wertenbaker, *Things That Fall Over* offers a unique perspective on Australian metatheatre and, indeed, theatre itself, in the new millennium. This is seen, in particular, in the play's engagement with recent technologies, along with the unique way in which it involves its audience. Like *Mukinupin*, *Royal Show* and *Our Country's Good*, Murray's work uses metatheatre to challenge conventional notions of dramatic resolution. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which it does this; whereas the previous works are in some sense contained (even by the theatrical conventions that they partially subvert), *Things That Fall Over* embraces both openness and open-endedness so thoroughly that, at times, it is difficult to pin down. Using the metaphor of women's handicrafts (a metaphor that will be discussed later in this chapter), Murray's play can be seen to turn the tapestry of theatre making inside out, revealing the loose threads behind the making.

The study of Murray's play thus poses challenges for the academic researcher on account of its very openness and fluidity. Whereas, traditionally, the researcher's role is contingent upon her ability to occupy a position of relative detachment, the nature of Murray's play, as an evolving and open weave of texts, challenges the extent to which

such detachment is possible. In my own experience as researcher and observer for the recent premiere performance in Melbourne, objectivity was complicated by my last-minute incorporation into the production team as a volunteer usher.¹⁶² While a traditional view of the researcher's function might assume my perspective on the performance to have been limited by competing demands and perspectives, in fact what was gained from this experience, was a deeper insight into the complexities and challenges of female arts practice. By taking on the dual roles of participant/researcher, I was able to experience, first hand (though arguably to a lesser extent than that of the performers, playwright and other participants) the nature of women's theatre in which participants so often take on multiple roles.¹⁶³ As the following discussion of *Things That Fall Over* will illustrate, it is these very challenges that Murray both describes and embodies within her epic play.

In using the term "epic," I refer to both the dramaturgical structure of Murray's work and its ambitious, or epic, scale. In the former sense, *Things That Fall Over* bears some of the dramaturgical hallmarks of Brechtian epic dramaturgy, which Janelle Reinelt (drawing on Brecht's own writings) describes as applying to plays that have an episodic scene structure and in which the "knots" or seams between scenes are "easily noticed."¹⁶⁴ Reinelt acknowledges that such epic scene structures, while most often associated with Brechtian theatre, can also be traced to earlier dramatic traditions, including Shakespeare "whose interest and importance for Brecht" has been widely acknowledged.¹⁶⁵ Murray's epic work can, in this sense, as well as in its grandeur of scope and ambition, be seen to take on a Shakespearean quality that in the Australian context demonstrates her play's continuance of the legacy laid out by Hewett in the 1970s.

In order to understand the nature of Murray's new work, as well as its relevance to the discussion of Australian metatheatre, it is necessary to consider its performance iterations and evolution. This chapter therefore begins with an outline of the work in its recent premiere performance in Melbourne. This outline is detailed, since the play has not yet

¹⁶² Arranged by email correspondence between Peta Murray and Rebecca Clode, February 20, 2014.

¹⁶³ For a discussion of this phenomenon, see for example Peta Tait who, in *Converging Realities*, discusses how women playwrights including British writer Bryony Lavery are often required to take on additional roles including, in Lavery's own account, as producers. Peta Tait, *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1994), 81-83.

¹⁶⁴ Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 9. Reinelt also explains that after initially defining his theatrical approach as "epic," Brecht "overthrew this nomenclature for the appellation "dialectical theatre." Nonetheless, she argues, "we know Brechtian theater as epic theater, and many British theater workers also think about their own tradition as epic," 9.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

been published. My synopsis will be followed by a closer examination of the play's lengthy title, including its incorporation of irony, the way in which it demonstrates the playwright's use *within* the play of multiple registers, and the idea of paratexts. A third section of the chapter will then be used to outline the play's origins and constituent texts. Here, in demonstrating the work's openness, topicality and capacity to evolve, I argue that *Things That Fall Over* represents a new type of self-reflection within Australian theatre. Specifically, I suggest that through its generic hybridity and constant evolution, this play explodes the spatial and temporal boundaries of theatre while articulating its very essence. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the play's metatheatrical functions. These include its narrative dimensions, embodied variously by Murray herself and by an Indigenous character, The Weaver.

4.2 THE PREMIERE PERFORMANCE

The first performance of *Things That Fall Over* (TTFO) was held on Saturday 1st March 2014 at the Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne.¹⁶⁶ Staged as a community theatre event, the performance was part of the Arts Centre's week long celebration of International Women's Day, a "global day" of celebration held annually on the 8th of March, in recognition of "the economic, political and social achievements of women in the past, present and future."¹⁶⁷ With its dominant theme of mature-aged female arts practice and a cast of more than 30 women, *Things That Fall Over* was clearly an appropriate selection for the Arts Centre's programme, the slogan of which (connected with the aims of Women's Day) was "Women, Art, Politics."¹⁶⁸ The production took the form of a three act play reading, followed by an outdoor performance of its related, metatheatrical, "oratorio-as-coda."¹⁶⁹ A discussion of the way in which the work was presented in this world premiere highlights the play's social and political agency, its use

¹⁶⁶ *Things That Fall Over* and TTFO are both abbreviations of the much longer title which, as mentioned, I will discuss later in the chapter.

¹⁶⁷ Note, the Footscray Community Arts Centre's most commonly used abbreviation is the acronym FCAC. However, I have used other abbreviations, such as "Arts Centre" in fitting with the flow of my discussion. For discussion of International Women's Day, see "History of International Women's Day," accessed April 10, 2014, <https://unwomen.org.au/iwd/history-international-womens-day>.

¹⁶⁸ Peta Murray, "Artist's Talk," *Things That Fall Over: an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*, archival recording of premiere performance on March 1, 2014, filmed and edited by Sue Roberts (Melbourne: Luminescence Films, 2014), DVD.

¹⁶⁹ As I will discuss later, the "oratorio-as-coda," mentioned within Murray's lengthy play title, involved the performance of a related, though detachable, work entitled *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!*

of space in generating an embodied experience of its feminist concerns and, relatedly, the way in which it involved the audience, metatheatrically, in its story-telling.

The performance, which incorporated both an interval and a community picnic dinner, ran for a total of five hours, commencing at 5pm and concluding at 10pm. It was staged as a promenade theatrical event, in which performers and invited audience members started out in one of the Arts Centre's indoor spaces and moved progressively through different areas and rooms within the centre as the narrative unfolded. At the outset, the 80 audience members (a maximum stipulated by the capacity of some of the spaces used within the production) obtained their pre-booked tickets from the Arts Centre's Warehouse foyer. Here they were invited to view the visual art exhibition in the adjacent Roslyn Smorgon Gallery; entitled "Transience," this exhibit featured work by a group of migrant and refugee female artists and, like Murray's work, had been programmed as part of the week's celebration of Women's Arts.¹⁷⁰

The play began in the Arts Centre's "Performance Space," a black-box studio theatre adjoining the foyer and gallery. Once admitted to the space (by volunteer ushers, including myself) the audience were seated, end on, in raked seating. The first part of the performance involved an unexpected, *seemingly* unscheduled "Artist's Talk" which took the form of an address of some 15 minutes delivered by the playwright; this dramaturgical moment could be said to reflect a traditional metatheatrical device, the dramatic prologue.¹⁷¹ Using this construct, Murray addressed the audience directly, welcoming them to the Footscray Community Arts Centre from behind a spot-lit lectern. In the moments that followed, the playwright constructed a thinly veiled pretence that, due to mitigating circumstances (what she claimed was a suddenly "terrible" situation outside, missing actors and other last-minute production glitches), the show would not be able to proceed as planned. The fact that this was a performance, if not *immediately* apparent, was soon clarified by Murray's increasingly absurd and ironic staging of her attempt to

¹⁷⁰ "Transience," exhibition of work by women migrant and refugee artists, Roslyn Smorgon Gallery, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne, March 2-16, 2014, opening March 1, website accessed on April 10, 2014, <http://footscrayarts.com/event/transience>.

¹⁷¹ Pavis traces the prologue to Ancient Greek drama, in which it "was originally the first part of the action before the first appearance of the chorus." According to Pavis, this dramatic device was commonly used until the advent of dramatic realism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, he suggests, "the prologue began to disappear, as it was felt to detract from the theatrical fiction." It has "resurfaced" in "expressionist," "epic" and other forms of non-illusionist theatre. Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, 288-89.

create order out of chaos. As the playwright suggested that she offer a “talk” in lieu of the promised performance, it became clear that this was, ultimately, a part of the story of *Things That Fall Over*.

Within her “prologue,” Murray introduced *TTFO* as a play that had begun out of an academic interest in women’s artistic practice, including her own experience as a mature-aged female playwright. In doing so, she touched upon the challenges, and therein “Politics,” of trying to write a large scale female ensemble work, for performance in Australia in 2014. These challenges were encapsulated in the “prologue’s” artifice of a project that had ultimately failed – “reduced” to a description, or lecture on what “might have been” had more resources been available to the artists involved.¹⁷²

Using the format of the lecture, possibly a symbol of her own recent attempt to forge a space for her creative expression in the Academy, Murray described her experience of trying, and seemingly failing, to produce the work at hand. This was highlighted via a photographic display of slides projected throughout her talk, demonstrating various stages in the creative development of the play that had, apparently, “fall[en] over.” Accompanied by an ironic commentary from the playwright, this display demonstrated how, despite the best efforts of the women involved, the project had struggled to find sufficient funding within the contemporary theatrical and political context. As Murray explained “we’ve just realised that a work of this scale with a company of this nature just isn’t right for the times.”¹⁷³

The political tone of the play, as a comment on conditions faced by women artists, was established from the outset. Identifying *herself* as the Artist, or “Architect,” of the work at hand, Murray pulled out a sash embossed with the slogan “Unfunded Excellence,” which she donned in a performance and statement of her position.¹⁷⁴ Qualifying her political comment with an acknowledgement of those funding bodies which *had* lent some support to the project, notably the City of Maribyrnong and the Besen Family

¹⁷² Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TTFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ The title of “Architect” is also reflective of Murray’s view of her particular approach to playwriting. In her April 2013 interview (Appendix E), Murray explained that “...I’m a writer who works very much with structure. If I’m talking about being a playwright and why I became a playwright I always say ‘I’m a carpenter’s daughter.’ My dad was a builder. And when I write plays I think of building something, and the shapes and the physics and geometry of the construction. [These] are really big things for me.”

Foundation, Murray quipped that the wording on the slogan was a “typographical error,” meant to have said “*Underfunded Excellence*.”¹⁷⁵

The image of the playwright draped in the sash was, like the work about to unfold on stage, complex, ironic and contradictory (see fig. 4.1). Wearing it behind the lectern, Murray invoked a visual reference to the suffragettes.¹⁷⁶ The image of the playwright standing on-stage in her sash suggested, on another level, the idea of a too-old and too-articulate contestant in a beauty pageant and a theatrical echo of Dorothy Hewett’s aging Shirley Temple grotesque, Bobbie Le Brun. Here, the idea of pageantry was at once highlighted by the royal purple colour of the sash and undermined by the statement of the artist’s, and the work’s, “un(der)funded” status. In addition, Murray, unlike the refined, composed, *stereotypical*, female pageant contestant, was visibly flustered by the circumstances of the scene in which, aided by a series of messages sent from actors off stage, she continued to act out a situation in which the attempt to stage her play was coming undone.



Fig. 4.1. The Artist’s Talk. Peta Murray addresses the audience. From the premiere performance of *Things That Fall Over*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, March 1, 2014. Photograph by Lucy Crossett.

As the lecture progressed, with Murray insisting on several occasions that she was eager to continue her talk, it became apparent that the stage was being gradually infiltrated by an external, theatrical element. With each attempt to return to her lecture on the “story” of *Things That Fall Over*, Murray was halted by staged interruptions from outside the Performance Space. Following text messages received on the playwright’s mobile phone

¹⁷⁵ Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

¹⁷⁶ One of the iconic items of apparel worn by the suffragettes was the sash worn diagonally across the torso. For pictorial examples see Diane Atkinson in association with the Museum of London, *The Suffragettes in Pictures* (UK: The History Press, 2010).

reporting “worsening conditions” and still “missing” actors from the cast of *TTFO*, the action was further interrupted by the arrival of Caroline Lee, an actor claiming to be part of the rehearsal of a work titled *Swansong* currently taking place outside.¹⁷⁷ Lee was soon joined by others from the *Swansong* cast and crew, swarming the performance space in apparent need of refuge (fig. 4.2). While tending to various injuries supposedly sustained “outside,” the women explained their predicament to Murray. Murray, in turn, related the situation to the audience, informing them that the rehearsal of *Swansong* had come under siege by an unnamed but seemingly authoritative force.

The playwright explained that, in connection with recently implemented “anti-protest” laws in the state of Victoria, the *Swansong* rehearsal had attracted attention as a form of “unlawful assembly.”¹⁷⁸ This satirical reference to the laws introduced by conservative Liberal Premier Denis Naphine in early 2014 was immediately recognised by the Melbourne audience, who laughed appreciatively here, as during other moments of political reference throughout the play. Murray went on to explain that, in the course of the raid of the *Swansong* rehearsal, “all their scripts [had] been stolen”¹⁷⁹ and key actors, including one known as “The Weaver,” had gone missing. As the remaining actors from *Swansong* took refuge in the Performance Space, the playwright asserted that everyone, including the audience, would have to remain inside for their own safety. Murray proposed that whilst taking shelter in the theatre, the actors and audience members present might attempt to restore as much as they could of the *Swansong* performance. Here the connection to *TTFO*, the supposedly abandoned work, was finally elucidated as Murray explained that in order to “capture” *Swansong*, they would need to “go through *Things That Fall Over*.”¹⁸⁰ “So what we’re going to do,” the playwright explained, “is give you a reading or some sense of the work and we’re just going to ‘soldier on,’ as we do, ‘soldier on.’”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TTFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid; Michael Safi, “Victoria’s anti-protest laws pass lower house by one vote,” *Guardian*, Feb 20, 2014, Australian edition, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/20/victorian-anti-protest-laws-pass-lower-house>.

¹⁷⁹ Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TTFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Possibly another reference to the suffragettes.



Fig. 4.2. The Arrivals. Nursie (far right) played by Caroline Lee ministers to injured actors and production crew from the *Swansong* rehearsal outside. From the premiere performance of *Things That Fall Over*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, March 1, 2014, Photograph by Lucy Crossett.

Having now established the premise of reading *TTFO* as a means of reclaiming *Swansong*, Murray called upon any actors present among the audience to assist them in their task of conducting the staged reading. Here the extent of the playwright's dramatic contrivance was fully revealed as actor Tracy Bourne stepped forward to volunteer, claiming to have "found" a script of *TTFO* on her way to the theatre. Elsewhere in the audience were a choir of female cast members who would later come forward to perform roles, in both *TTFO* as the story of the "making-of," and *Swansong*, the play-within-the-play and work that is, ultimately, made. In the remaining four and a half hours and in a journey that took them through a labyrinth of corridors, stairwells and rooms before finally ending outside in the public amphitheatre, the cast and audience participated in the production of *Things That Fall Over*.

The play is set in a hypothetical future and revolves around a central female character, a writer named Verity. Besides standing in its own right as a female name used not infrequently throughout the twentieth century, this name signifies, in its meaning of "truth," the character's ongoing attempt to express herself against a political background hostile to her cause.¹⁸² Though already elderly at the outset of the play, Verity is heavily pregnant, a metaphor that Murray, while admitting to be somewhat "obvious," uses to

¹⁸² The name Verity is particularly suitable for this character in a play about mature-age female artists in the sense that it is more common among older women than younger women. As defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, from Anglo-Norman and Old French *verite*, *veritet*. "Without article. Truth, either in general or with reference to a particular fact." "verity, n." OED Online. June 2014. Accessed April 1, 2014 (Oxford University Press). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/222535?redirectedFrom=verity&>

feminise her depiction of the process of artistic “conception” and production.¹⁸³ In the course of the drama, set over three acts or “folios,” Verity delivers a “trilogy” of written works, aided by a team of female creatives. Each “folio” (a literary reference signifying the play’s cross-genre playfulness) concerns the production of one creative output. Folio One is set in Verity’s “Private Residence” and depicts the production of a novella called “An ‘Inkling.’” Folio Two is set in a “Sanitarium” guarded by men and depicts the production of a sequel. This is titled “A Fantasia on International Themes,” an ironic intertextual reference to the second part of American playwright Tony Kushner’s contemporary two-part epic play *Angels in America*. In Folio Three, Verity takes shelter in a “Safe Haven” for female writers after an edict passed down from “Emperor Phoney Rabbit” (rhyming slang for Tony Abbott) sees the writer and her companions flee the Sanitarium.¹⁸⁴ The output of the third folio is Verity’s final work, *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* In this performance on March 1st, Folios One and Two were performed in rooms within the Warehouse basement, with Folio Three taking place in the adjacent historic building, Henderson House.

In moving the action and, with it, her audience, throughout these spaces, Murray created an experience in which viewers were immersed in the same progressive journey as the characters of her play. After moving from the Performance Space to the smaller, confined basement space, of “Mario’s Studio,” the audience witnessed Verity (played by Margaret Dobson) in the agonies of creative production as she attempted to produce her first volume, a novella. Given the genre of her output (finally produced at the end of Folio One), it was fitting that this action be set in Verity’s “Private Residence,” seemingly a reference to eighteenth and nineteenth century notions of women’s domesticity and the heyday of the novel. While Folio Two was also set within the Warehouse basement, space was used in the two scenes of *this* folio to encapsulate a later nineteenth century notion of gendered social control. Here, in the “Sanitarium” which turns out, in fact, to be a prison for women writers, Verity awaits the delivery of the two remaining volumes of her trilogy. Murray’s setting, along with the two spaces used for these scenes, took the audience on a journey from the questionable safety of the Sanitarium (performed in the foyer adjacent to Mario’s Studio) to a dark basement theatre space, “Enza’s Studio,” down

¹⁸³ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 3.

¹⁸⁴ Here, again, Murray employs political satire as she hints at worsened conditions for women artists under the contemporary Liberal Prime Ministership of Tony Abbott.

the hall. Within the action of Folio Two, this was referred to as “The Bindery.”¹⁸⁵ This space was fitting since in this, the bleakest scene of the play, Verity and the group of “pregnant creatives” (played on March 1st by the choir members dispersed amongst the audience) are bound and gagged in a staging of the politically motivated silencing of female artists. As their books are burned, following the edict passed down by Phoney Rabbit, the lives of the women are seen to be in immediate peril. Yet moments prior to their pending demise, the women, visited by the aforementioned Weaver of *Swansong*, stage a passive resistance by humming a tune of consolation led by the Weaver herself (fig. 4.3). Against the powerful soundscape of this, a rendition of a cadence from Brahms Opus 52, the play reaches its climax as Verity’s muse, Orla/Orlando (a reference to Virginia Woolf’s “mutable gendered” hero/ine), arrives by helicopter and, in a *deus ex machina* style contrivance, stages a rescue.¹⁸⁶ The women, all barring the Weaver who remains behind in a commitment to protesting the system, are then transported to the “Safe Haven.”¹⁸⁷



Fig. 4.3. The Weaver (Lisa Maza, left) leads the women, bound and gagged, in humming a song of consolation. From the premiere performance of *Things That Fall Over*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, March 1, 2014. Photograph by Lucy Crossett.

If Folios Two and Three evoke conditions for women writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, then Folio Three takes its action, and with it the

¹⁸⁵ I use the term questionable because, as the site of gendered social control it is doubtful that the Sanitarium is genuinely intended to suggest a place of safety.

¹⁸⁶ In her April 2013 interview, Murray explained that what appealed to her about this piece of music was the idea of a solo female being supported by a male chorus. She was also struck by a particular lyric, from Goethe, regarding the difficulty of finding a suitable “lyric in [one’s] hymn book” to express a human experience. Sung by the female soloist, this lyric resonated with the ideas Murray was grappling with at the time of writing her play. Peta Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 20.

¹⁸⁷ Where, in the premiere performance on March 1, 2014, the play resumed after an interval.

audience, into a spatial embodiment of a twentieth century perspective. Here, the “Safe Haven” for women, operates in clear reference to Virginia Woolf’s narrative essay and iconic feminist work, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).¹⁸⁸ This text is fitting as it demonstrates Murray’s own concerns regarding particular challenges faced by women writers. Like Woolf in her now famous claim for a woman writer’s need for resources (specifically, spatial and financial), *Things That Fall Over* responds to contemporary deficits in both of these essentials. Beyond the comments offered in her explanatory prologue, articulating the difficulty of funding this project, Murray’s depiction of the Safe Haven in Folio Three dramatises Woolf’s perceived need for women to have access to spaces for creative work. Moreover, Murray’s Safe Haven, as a site for women’s productivity, offers a broad, political, statement of both women’s rights to safety and their right to occupy space in twenty first century Australian society, via free speech and creative expression. It is also possible that in a broader sense the Safe Haven was intended as a reference to women’s refuges from domestic violence, the development of such spaces being an important dimension of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸⁹ Notably, the celebration of International Women’s Day in 1974 was soon followed by the establishment of Australia’s first refuge for women and children.

In the March 1st performance, 2014, the rescue from the Sanitarium was effected using a remote control toy helicopter to suggest the mode of transportation by which the women were taken from the Bindery to the Safe Haven. After an interval, the performance resumed in Henderson House, a heritage building located across the lawn from the previous performance spaces. This gave embodied form to the play’s progression to a new, distinctive space that recalls Woolf’s argument in *Room* by showing the ways in which the women of the Haven were able to thrive creatively once they had a space in which to work. Murray’s claim to free speech for women writers was further highlighted in a statement she presented during this interval, immediately prior to her play’s depiction of the Safe Haven (Henderson House) in Folio Three. Speaking in the foyer, alongside the exhibition of women migrant and refugee artworks, Murray delivered a statement

¹⁸⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2002). In *TTFO*, the Safe Haven is given the name “Saint Christabel and Saint Germaine’s Haven for Late Bloomers.” Murray explains in a footnote that it is named for feminist icons Christabel Pankhurst and Germaine Greer. See Murray, “*TTFO*: Final Draft,” 81.

¹⁸⁹ The first Australian Women and Children’s refuge was established in 1974 in Glebe, Sydney. See “History,” Domestic Violence NSW. Accessed July 21, 2014 <http://www.womensrefuge.org.au/victim-resources/history>, accessed on 21/07/2014.

that she had pledged to read as part of her membership of a group named “Writers for Refugees,” opposing the system of mandatory detention of asylum seekers upheld by the current Australian government.¹⁹⁰ In so doing, she reminded the audience that the silencing of women artists they had just seen played out in *Folios One and Two* was symptomatic of a contemporary situation in which “writers all over the world” continue to be silenced “by violence and regimes” imposing restrictions upon freedom of speech.¹⁹¹ Having made this point, the playwright explained that she was now going to exercise her *own* right to speak on an issue connected with immediate events in Australian politics. Acknowledging the “suffering faced by refugees currently held in detention centres and off shore,” she asserted that, as a writer, she would “continue to speak out about my country’s treatment of those seeking asylum.”¹⁹² Murray pledged:

I choose to use my voice as a writer to speak for the voiceless, and the silenced who have come to Australia seeking freedom and asylum but have been met with cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. I wish to acknowledge those who have lost their lives or their hope, attempting to seek safety and solace here. I read this statement to call on the Australian government to welcome refugees and end these policies.¹⁹³

The presentation of this speech during interval worked to highlight the connection of Murray’s play to the Arts Centre’s week-long programme on “Women, Art, Politics,” and Australian politics more broadly. Furthermore, as illuminated in the final part of the statement, it established a background – or condition – of viewing, in which the subsequent depiction of Verity’s refuge in the Safe Haven could now be interpreted at a broader social level, as a place of refuge welcoming not only writers but all who have been repressed.

Folio Three began on the lawns of the Henderson House. As the audience assembled in front of this bluestone building, they were greeted by one of Verity’s companions, the “Lady Typist,” Mannie, whose name, derived from the Latin *manus* (meaning hands), reflects her role as Verity’s “handmaiden.”¹⁹⁴ Standing on the second floor verandah, Mannie re-introduced the group of women who, arranged in a *Tableau Vivant*, were

¹⁹⁰ This statement was not written by Murray but rather provided to her by the group. Email correspondence between Peta Murray and Rebecca Clode, April 29, 2014.

¹⁹¹ Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Peta Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 9; Murray, “*TFO*: Final Draft.”

engaged in a range of creative activities.¹⁹⁵ Now “many years later,” as Mannie explained, the outside world was still hostile to women but here, in this welcoming “space of their own,” the “Sisters of the Haven” were free to pursue their work.¹⁹⁶ Mannie’s brief description of life in the Haven was followed by an invitation for the audience to join them in the indoor space in Henderson House, where the action of the play continued.

During the final scene, within the setting of the Haven, Murray’s audience were presented with a hypothetical reversal of the patriarchal world order. Here, authority figures, muses and guides are either female or transgender. These female characters also include identities beyond the traditional stereotypes of “helper, villain, or victim.”¹⁹⁷ An example of this was seen in the development of the character of Nursie, played by Caroline Lee. When introduced in the Sanitarium during Folio Two, Nursie represents the stereotype of a profession traditionally deemed to be “acceptable” for women.¹⁹⁸ However, during the climactic escape from *The Bindery* that ends that folio, Nursie strikes up a romantic connection with another female character, Matron “Gassy” Gascoyne. A leading figure in the women’s escape and the founding of the Safe Haven, Matron (whose title demonstrates Murray’s subversion of the contrasting patronym) is based upon a real-life icon of the mature-age female artist, Rosalie Gascoyne (1917-1999).¹⁹⁹ The lesbian relationship between Nursie and Matron was then developed in Folio Three, throughout which the women interact as romantic partners. Murray’s depiction of female-female attraction in the relationship between these characters exemplifies the play’s challenging of the kinds of gender stereotypes played out in the first two folios. Verity, too, is involved

¹⁹⁵ Pavis defines the *Tableau Vivant* as a “staging of one or more actors who are immobile and fixed in an expressive pose suggestive of a statue or painting” The *Tableau Vivant*, though dating back to earlier periods, was at the height of fashion during the eighteenth century. See Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, 377. As used in Murray’s production, the *Tableau Vivant* began with the women actors walking out onto the balcony and assuming positions of stillness before performing their moved actions of handicrafts and stereotypical, or traditional, women’s activities.

¹⁹⁶ Murray, “*TIFO*: Final Draft,” 80.

¹⁹⁷ During interval at the premiere performance, Murray declared that her play’s female characters were committed to resisting these stereotypes. See Murray, “*TIFO*: Final Draft,” 80.

¹⁹⁸ Lee had also appeared as a kind of Nurse even before the official beginning of the play, when, during the “Artist’s Talk” she came into the space dressed in blacks, with a first-aid kit strapped around her neck and ministered to the injured ‘actors’ from the *Swansong* rehearsal as they infiltrated the space. Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TIFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

¹⁹⁹ Murray’s alteration of the spelling of Gascoyne’s name is deliberate and intended as part of the writer’s interrelated play on words and identities, a dimension of the play that will be discussed in further detail throughout this chapter. As Murray explains, the character of the Matron thus becomes “Matron ‘Gassy’ Gascoyne (not Gascoigne), I deliberately did not employ the correct spelling of either the writer or the artist’s names. I chose homophones instead.” Peta Murray, email message to Rebecca Clode, April 29, 2014.

in a romantic relationship that, while existing outside the parameters of the “social norms” outlined by Phoney Rabbit, finds acceptance within the boundaries of the Haven. As mentioned, Verity’s partner and muse is the gender shifting Orla/Orlando, who like Woolf’s Orlando embodies a sexuality located in the margins of society.

Throughout the course of Folio Three, Verity continues in the production of her trilogy. Now trying to create its third and final volume, she is accompanied by the Sisters of the Haven who assist her in various ways. Orla, for example (who remains committed to her “feminine side” except when venturing beyond the safety of the Haven) provides a back story and tunes which become the basis of Verity’s new work, *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!*²⁰⁰ Mannie, as Verity’s handmaiden, assists by typing her hand written notes and, ultimately, progressing to the role of an artistic “Doula.” In this capacity, she provides the spiritual, emotional and physical support that Verity requires to produce her work.²⁰¹ Other motivators for the now “weary” writer include Nursie, Matron Gascoyne and another character based upon a real-life female literary icon Elizabeth Jolley, here Saint Lisbeth the Jolly.²⁰² Lisbeth’s first visit (fig. 4.4) inspires Verity and gives her the motivation to continue pursuing her work by reminding her of the ultimate importance of “Truth.” This broad theme incorporates both the idea of “truth to self” and the notion of artistic and personal integrity in speaking social truths as a writer. Saint Lisbeth’s advice is symbolised in a gift she gives to Verity, an unopened tin of beetroot. A pun upon the idea of be(ing) tr(ue), the beetroot is given with advice that its juice may be used as ink in the event of an emergency. It is with this ink, and following the advice offered by Jolly, that Verity pens her final work, *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!*

²⁰⁰ Murray, “*TFFO*: Final Draft,” 89-93.

²⁰¹ During her “Artist’s Address” at the beginning of the performance on March 1, 2014, Murray assisted the audience in understanding her metaphor by defining the word “doula” as a person (usually a woman) who, during the process of childbirth, attends to the emotional and spiritual needs of the mother. Murray, “The Artist’s Talk,” *TFFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

²⁰² References to Verity being “weary” or in a state of “weariness” are scattered throughout the play, and signify the aging writer’s state of physical, emotional and artistic exhaustion. The character Saint Lisbeth the Jolly is based upon the novelist Elizabeth Jolley whose writings, Murray claims, have always been of interest to her and who typifies the “late-blooming” female artists of whom the playwright speaks in this play, in the sense that she began her career as a writer relatively late in life. Like the character Matron “Gassy” Gascoyne, the spelling of this character’s name has been altered from “Jolley” to “Jolly.” Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 1-2, 11-12.



Fig. 4.4. The Visitation. Verity (Marg Dobson, left) is visited by Saint Lisbeth the Jolly (Wilhelmina Stracke), From the premiere performance of *Things That Fall Over*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, March 1, 2014, Photograph by Lucy Crossett.

By the end of *Things That Fall Over*, Verity, having been through the trials of writing her trilogy, is utterly exhausted. As the third folio brings her towards the moment of her death, the writer comes to a crucial realisation – *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* has not yet been performed. As such, the work remains incomplete. Far from being distressed by this lack of closure, however, Verity, having now lived a full creative life, has come to a point at which she is able to accept the incompleteness and shifting nature of art, just as she can accept these qualities in life itself. In the moments before her death, Verity, now assuming the role of teacher, is also able to impart this lesson of acceptance to her Sisters. In a poignant moment towards the play's end, Mannie is distressed to learn the works that Verity has created will not endure forever.²⁰³ Lacking the mordant to fix it permanently to the page, the beetroot juice in which the works have been written will eventually fade. However Verity, now at peace with the notion of evanescence, is able to appease her handmaid, assuring her of her *own* comfort in knowing her legacy will be continued in the work of women to come. It is here, too, that Verity can accept the “still[birth]” of *Swansong* in its failure to be performed during her life time.²⁰⁴ Using the stillborn metaphor to articulate the idea of a play that exists on the page but remains un-staged, Murray here acknowledges the communal and collaborative aspects of theatre, in vitalising a written play text. There is also an identification, implicit in the portrayal of Verity's death, of the way in which creative works and, in particular, theatre, continue to evolve in the “afterlife” of the artist. It is therefore the idea of incompleteness that Verity

²⁰³ Murray, “*TIFO: Final Draft*,” 101.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

celebrates immediately before her death. Here, in a re-writing of Christian gospel that is consistent with her Folio Three reversal of Western patriarchy and, arguably, a feminisation of a Grand Narrative, Murray has Verity utter the following dying sentiment:

Stillborn. Yes. Yet, strangely – it pleases me. Orla. Orlando. Whichever you are. Do not weep. For I have learned that there is great beauty in the unresolved and undecided. The most captivating and enduring things in life and art are often the unfinished. There is dignity and truth in the incomplete. And thus I die peacefully, my work undone, nor even sung, amidst the clamour and the ... clung! (*a last breath*) Lo...it is unfinished.²⁰⁵

Within this feminised re-working of the death of Christ, Verity's comforter is not the weeping virgin mother, but Orla, the theatrical descendent of a figure conceived by a feminist literary icon. In Verity's death, Murray presents her ultimate subversion of the Grand Narrative by denying the very catharsis and closure embodied in the dying words of Christ.²⁰⁶ Verity's final utterance, occurring as it does within the Safe Haven for female artists, becomes, in contrast with this "narrative," a celebration of both the unfinished and more broadly, untraditional, untold, women's narratives.

Murray's celebration of the unresolved is carried beyond the moment of Verity's death and into the subsequent performance of *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* This metatheatrical performance of Verity's play is suggested at the end of *TTFO* as an effort on behalf of the Sisters of the Haven to continue the work she has begun. This is connected with a final moment in *TTFO* when a young girl breaks in to the Haven in search of refuge. In a demonstration of the argument made by the playwright during interval at the performance on March 1st, the women welcome the child into the safety of their home and, at the child's request, begin to teach her all they know. Led by Mannie, the first lesson, and the one that "ends" the play, is a lesson in writing. Taking up a cygnet's quill and listening intently, the child is taught to write her first word – Verity.

Following this moment in the premiere performance of *TTFO*, the audience were invited to continue the journey by following the cast outside, for the picnic and performance of *Swansong!!!* Having already been closely involved in the promenade performance through their participation in the journey thus far and the conflation of actors and audience

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ A variation of "It is finished," from John. 19:30 (New Revised Standard Version). It is noted that the Gospels vary in their accounts of Christ's dying words.

built into Murray's staging, participants were now invited to take part in what Murray described to them as a "(w)rite of passage."²⁰⁷ This involved, beyond journeying out to the public amphitheatre, writing a message, or word of support or advice, for the child artist of *TTFO*. The "write of passage" was led by the playwright herself; after explaining the process to the audience, she led them as they journeyed physically, on foot, out of the back entrance to Henderson House, through a corridor and out into the outdoor space of the amphitheatre. Here a journal was passed among the audience and they were again encouraged by Murray to contribute by writing down a single word of their choice, for the benefit of the child artist. In this way, Murray both engaged her audience physically in the event that was unfolding, and called upon viewers for a written commitment to support the legacy of women's writing.

Having participated in this process and set up their picnics, the audience now sat in the amphitheatre where *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* was performed. Written as a "coda," or afterword for *TTFO*, this metatheatrical work adopts the form of an oratorio. Defined in the *OED* as a musical performance of a narrative, usually religious in nature, this term had also been described more loosely by Murray, earlier in the evening, as an "opera without the money."²⁰⁸

In *Swansong*, the myth of swans (and by analogy) women's silence, is re-written via musical performance. Led by the Weaver narrator, played by Indigenous Australian actor Lisa Maza, it enacts, in general terms, Verity's passing on of lessons learned to an artist symbolised in the character of The Child. While aspects of the oratorio, including its Indigenous dimension, will be discussed in more detail later, one important part of its performance on this occasion was the way in which, unlike the preceding folios of *TTFO*, it was conducted in an outdoor, public, space. Within the Arts Centre's amphitheatre, *Swansong* became a public statement of the value of women's writing and the role of theatre in enabling women to speak in the public space. For the audience, including myself, who had participated in the performance from its beginning, this was emphasised

²⁰⁷ Obviously this linguistic nuance is lost in performance, however, this kind of word play is typical of what Murray does throughout *TTFO* and there are other instances in which the word play is elucidated for the audience.

²⁰⁸ An oratorio is elsewhere defined as "a large-scale, usually narrative musical work for orchestra and voices, typically on a sacred theme and performed with little or no costume, scenery or action." "oratorio, n." *OED Online*. Accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/Entry/132208?redirectedFrom=oratorio#eid>; Murray, "The Artist's Talk," *TTFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

by the way in which the play had gradually opened out – its fictional settings and physical spaces embodying the progression of women’s writing from the private to the public domain.

However, if the audience at this production had held any expectation that Verity’s story would somehow find its conclusion in the performance of *Swansong*, this “conclusion” was only found in the oratorio’s reverent yet upbeat re-iteration of the celebration of the unfinished. Just as *Things That Fall Over* subverts masculine paradigms to celebrate the messy and “incomplete” qualities of artistic production, so too, the messy and incomplete are celebrated in *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* This is played out during the Weaver’s narration of the oratorio, during which Murray dramatises incompleteness by abruptly ending the story of ‘The Child’ before it is complete. As the Weaver explains,

Taking up that feather and holding it firm, in the soft mud,
beside the lake become ink, the Child began...

The child, in response, asks:

What? Began what?

Confirming that the story is incomplete, the Weaver informs her:

There is no more. Here *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!*
ends.²⁰⁹

Here, in the final moments of *Swansong*, the Child affirms that *she* will complete the work. Responding “then I shall finish it,” she returns to the action of writing in the mud, this time inventing her own conclusion which she reads aloud to the Weaver: “the child began to write!”²¹⁰ Although a commitment to the continuation of Verity’s work has been stated in the Child’s determination to write, it must occur to us, as the play ends here with the Child in the midst of writing (indeed, she has only just “*beg[un]* to write”), that the “work” in one sense perpetuates, unfinished.

²⁰⁹ Murray, “*TFO: Final Draft*,” 139.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

4.3 COMPLEXITY, OPENNESS AND PARATHEATRE: AN ANALYSIS OF MURRAY'S PLAY TITLE

The ambition of Murray's metatheatrical epic is signalled most strikingly in the play's expansive title *Things That Fall Over – an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*, which was performed as part of the prologue to the March 2014 production.²¹¹ In her Artist's Talk, Murray painstakingly announced the play's title in its entirety before declaring, as outlined earlier, that the project had failed to reach fruition. When read aloud as part of this performance, Murray's unruly title was met with laughter by the audience as they recognised the playwright's own acknowledgement of the work's ambitious scale. This was emphasised by Murray's cleverly crafted performance, in which she was able to convey, using the tone of her delivery, a sense of self-irony and playfulness. These qualities pervaded the subsequent performances of several attempts to explain the play's title to the audience. One such attempt was offered, at Murray's request, by the refuge-seeking actor from the 'Swansong' rehearsal, Caroline Lee. Here, the actor obliged by stepping up to the lectern and, pulling out a bundle of notecards (an ironic comment upon the amount of supporting material required for such a task) began to embark upon her explanation. Lee's performance contributed to the play's signposting of its title's complexity, particularly as she began her talk by having to read the title from her notecards. This joke was reiterated moments later in Murray's presentation when the playwright both wryly and ironically remarked that she herself was the only person able to say properly the title of her play.

Lee's attempted explanation of this title began with an observation of its complexity. Having identified this defining quality, the actor then proposed that she explain each of the title's constituent elements. Indeed, as she suggested, an understanding of each *part* of the "complicated" title would ultimately be essential to grasping its overall meaning.²¹² The fact that Lee's explication got no further than a definition of one component, the oratorio, was, therefore, highly ironic. Interrupted, first by Murray (eager to continue her slide show) and then by the arrival of other *Swansong* actors seeking refuge, the supposedly vital definition was overtly left incomplete.

²¹¹ Murray, "The Artist's Talk," *TTFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

²¹² Caroline Lee in Murray, "The Artist's Talk," *TTFO*, archival recording of premiere, DVD.

Murray's own interruption of Lee's explanation is particularly interesting as it indicates a deliberate denial of definition. This metatheatrical staging of the title for her work implicated the audience in a process whereby they became responsible for making meaning of both the title and the play itself. Within this process, having been alerted to the importance of the title's components as well as its openness to deconstruction and reconstruction, the audience were encouraged to consider the significance of each individually as well as, potentially, to deconstruct its elements. This active reflection upon the meaning of both the title and the play was further encouraged at moments throughout the work during which the characters made occasional, metatheatrical comments illuminating the title's constituent parts.

Murray's title reflects the play's stylistic, generic and thematic scope. Playful in its use of language, it combines intertextual homage, generic hybridity, scholarly reference and the suggestion of a metatheatrical approach. As demonstrated, there is a sense in which the title itself, performed within Murray's prologue, operates as a metatheatrical, performative, paratext, designed to foreground the play's own questioning of the nature of a women's ensemble theatre work in the twenty-first century.²¹³ Intertextual homage, a technique used throughout the play, particularly in reference to mature-age female artists from the past, is first embodied in the opening of Murray's title, "*Things That Fall Over*." Here, as Murray explains in one of the footnotes accompanying the text, her work quotes a comment made by visual artist Rosalie Gascoigne during a 1997 interview. Speaking of "her training in *ikebana* and its influence on her later sculptural work," the artist recalled how another practitioner of the Japanese art-form had remarked that she (Gascoigne) had no patience with "things that fall over."²¹⁴ Gascoigne's comment reflects the way in which her sculptural work courts a certain messiness, in contrast with the precision and perfection of *ikebana*. As used by Murray, this comment becomes a

²¹³ Genette defines the paratext as material that is generally textual in form and which exists in peripheral locations to an author's primary work. Printed or presented in connection with this primary work, paratexts may include, but are not restricted to, such texts as a work's title, its preface and footnotes or endnotes. According to Genette, the primary function of the paratext is to facilitate a "better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading – more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies." Murray's footnotes may be seen as paratextual, as indeed may the play's title itself. Gerard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22, no2 (1991): 262.

²¹⁴ Murray's footnote explains "This phrase [things that fall over] comes from an interview with the artist Rosalie Gascoigne by journalist, Stephen Fenely, broadcast on ABC Radio on December 4, 1997. The phrase was used in her answer to a question about her training in *ikebana* and its influence on her later sculptural work. This part of the transcript was found in Martin Gascoigne's essay, in a publication accompanying the Rosalie Gascoigne retrospective staged at the NGV, Melbourne, 19 December 2008 – 15 March 2009." Murray, "*TFO*: Final Draft," 84.

metaphor for the *play's* depiction of the messy and often frustrating process of artistic creation.

When viewed in relation to the play's treatment of sexuality, particularly in the third folio setting of "The Haven", there is also a more playful reading of "*things that fall over*" as a reference to phallic incompetence. Although this interpretation is not forwarded directly within Murray's dialogue, it is at least suggested by other, similar, allusions. Notably, at a moment during Folio Three, the gender-bending Orla offers to procure Verity a "bigger tool" than the pen with which she is struggling to write her work.²¹⁵ Verity's response highlights Murray's use of double entendre as the lesbian writer informs her partner that she has no use for such appendages.

VERITY. My quill? Orla?
 ORLA. There, darling.
 VERITY. Where?
 ORLA. Do you not see it?
 VERITY. No, yet...I feel it still.
 ORLA. Oh Saints. If only there were a bigger tool?
 VERITY. There is. It's not for me.²¹⁶

Such moments, like the title's reference to "*things that fall over*," are not only part of the play's comedy but can also be seen to reinforce the agency of the female writer. Together, they highlight Verity's ability to write independently of male authority and demonstrate the play's subversion of phallic, male, dominance.

The playfulness embedded in the opening of Murray's title is carried out through her subsequent description of the work's stylistic and generic architecture. "*Things That Fall Over*," as the "Architect" herself informs the viewer, is an "*(anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play*." Part of the writer's irony in constructing this description is that *it*, like the un-named *things* to which it refers, falls over itself in its very attempt to articulate what it is. This, of course, is the point. Part of the joke and, indeed, the challenge for Murray's audience, is to ascertain what an "*(anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play*" would look like. This task is further problematised by Murray's complication of traditional genres whereby the "musical" of the title becomes an "(anti-)musical" and

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the play is not a fully mounted dramatic production but rather, as described, a “*reading of a play*.”²¹⁷

Murray’s aim in the construction of her complex title can be seen to serve three key functions. The first of these is descriptive and immediately related to plot. In referring to an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, Murray describes the action and structure of the play’s first three folios – in other words, the plot beginning with Verity’s creative gestation and ending shortly after her death. The title refers to Verity’s process of writing a novel, as depicted in the form of a play reading. It also indicates the use of music in the telling of Verity’s story (as indeed occurs during Folio Three) while simultaneously alluding to the musical, or (anti-)musical, as the form of Verity’s final work.

In her references to the (anti-)musical and reading of a play, Murray highlights the secondary function of her title, this being to complicate and challenge traditional notions of genre. As outlined in the exegetical component of her Master’s thesis, this technique operates as part of a broader process of “queering” the work by using it to simultaneously demonstrate and embody a resistance to categorisation.²¹⁸ Thus her “over-blown” title, the playwright explains, “speaks to the work’s refusal to be contained within orthodox taxonomies and the boundaries of genre.”²¹⁹

Murray’s reference to a play reading operates as one such “refusal” as it replaces the idea of the fully mounted stage production with a mode of presentation more traditionally associated with the notion of rehearsal. There is also an element of generic hybridisation at play here, as reading indicates a process more commonly associated with the novel (or other literary forms) than with the play. While such a notion may first appear as anti-theatrical, in fact when viewed in relation to the play’s argument for artistic openness, it becomes a celebration of theatre in its unfinished and unresolved dimensions. In referring to this metatheatrical presentation of rehearsal – the “reading” of a play, Murray honours

²¹⁷ Italics mine.

²¹⁸ Peta Murray “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-)musical,” master’s thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2011, 8. Retrieved from QUT e-prints, <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/53579/>.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

female theatrical practice in its broadest sense, as process which has a value distinct from the finished product.

The use of the term (anti-)musical within this section of the title indicates an alignment with the kind of intellectual musical exemplified in the works of Stephen Sondheim.²²⁰ In particular, it signifies a rejection of the “light,” cathartic effect engendered by the “traditional Broadway” musical.²²¹ In borrowing this term, “sans parentheses” from Wiley Hausam (2003), Murray uses it to denote a variation on the traditional musical.²²² Demonstrated in recent decades in a wave of alternative, “outsider musicals” including *The Book of Mormon* and *Avenue Q*, the qualities of the anti-musical are exemplified in the Tony Award Winning *Into the Woods* (1987) by James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim.²²³ Well-known for its re-working of traditional fairy-tale endings, this two act work devotes its second half to examining the lives of its characters after the supposedly “happily ever after” conclusion has been played out. Lapine and Sondheim’s displacement of the traditional happy ending from the end to the middle of their play encourages a questioning and subversion of this form and the catharsis it affords the viewer. Such a technique, typical of the anti-musical, is reflected in *Things That Fall Over*. Like Lapine and Sondheim, Murray incorporates the musical form but denies both her characters and audience the catharsis of dramatic closure through her emphasis on the work as “unfinished.”²²⁴

Although the play’s title incorporates this reference to the anti-musical, Murray goes further in her deployment of this term by adding parentheses to the prefix (anti-). This gesture, like the title when read in its entirety, once again conveys the strong sense of playfulness that accompanies the work’s more serious objectives. It is also an ironic gesture signifying the play’s status as a postmodern, cross-genre work, a dimension of the play that Murray again acknowledges in her thesis.²²⁵ The reader of Murray’s title may well ponder the fact that this particular punctuation, (anti-) is only evident upon a

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, iii, 22.

²²¹ Wiley Hausam, cited in Murray “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-)musical,” 25-26.

²²² Murray, “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-)musical,” 25-26; Wiley Hausam, ed., *The New American Musical: An Anthropology from the End of the Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003).

²²³ Murray, “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-)musical,” 22.

²²⁴ As per Verity’s dying line, previously discussed, “Lo...it is...unfinished.” Murray, “TTFO: Final Draft,” 125.

²²⁵ Murray, “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-)musical,” iii, 192; 203.

visual encounter with the title. This irony is carried throughout the play where it is highlighted at various moments within the portrayal of Verity's writing process. In Folio Three, for example, Murray challenges the boundaries between written (literary) text and spoken word (performance) as Verity and Orla discuss the title of Verity's work, *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* Upon hearing the title for the first time, Orla responds with a question: "All those exclamation marks?" The dialogue continues:

- VERITY. You hear them?
 ORLA. I hear three of them. Swansong. Bang! Bang! Bang!
 VERITY. You have an ear for punctuation.
 ORLA. Swansong. Bang! Bang! Bang!
 VERITY. But wait. There's more. Swansong!!! The Musical!!!
 ORLA. Swansong. Bang! Bang! Bang!
 The Musical. Bang! Bang! Bang!
 VERITY. How may I work with all this banging...?²²⁶

Through comic exchanges such as these, Murray thus demonstrates the third key function of the play (and in her use of the prefix anti-, parenthesised, its *title*) as she plays with her text to locate the work within a postmodern literary and theatrical context. This function is further demonstrated in her title's reference to two additional features. Adding to the already complex mix of ideas contained within her "(anti-) musical of a novel inside a reading of a play," Murray informs us that the work will also include "footnotes" and an "oratorio as coda," as though wishing to take her postmodern hyperbole to its limit.

This stretching of generic boundaries demonstrates the scope of Murray's theatrical ambition whereby she proposes her work will extend beyond conventional understandings of theatrical performance. The footnote, typically literary and, indeed, scholarly in its connotations is a highly unusual paratextual companion for a performed work of theatre.²²⁷ Yet as Murray explains in notes accompanying her libretto, in *TTFO* footnotes are intended to be incorporated into the play's performance, and the playwright urges that anyone considering a staging of the work should also consider how this might be done. In introductory notes accompanying a draft of the play, Murray says:

²²⁶ Murray, "TTFO: Final Draft," 91-92.

²²⁷ For a discussion of the footnote as a kind of paratext, see Edward J. Maloney, "Footnotes in Fiction: A Rhetorical Approach," (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2005), 23-27. Electronic thesis, http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1125378621_osu1125378621.pdf.

I would ask the director to consider how they might be performed or broadcast with, or after, the event via surtitles, a website, an app or some other means. Hence their inclusion within the draft of the text.²²⁸

With this possibility in mind, the play incorporates upward of 50 footnotes, most of which serve an explanatory function.²²⁹ In an interview, Murray explains:

When we launched [the play] we had this great thing where we had kind of installations...so they were almost like these little individual Artworks.²³⁰

These visual manifestations of the footnotes were displayed as part of the performance that was given at the State Library of Victoria, during the launch of *TTFO*. Sponsored by the Victorian Women's Trust and the State Library of Victoria, this event was attended by approximately 100 audience members, most of whom were guests of the Trust. As well as speeches by Murray, Robin Laurie as co-director (with Murray), and a performance of selected scenes, the event included the launch of a book by Mary Crooks. Murray's footnotes, as another, visual, part of the event, consisted of items displayed on plinths set up within the Queen's Hall venue. These items included an "old fashioned weighing scale" containing a novella and other "manifestations of aspects of" the work's numerous references.²³¹ As Murray explains, actors from the performance stood by these visual footnotes as a prologue to the proceedings and explained their functions and significance to the audience, thus making the footnotes both a physical and interactive part of the event.²³²

Similarly, in the premiere on March 1st 2014, footnotes were incorporated into the performance space via a range of visual displays and intertextual references. Murray's footnotes, displayed visually in the production as physical objects and in take home cards distributed after the show, are vital to this process of "explosion." The take home footnotes consisted of 26 cards (one for every letter of the alphabet), each of which featured a written and pictorial explanation of a symbol used or reference made during the performance. Examples include "D is for Drag King," "G is for Girl Group" and "L is for

²²⁸ Peta Murray, "Things That Fall Over: an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda," unpublished manuscript of Draft 10C amended in creative development, 2012. Hereafter Murray, "TTFO: Draft 10C."

²²⁹ Draft 10C in fact contained 61, while the final draft used on March 1, 2014 contained 56.

²³⁰ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 16.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

Late Bloomer.” Implied in their use (and, importantly, signposted through their mention in the play’s title) is the idea that theatre is not bound to a particular sequence of events or group of characters depicted on a stage. Here, as frequently throughout *TTFO*, theatrical boundaries are made porous such that the very concept of theatre as an event confined by space and time is exploded. Another way that the production “exploded” its meanings and resonances was by having the footnotes appear online, on the *TTFO* production website throughout the performance at pre-programmed times, scheduled roughly to coincide with the times at which as the items or ideas to which they referred were mentioned or featured on-stage. This created a sense of the production “going live” both in and beyond the performance space, and also demonstrates Murray’s engagement with recent technologies to expand the audience of her work.

Murray’s footnotes provide a means of incorporating reference material in a manner that is accessible for audiences. The playwright expresses a desire to acknowledge the wide range of influences upon which she has drawn, incorporating them into the production without privileging one form of reference over another. In particular, she explains:

I wanted not to privilege the High Arts. I wanted to have jokes in there that would be appealing to people across all spectrums. I hate the kind of theatre where you get the sense everybody else is in on something and you’re not.²³³

It is for this reason, as well as (it would seem) to highlight its location within a broader network of literature and culture that Murray includes, alongside references to Coleridge, Shakespeare, Austen, Whitman and Woolf to name just a few, footnotes pertaining to popular culture references including contemporary music and television programmes. Furthermore, such annotations are often included with a sense of irony, as though satirising the formality of the scholarly footnote itself by linking it with a relatively lowbrow reference. When, part way through the play, for example, central character Verity finds herself in need of medical assistance, she fetches her dog, a “wind-up toy” named Skippy and tells him “Run, Skippy. Fetch help...”²³⁴ A footnote inserted at this point reminds audience members that Skippy is a “Reference to iconic Children’s TV

²³³ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 17.

²³⁴ Murray, “*TTFO*: Final Draft,” 41.

Series, *Skippy, The Bush Kangaroo*, created by John McCallum and produced from 1966-1970.²³⁵

The play's references to beetroot also highlight the use of another specifically Australian icon. Like Murray's "Skippy" reference, this is outlined in a footnote in which the playwright explains the multiple resonances of this term. The footnote card handed out at the premiere to accompany this reference showed images related to the vegetable beetroot on one side.²³⁶ Here, above the text stating "B is for Beetroot," were pictured beetroot in its raw form, and its sliced (tinned) form. On the other side of the footnote card, Murray explains that:

To some, the spectacle of sliced tinned beetroot is still synonymous with Australian food. Brian Dibble's biography of Elizabeth Jolley includes a description of the author in her kaftan, distributing small tins of beetroot to creative writing students who had done well.

In addition, the playwright adds a DIY suggestion encouraging audience members to extend their exploration of "beetroot" beyond their encounter with it as a reference in her play. As she tells the reader:

Beetroot can be grown successfully in most Australian gardens and is a great first choice for anyone starting a vegetable plot, as both the leaves and the root can be eaten. The versatile beetroot can be used cold, warm, raw, cooked, roasted or pickled and makes fabulously colourful juices and soups.²³⁷

Murray's humorous and, indeed, irreverent, use of the scholarly footnote can be seen to operate as part of the play's democratising function. By elucidating the work's more obscure references and inviting a playful approach to the viewing of the work, the playwright makes her writing and indeed the play's more serious, feminist, argument, both more accessible and less threatening for the audience member who is unacquainted with high arts, academia, or who might otherwise be discouraged from seeing her work, for example on account of possible preconceived notions of "feminist theatre." When

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ As mentioned in an earlier annotation, the footnotes were handed out as packets of cards, to audience members as they left the venue, after the performance. The playwright made an announcement alerting people to their availability and, in fact, many people came seeking these footnotes, perhaps wanting to discover the significance of their being featured in the play's title, or seeking further understanding of concepts that had been raised within the play that perhaps they had found obscure.

²³⁷ Peta Murray, "B is for Beetroot," from Footnote Cards distributed to audience at the close of "Things That Fall Over," premiere performance, March 1, 2014.

combined with the previously outlined methods of physically integrating the audience and the play's footnotes into the performance space (whatever that may be) Murray creates a work that is thoroughly democratic and approachable.

As theatrical paratexts, Murray's footnotes signal far-reaching meanings and possible interpretations. Moreover, through their explanation of literary, dramatic and poetic quotations, as well as popular culture references, they help locate the work within a much broader semiotic network than is possible to achieve, even metatheatrically, within the limitations of text and performance. *More* than metatheatrical (a function seen in the play's depiction of the backstage writing/rehearsal process, as well as the oratorio) Murray's work becomes *paratheatrical* – unconstrained and seemingly infinite in its multiple layering of texts/frameworks.

Finally, consideration must be given to the playwright's ironic alternative description of the work as "*a triathlon for ensemble performance*," an acknowledgement of the play as an endurance event for both performers and audience. "Triathlon" also references the three part structure of the plot concerning writer Verity. Beyond this, in using a term that is ordinarily associated with sport, Murray's play further complicates its own definition of theatre, ironically proposing an elevation of theatre's status and cultural value to the level of a sporting event in a possible comment on the relative status of sport and art in Australian culture. Murray's description of *TTFO* as a work for "ensemble" performance also reflects her intention that this "triathlon" will be performed by a large all female cast in line with her desire to create an opportunity for the creative expression of "mature-aged" women, privileging the group in spite of the commercial advantages inherent in creating a play with a smaller cast. In her MA thesis Murray expressed a concern with the well-documented lack of artistic and other opportunity for older women in contemporary Australia based on her own experience and observation of a changing theatrical context. Murray notes:

I had come to the theatre via a kind of Golden Age in the 1980s and '90s, drawn by the ardour of young Australian theatre-makers at places like Nimrod Theatre and Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney. I found my mentors, and later my place, within the corps of women – actors, directors, designers – who gathered under the banner of The Women and Theatre Project (Belvoir Street, 1981-82) and went on to professional careers. Yet now, in the late "noughties" my perception was [that] women-in-theatre seemed

less visible than before. As for my own writing, perhaps my focus on woman-as-subject was out-of-date in an allegedly post-feminist world?²³⁸

In relation to the cultural shift perceived by Murray at the time of enrolling in her thesis, it is worth noting that a host of theatre groups and organisations that had been in operation during the aforementioned “Golden Age” of the late twentieth century, specifically for the purpose of promoting and supporting female artists, were, by the early years of the new millennium, no longer functioning. Corresponding with her own encounter of a rapid decline in artistic opportunity, Murray explains that at the time of commencing her research project, she began to hear “rumblings and grumbings of discontent” among other female theatre practitioners.²³⁹ These concerns were soon echoed in public forums, including in a keynote address given by Australian writer and editor Sophie Cunningham at the Melbourne Writer’s Festival in 2011.²⁴⁰ In this address, Cunningham voiced concerns about gender inequalities in the Australian Arts Industry, including a visible shortfall in the representation of female writers and theatre practitioners, particularly in the programmes of subsidised state theatre companies.²⁴¹

In addressing such concerns, both at a personal and social/political level, Murray connects her work with a feminist agenda which she articulates in her exegesis as being particularly relevant to the artistic context of the early twenty-first century. Ultimately, in light of the playwright’s perception of these recent shifts in the Australian cultural landscape, her creation of a work featuring a large cast of “women, onstage, in their bathers, singing and occupying a lot of space” can be seen as an active resistance to the range of social and political circumstances that have recently denied the mature-age female her voice.²⁴² Murray’s title demonstrates the work’s commitment to this cause by announcing the nature of this complex, performative “triathlon” as an ensemble project. It is through the work of this ensemble that Murray proposes to realise her play *Things That Fall Over: an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio as coda*.

²³⁸ Murray, “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-) musical,” 1.

²³⁹ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 2.

²⁴⁰ Sophie Cunningham, “Why We Still Need Feminism” (keynote address, Melbourne International Writers’ Festival, September 13, 2011) <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/bigideas/stories/2011/13/3315939>.

²⁴¹ Cunningham subsequently founded ‘The Stella Prize,’ an annual award “celebrating Australian women’s writing” Named after novelist Stella Maria Miles Franklin, this award is unlike the ‘Franklin’ Award in the sense that it is exclusively for women writers. See website “About the Stella Prize,” The Stella Prize, accessed September 15, 2013, <http://www.thestellaprize.com.au/about>.

²⁴² Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 8.

4.4 TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

As demonstrated, *Things That Fall Over* is comprised not of one text and the performances it has generated but, rather, several interwoven texts and paratexts. While the play's extended title can be seen as a text in its own right, it is useful, beyond this, to consider the various written and performance texts of the play. Among these are an exegesis written as part of an MA thesis, numerous drafts and four public performance events to date. The first of these performances was a "showing" of select scenes from the play, staged at the State Library of Victoria on 11th October 2012, intended as both a fundraiser and launch of the creative development process. This, as the following discussion will unfold, was an unusual venue for an equally unusual theatrical event. Subsequent events included two more showings, a production of *Swansong!!!* and then the premiere of the work in its entirety in March 2014.²⁴³ Spanning a period of more than five years from conception to first production (to use the metaphor employed by the playwright herself), these stagings have been documented in interviews, blogs and social media networks, each of which contributes to the play's already extensive production archive.²⁴⁴ In fact there is a sense in which the archive of Murray's work, as a documentation of her process of creative development, has become even more important than any single performance of the play. Certainly, insofar as the archive embodies and documents the various stages and challenges of production, it articulates a kind of performance of the work itself. A discussion of the constituent texts and contexts of *Things That Fall Over* is useful in demonstrating both the play's distinctive qualities and its metatheatrical approach. In the section that follows I will therefore consider these aspects of Murray's work, with a particular focus on the play's oratorio, *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* An analysis of this work, suggested in Murray's title as a play-within-the-play

²⁴³ The first of these was held on Saturday November 3, 2012, part way through a three-week creative development period. Performed at the Bluestone Church, Footscray, the showing involved the performance of a selection of scenes and songs from the developing work, beginning at a point "exactly half way through the libretto, where music and song breaks into and begins to transform the text." See *TTFO Blog: Concerning the creative development of an (anti-)musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*; "About Things That Fall Over: Show and Tell #1," blog entry by wandalusst, November 7, 2012, <https://thingsthatfallover.wordpress.com/2012/11/07/show-and-tell-1/>. The second showing was held on Sunday 15th September 2013 at the Bluestone Church Footscray following a second, week-long creative development. This involved a staged reading/performance of the play-within-the-play, *Swansong!!! The Musical*. See *TTFO Blog*: "About Things That Fall Over: Monthly Archives: September 2013," <https://thingsthatfallover.wordpress.com/2013/09/>. The third showing was a more developed staging of *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* held in the 'First Site' gallery space at RMIT on Monday December 16, 2013. See *TTFO Blog*: "About Things That Fall Over: Monthly Archives: December 2013," <https://thingsthatfallover.wordpress.com/2013/12/>.

²⁴⁴ *TTFO Blog*. See also facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ThingsThatFallOver>.

but also a “detachable” work, reveals that, in fact, the most radically metatheatrical element of *Things That Fall Over* is the role of the playwright herself. Through her insistent framing of the play’s discourse on artistic process, demonstrated in each of the performance events to date, Murray becomes a key performer in her own work, in a manner that distinguishes *Things That Fall Over* from the plays examined previously.

The unusual nature of *TTFO* has been clear from the moment of its first public outing, the launch held in October 2012. This event was remarkable in the fact that what it worked to herald was not a complete performance, or indeed a season of works (as would more typically be expected at a theatrical “launch”) but rather a creative development – a work in the mere infancy of its “readiness” for public viewing. It is through this event, the product of some seed funding from the Victorian Women’s Trust, in partnership with the State Library of Victoria, that the unique nature of *TTFO* as a work of performance becomes apparent.²⁴⁵ Here, in the launch of her as yet underfunded, infant work, Murray made women’s creative process – notable as both the central theme and status of her work – public.

The performance of *TTFO* that took place within Queen’s Hall is described by Murray as a “hectic, short version” of the first folio or act of the play.²⁴⁶ A compilation of scenes performed by six actors, it was interspersed with talks by co-director Robin Laurie, Shane Carmody the Director of Development at the State Library of Victoria, and Murray herself.²⁴⁷ These provided a framework (the first example of Murray’s embodied framing of the play) for the introduction of *Things That Fall Over* as a work in creative development. Additionally, and with a view to a possible future performance, the launch demonstrated, as the playwright explains “how we could bring something into the space.”²⁴⁸ Part of this demonstration involved showing how a performance of the play

²⁴⁵ Peta Murray, telephone conversation with Rebecca Clode, September 25, 2013.

²⁴⁶ Queen’s Hall is one of the Library’s celebrated heritage architectural spaces. Located on the third floor, it is generally not open to the public. However, the marble staircase leading up to Queen’s Hall is one of the features of the Library and the Hall itself is still used for functions and events. For information on Queen’s Hall see “Explore Our Heritage Architecture,” State Library of Victoria, <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/visit/things-see-do/explore-our-heritage-architecture>; Murray, telephone conversation with Rebecca Clode, September 25, 2013.

²⁴⁷ For images from the launch, see *TTFO Blog*: “About Things That Fall Over: Ladies Who Launch -35,” blog entry by wandalusit, October 23, 2013, <http://thingsthatfallover.wordpress.com/2012/10/23/ladies-who-launch-3/>.

²⁴⁸ At the time it was hoped that a production of *Things That Fall Over* could be done as part of the State Library’s Dome Celebrations in 2013. The Library’s Dome, which forms a roof over the Library’s main reading room, is a heritage architectural feature of the State Library; it, along with the reading room itself,

could be realised in a manner that would not disrupt or damage the integrity of the space, using lighting and projections.

While arguably an unusual venue for a theatre performance, there is also a sense in which the State Library was a remarkably fitting backdrop for this launch of an (anti-) musical of a novel inside a reading of a play. In relation to its hybrid generic status conflating theatre and the novel, and further in its plot concerning the process of writing, the setting of the work in an archive and repository of books was, thematically, illuminating. Moreover, in bringing the launch into an overtly public space such as the State Library of Victoria, Murray can be seen to have made the process of theatre making itself publicly visible, and possibly even more so than had the work been performed in a conventional theatre space.

The unconfined, uncontained, paratheatricity of Murray's play, a quality I have examined in relation to the work's complex structure, is also demonstrated in the nature of the text, or indeed, texts, that comprise it. Constantly evolving, *Things That Fall Over* has only ever been performed using scripts referred to by the playwright herself as "drafts," a point that when considered alongside the fact that the work has not been commercially published in its written form, suggests a possible resistance to the very *idea* of the definitive, written play text. There is of course a certain irony inherent in such an observation in the sense that *all* dramatic texts (or at least all those written with the aim of performance) assume some degree of openness in their interpretation for and production on the public stage. Nonetheless, as seen in the examples of Hewett's *Mukinupin* and Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, the published text has frequently been ascribed a status of authority as a record of the original form of these plays. This is true in the cases of Hewett and Wertenbaker who, despite being closely integrated into the rehearsals of their plays, also published their play scripts to coincide with their works' premiere seasons.²⁴⁹ Nowra's active resistance to the publication of *Royal Show* further

known as the Dome Reading Room, was built in 1913. See "Dome Centenary 2013: Celebrating the Dome," State Library of Victoria, <http://exhibitions.slv.vic.gov.au/dome100/celebrating-dome>; Murray, telephone conversation with Rebecca Clode, September 25, 2013.

²⁴⁹ In saying this, I acknowledge that there are a number of factors at play here, including the fact of the published play working as a source of income, and the coincidence of the productions with historical celebrations, for which the publication serves as both marker and souvenir.

illustrates the point at hand in so far that the play has not figured significantly in studies of Nowra's career because it exists only in manuscript form.

The Australian theatrical contexts out of which Murray's work has emerged have recently been examined in Fotheringham and Smith's edited collection of essays, *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s*.²⁵⁰ Here, Geoffrey Milne considers the ways in which "developments in government-subsidised theatre in Australia from the mid-to-late 1990s to early 2011" worked to benefit a minority of "major performing arts organisations" whilst making the position of "small-to-medium" theatre companies more precarious.²⁵¹ Milne argues that the "casualties" of this industrial climate have included "regional," "multicultural Australian drama" and "contemporary Asian Australian theatre."²⁵² Milne further argues that opportunities for female playwrights, demonstrably fewer in previous decades than those afforded their male counterparts, have scarcely improved, if at all. Indeed, while "writers like Melissa Reeves, Patricia Cornelius, Andrea Lemon, Pat Rix, Lally Katz... Hilary Bell and Peta Murray have all had numerous works performed," these have mainly been staged outside the "major [subsidised] organisations" sector.²⁵³ In demonstrating the conditions experienced by contemporary female playwrights, Milne also decries the disestablishment of Playworks, an organisation that had operated between 1986 and 2006 as the "leading women's playwright support organisation."²⁵⁴

Reflecting this context, *TTFO* engages in a kind of paradox whereby, in addressing the challenges faced by female playwrights in Australia, it risks embedding and reinforcing those challenges, possibly becoming a self-defeating exercise. Murray has described the process of the play's genesis as "messy," "protracted" and fraught with challenges.²⁵⁵ While this may, in part, be attributed to several unavoidable interruptions to her MA, which prolonged the process of conceiving and actually writing the work, the obstacles that Murray has faced in getting her play staged can also be seen to reflect the very contexts critiqued within it. In September 2013 at the completion of the third public

²⁵⁰ Richard Fotheringham and James Smith, eds., *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

²⁵¹ Specifically "due to the onerous conditions – including constant innovation – placed on this sector's access to the relatively limited Federal funding made available to it." Milne, "Making it New?," 21.

²⁵² Which he defines as the "non-metropolitan-company sector," citing as examples the closure of several regional companies. Milne, "Making it New?," 36-39.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁵⁵ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 22.

showing, Murray estimated that she had attended upward of 100 meetings, “including repeat visits to people and organisations” as she worked to secure funding, venues and further public performances of TTFO.²⁵⁶ Since the launch in October 2012, the playwright had written 20 applications for funding “to support different aspects of the production and its processes.”²⁵⁷ In discussing this exhaustive (and indeed exhausting) undertaking, a physical and emotional effort metatheatrically reflected in the play’s depiction of Verity’s artistic process, Murray points out “how few of these applications and meetings bear any fruit. The strike rate,” as she explains, “is very low.”²⁵⁸ Yet, with the small amounts of funding and other support she has managed to secure from a range of organisations, among them The City of Melbourne, The State Library of Victoria, The Victorian Women’s Trust, The Besen Foundation, the Australia Council, Footscray City Council, La Mama Theatre, Victoria University and private donations (mostly from friends and family), the playwright has remained committed to finding a voice for her work. Viewed in this light, the paratheatricity of Murray’s play can be said to articulate not just the playwright’s artistic voice in the sense that Hewett expresses hers in *Mukinupin*, but also, radically, voices the conditions of playwriting for women in Australia in the early twenty-first century. Unbounded by its own sense of time or place as a theatrical event, this is a work that expresses both broadly and publicly, what it means to be a woman artist.

As well as its radical staging of women’s artistic process, Murray’s work bears a number of hallmarks of postmodernist drama, further reflecting the theatrical contexts out of which it has been conceived. *Things That Fall Over* might usefully be understood in relation to the discussion of North American dramatic postmodernism offered by Philip Auslander, who uses the terms “postmodern” and “postmodernist” to distinguish between two commonly used applications of the term; while “postmodern” signifies a historical definition of dramatic work emerging from the 1970s, “postmodernist” is used by Auslander to describe “cultural works” bearing particular, aesthetic features. These features, in a non-exhaustive list to which other critics have subsequently contributed, incorporate techniques adopted across a wide range of cultural practices, some of which (including visual art) initially developed such strategies as part of their own genre’s

²⁵⁶Peta Murray, email message to Rebecca Clode, September 28, 2013.

²⁵⁷Ibid.

²⁵⁸Ibid.

reaction against the tenets of modernism.²⁵⁹ Among the techniques employed by Murray in *Things That Fall Over*, are generic hybridity or “boundary blurring between genres and practices,” the conscious mixing of high and low (or popular) culture, and notable in relation to the play’s metatheatrical discourse on theatrical process, a “[self]-reflexive approach to texts and performances.”²⁶⁰

The origin of *TTFO* in an academic Masters programme marks another contemporary context out of which Murray’s project has emerged. The nature of the project as practice-led research, provided a context in which she could self-reflexively explore this theme, whilst situating the work within a recently expanded era of creative (writing) practice within Australian universities. Consistent with trends observed in both the United States (see McGurl) and United Kingdom (see Donnelly and Harper), this era has seen an influx of creative practitioners seeking avenues for their artistic practice within university programmes, filling the void caused by the withdrawal of state-sponsored funding for the arts.²⁶¹

As the earliest constituent text of *TTFO*, Murray’s MA thesis bears comparison with Hewett’s “Genesis,” although in the context of the MA project it necessarily represents a more formalised process of reflection than the type-written, hand-annotated notes preserved in Hewett’s archive. Murray’s thesis is entitled *Things That Fall Over: Women’s Playwriting, Poetics and the (anti-)musical*. While *TTFO* is presented within Chapter Four of the thesis, the three preceding chapters are used to provide her exegetical

²⁵⁹ See, for example, Kerstin Schmidt, *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), accessed May 25, 2014, eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost), <http://search.ebscohost.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xwv&AN=130676&site=ehost-live>. As critics including Philip Auslander have explained, postmodernist drama is generally not understood as a reaction to dramatic or theatrical modernism. As Auslander argues, “it is difficult to establish what postmodern theatre [unlike postmodern art] may have reacted against because a coherent description of modern theatre is hard to construct.” Philip Auslander, “Postmodernism and performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101. Cambridge Companions Online, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521640520.006>.

²⁶⁰ Auslander, “Postmodernism and Performance,” 106. Quotations from *Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, vol 2 (M-Z), ed. Dennis Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 2003), “Modernism and Postmodernism,” 866-70. It is important to acknowledge here that some of these features, including generic hybridity have also been considered as features of modernism. For a closer examination of the shared vs distinguishing features of modernism and postmodernism in drama see, for example, Auslander, “Postmodernism and Performance,” and Schmidt, “Introduction: The Postmodern Condition of Drama,” in *The Theater of Transformation*, 9-29.

²⁶¹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009); Dianne Donnelly and Graeme Harper, eds., *Key Issues in Creative Writing* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013).

outline and explanation of the research project. Entitled "Once Upon A Time," "A Primer of Play-full Practice" and "The Big Picture Book," these sections fulfil a number of related functions.²⁶² In them, Murray outlines the guiding principles of practice-led research as they have been employed within her project's methodology. She also articulates her broad research topic including its origins in her own practice and in the study of two "late-blooming" female artists, Elizabeth Jolley and Rosalie Gascoigne. A further function of the exegetical component of Murray's thesis is to provide background on the contexts and genres informing her work. Detailed primarily within her third chapter, these include: "Women's Playwriting in Australia,"²⁶³ "The Stage Musical,"²⁶⁴ and "Playwriting, Poetics and the Anti-Musical."²⁶⁵ Throughout these sections, Murray further situates her work within the context of postmodern theatre, a term that she uses to describe the play's postmodern historical location (consistent with Auslander's use of the term "postmodern") as well as its incorporation of "postmodernist" aesthetic features (see Auslander's description of postmodernist dramatic style). Chapter Five, following the libretto of chapter four is an "Abecedarium,"²⁶⁶ in which the playwright offers further insights into key terms and concepts employed within the play. This in itself is a gesture towards the play's postmodernist generic hybridity, an Abecedarium being a kind of glossary and thus a paratext that, like the footnote, is more commonly associated with a work of literature than a play. Together these chapters (followed by Chapter Six, a conclusion) address the project's key reflective functions and, as such, they draw upon notes from a writer's journal that Murray kept while she was doing her MA.

An important function of Murray's exegesis is to demonstrate the play's role in examining the issue of women's theatre practice. Murray describes the play's genesis as a research project exploring

the contradictions and ambivalences experienced by a working artist at a time when her age, her gender, and broader cultural shifts are all potential obstacles or liabilities to creative flourishing. It is the product of practice-led research into the creative process from the perspective of the female "late bloomer." In this phrase, I have in mind the mature-aged woman who

²⁶² Murray, "Things That Fall Over: Women's playwriting, poetics and the (anti-) musical," 1-4, 4-11, 11-27.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14-20.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-24.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 182-202.

is, in mid-life, suddenly seized with inspiration and fired with creative energy.²⁶⁷

In addressing such concerns, both at a personal and social/political level, Murray aligns herself with Elaine Aston, describing her play as “feminist” insofar as it questions the assumption that women enjoy equality, particularly where the work of mature age female artists is concerned.²⁶⁸ Murray explains her poetics of playwriting through identification with a contemporary argument towards the need for continued advocacy for female artists, whilst acknowledging that identification with feminist aims is problematic, an issue addressed elsewhere by Peta Tait and Lizbeth Goodman.²⁶⁹

In her exegesis, Murray also explains the connection between her play’s generic hybridity and its feminist aims. The writer describes the play as “refus[ing] to be contained within orthodox taxonomies and the boundaries of genre,” a refusal demonstrated in the play’s conflation of wide-ranging dramatic styles, as previously discussed.²⁷⁰ Like Hewett in *Mukinupin*, Murray, as she *herself* describes it, “borrows” and “bowdlerises” elements from the theatrical traditions in which she has been steeped, first through her undergraduate degree at the University of New South Wales and later as a practicing playwright.²⁷¹ Particularly notable is the way in which both Murray and Hewett conflate elements of high art with popular culture – a technique that can be seen at once as Shakespearean and a kind of postmodernist pastiche.²⁷²

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶⁹ Peta Tait, *Converging Realities*, 68–82. Tait cites Goodman’s study of the experiences of “ninety-eight pro-feminist theatre groups in England,” and Goodman’s related argument that feminist theatre encounters particular challenges to survival, in a commercial sense, in contemporary Britain.

²⁷⁰ Murray, “Things That Fall Over: Women’s playwriting, poetics and the (anti-) musical,” 5.

²⁷¹ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 6. After completing her undergraduate degree, Murray went on to study a Diploma of Education at the University of Sydney. She then worked as a high school teacher before leaving education to focus on her playwriting career in 1989. As a student and continuing into her subsequent, professional, career, Murray has maintained an active involvement in fringe and community theatres. See Peta Murray “Depth Receptivity,” interview by Carolyn Pickett in *Performing Women / Performing Feminisms*, ed. Joanne Tompkins and Julie Holledge. (Brisbane: Australasian Drama Studies Association, 1997), 59–62.

²⁷² When asked about the possible influence of Hewett’s work upon her own theatrical style, Murray reflects that, while not immediately conscious of her techniques at the time of writing *TFO*, it is likely that Hewett, as a role model and the subject of her undergraduate honours thesis on *Pandora’s Cross* years earlier, represents a point of reference for the play’s hybrid theatricality. See Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 17–18. Murray’s familiarity with *Pandora’s Cross* is telling, because Hewett’s play was written immediately prior to *Mukinupin* and in this sense *Mukinupin*, like Murray’s *TFO* can be seen as a response to a moment of personal artistic crisis. There are distinct similarities in the textual and metatheatrical hybridity of *Mukinupin* and *TFO*, just as echoes of *Mukinupin* can be traced in Nowra’s metatheatrical *Royal Show*. Viewed in this light, the influence of Hewett’s techniques upon Murray, as a playwright whose

As illustrated earlier, there is a measured attempt on Murray's part, to locate her work on the "margins," outside the mainstream.²⁷³ In using this term, I here apply the loose definition adopted by Milne, who uses "mainstream" to describe work produced by "major" subsidised theatre companies.²⁷⁴ This is embodied within the play itself, the all female casting requirement of which mandates that the work should be generated out of a sector of the industry so-described by Milne as under-represented in the theatrical mainstream. Demonstrating Murray's attempt to create a work that sits "in-between" established social and theatrical "codes," the performance events of the play thus far have included a remarkable array of women. These include some of "Melbourne's most experienced professional female cross-genre artists with gifted amateur-performers from women's community choirs, queer and fringe arts, and community musicians."²⁷⁵

Among these, are a number of artists whose theatrical careers have been vital to the development of women's theatre in Australia of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, notably, Robin Laurie, who co-directed the creative developments and showings of the work that preceded its 2014 premiere. With a background in women's circus and physical ensemble, Laurie is one of the professionals among the varied *TTFO* collective. Her involvement in the production as a professional alongside relative novices to performance is just one example of the work's creative mix. Yet in another sense Laurie, like Murray herself, might also be seen as embodying the condition of "in-betweenness" that the playwright is attempting to articulate in this work. As a female

career began more than two decades after Hewett's own, bears testament to the legacy of *Mukimpin* and with it *Pandora's Cross*, as formative examples of contemporary Australian metatheatre.

Indeed, Hewett might well be seen as another example of the kind of mature-aged female artist upon whom *TTFO* is based and as such, a submerged source for the play. A "late bloomer" like Jolley and Gascoigne, whose stories informed Murray's writing of the play, Hewett came into playwriting aged 53. In retrospective critical accounts of the contexts in which she emerged as a playwright, Hewett is often identified as one of the few female playwrights to have successfully forged a career within the male-dominated Australian theatrical New Wave. Despite her "general accep[ance] as one of Australia's leading playwrights," Hewett's works have frequently been criticised for their unconventional use of dramatic form. This, as she noted on more than one occasion, was one of the characteristics of her writing that made the reception of her work problematic, particularly when judged (either critically or by audiences) against the predominantly male paradigm of mid to late twentieth century theatrical realism. As Margaret Williams contests, the "mixed styles and apparent disorder in Hewett's plays" can in fact be seen as a resistance to conventions viewed as "phallogocentric" by poststructuralist feminists.

²⁷³ Murray also talked about this in her April 2013 interview. Interestingly, though, when speaking on this topic, the playwright suggested that what she was, in fact, trying to do with this work, was situate it not so much marginally, in the sense of being on the periphery, as "in the gaps" between existing forms of theatrical expression. See Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 19.

²⁷⁴ Milne, "Making it New" 21.

²⁷⁵ *TTFO Blog*: "About Things That Fall Over," blog entry by wandalusst, October, 2012. <http://thingsthatfallover.wordpress.com/about/>.

theatre practitioner in contemporary Australia, much of Laurie's career has been spent working in theatrical forms and spaces that lie outside the "conventional frameworks" dominating mainstream theatres.²⁷⁶ Likewise, Murray has traversed the "spaces" of professional, community and educational theatres, as playwright, teacher, and mature-age student. Adding a further dimension to Murray's artistic hybridity, she has also traversed cultural "spaces," in her work as an Australian of Anglo-Celtic heritage, as creative consultant for the Melbourne based Aboriginal theatre company Ilbjerri.²⁷⁷ This experience can be seen to have informed the work of *TTFO*, in its incorporation of Indigenous performers and stated openness to cross-cultural casting, as well as its position on the margins. This position of flexibility, which Murray here applies to her own identity as an artist, also relates to her vision of the *work* as flexible, by which she means it may be performed not only by professionals but by pro-am and community theatre groups. Openness in the cultural make-up of the ensemble is also, she explains, vital; this is a work that celebrates and accommodates not only women but all those whose artistic practice has been relegated, in her experience and perception, to the margins. Murray's assertion and, indeed, celebration of the work's "queer" status (previously discussed), is important in this respect. This has been demonstrated, in performances to date, in the incorporation of community women's choirs and independent volunteer amateurs. Murray here celebrates not only women's artistic practice and diversity of performance experience, but in referring to the musical's all-female chorus as the "quire," a colloquial term for a homosexual choral group, specifies that diversity of sexual orientation is also part of her celebration of artists practicing from within liminal social and cultural spaces.²⁷⁸

This theme has been highlighted in numerous ways, including through the use of the term "quire" in the programme for the premiere (see Appendix F) and, most potently, in the music and its accompanying lyrics. Singing during the oratorio *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* the women who comprise the quire, most of whom were what Murray would term "late bloomers," embody and articulate the theme of giving voice to those on society's margins. Appearing as a group of "swan women," a dramatic take on the

²⁷⁶ *TTFO Blog*: "About Things That Fall Over: Introducing Robin Laurie, co-director," blog entry by wandalust, October 12, 2012. Peta Tait also mentions Laurie in a discussion of Women's Circus in Australia. See Tait *Converging Realities*, 111.

²⁷⁷ Murray was employed, on a short-term engagement, as a facilitator for Ilbjerri's Bla(c)k Writers' Lab. This involved working with Indigenous performers or theatre makers who were interested in writing.

previously outlined use of the swan myth as a metaphor for women's "silence," the quire appeals to their audience with the following lyrics:

Old ones in young bodies; we sing to you. Hear our swan song.
 Young ones in old bodies; we sing to you too. Hear our swan song.
 You will find us in this world and in the other too,
 And in the thin places in between...
 In the crossings, at the edges, never far from view
 Swim we soulful singing swans unseen.²⁷⁹

The performance of these lyrics in the public forum of theatre demonstrates the way in which Murray's play calls for women's voices to be heard. The appeal presented by the performers is that their audience "hear [their] swansong," in defiance of the myth of swans' and therein women's silence. This message is delivered to both an on-stage audience of the young girl artist and by implication to wider society, represented in the theatre audience at large. The message does not end here. Beyond their choral insistence that their voices be heard, the swans remind their audience of the physical presence of women in society. By referencing swans' existence in liminal spaces, they further insist that women, while often relegated to the marginal, backstage spaces of both artistic practice and society, nonetheless have a physical presence. Whether "in the crossings" or "at the edges" they are, indeed as Murray writes, "never far from view." There is a particular potency in Murray realising this message theatrically, as this medium enables women's physical presence to be demonstrated in a live and embodied way; it is here that the importance of *Swansong!!!* is most apparent.

The idea of staging marginal voices is further articulated in an interview with Murray in which she explains her play's preoccupation with the idea of women "inhabiting" liminal spaces. As she argues:

They can put me on the margins. But I'm going to find – and I'm not going to be allowed in the main spaces, but if I can insert story, character, style, into the gaps, and kind of rudely interrupt, then there is space for me there.²⁸⁰

As Murray attests, this is not a work that wishes to reclaim a perceived cultural "centre" from the fringes. Rather, it is a work that seeks to realign the centre-margin dichotomy by insisting on the value of voices that exist outside of dominant cultural and social

²⁷⁹ Murray, "TFO: Final Draft," 134.

²⁸⁰ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 13.

“norms” - hence its interest in making theatre out of what audiences normally do not see. From this position it proposes to sing loudly.

The openness of Murray's work and its conscious positioning at the margins continues to be celebrated with each performance event. In resisting closure, *Things That Fall Over* celebrates openness both in its thematic discourse and through its own staging of the process of theatre making and incompleteness. One risk inherent in this process is that in its scale and disparateness Murray's play is so difficult to define that it may seem obscure/untenable to those who are not immediately connected to its politics or the project itself. There is a sense in which the work continues to be so fluid that it becomes difficult to pin down, both in scholarship (admittedly only just emerging) and production. This fluidity is demonstrated in the ways in which drafts have changed and continued to change throughout the play's production history. On the one hand, this reflects the evolving nature of Murray's artistic process as a mature aged female playwright. On the other, the work's quality of fluidity has generated texts that, paradoxically, are so immediately connected to their production contexts that references within them must necessarily be understood in relation to the precise historical moment that produced them.

In the premiere of March 2014, for example, the character of “Franklin Miles” who had appeared in earlier drafts was replaced by a more immediate contemporary reference, “Phoney Rabbit,” rhyming slang for current Australian conservative Prime Minister, Tony Abbott. The original character had featured in *Folios Two and Three* as a tyrannical Emperor figure. Unseen but omnipresent, Franklin Miles was presented via a “male voice over,” issuing various commands and overseeing restrictions upon the lives of the play's female artists.²⁸¹ This name was drawn in reference to Stella Maria Miles Franklin, the Australian novelist and feminist (1879-1954) who worked under a male pseudonym, ‘Miles Franklin.’²⁸² In relation to the feminist agenda of *TTFO*, this pseudonym is in itself interesting to consider, as it was generated not through the adoption of a new name, but from the de-feminisation of her actual name; omitting the feminine “Stella Maria” of her first and second names, the novelist retained the masculine “Miles.” In early drafts of *TTFO*, Murray takes the de-feminised version of Stella's name, her male pseudonym, and phonetically inverts it to become Franklin Miles. She then attaches it to a tyrannical,

²⁸¹ Murray, “TTFO: Draft 10C,” 4.

²⁸² Jill Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography* (NSW: Harper Collins, 2010).

despot character who over the course of the play delivers edicts prohibiting women from writing and demanding the immediate destruction of their existing works.

Murray's inversion of Miles Franklin's name registers as an ironic comment on the historical practice of adopting male pseudonyms by female writers, for the purposes of being recognised and accepted in their professional sphere. The word play, which she describes as a form of "topsy-turvydom" might be seen as a kind of protest, both upon the contextual practice and the legacy it can be seen to have created.²⁸³ While inverting the name does not subvert the masculine (insofar as Franklin Miles remains a masculine name) the technique does create a kind of disruption to the "natural" order, and this appears to be Murray's intention both here and in other examples of topsy-turvydom throughout the play.

The replacement of the character himself with Phoney Rabbit, an even more immediate contemporary reference, arguably demonstrates Murray's lack of concern with writing an enduring classic or creating a definitive text. In earlier drafts, Murray's characterisation of the Emperor had been topical in its response to events in the Australian arts industry at the time the play was being written. Specifically, it represented a comment on two consecutive years in which women had been notably under-represented in the nominations for what is arguably Australia's most prestigious contemporary literary accolade - the Miles Franklin Award.²⁸⁴

The substitution of Franklin Miles for Phoney Rabbit appears to have been made for the occasion of the 2014 premiere, particularly in connecting the play with the theme of "Politics" within the Footscray Community Arts Centre's Women's Day event. Although it presents the audience with a more immediately recognisable and topical reference than

²⁸³ Murray, "TTFO: Draft 10C," 72.

²⁸⁴ Established following Franklin's death in accordance with a stipulation laid out in the author's will, the award is made annually to a writer (specifically, a novelist or playwright) for a work that demonstrates excellence in their field and which depicts "Australian life in any of its phases." See "Welcome to the Home of the Miles Franklin Award," Miles Franklin Award webpage, accessed on August 12, 2014, <http://www.milesfranklin.com.au/>. Yet as Sophie Cunningham pointed out in her address at Melbourne Writers' Festival in 2011, the shortlist for that year was exclusively male, as it had been in 2009. This, Cunningham later argued, could be seen to reflect broader inequalities affecting females within the publishing industry. Cunningham stated: "Women continue to be marginalised in our culture. Their words are deemed less interesting, less well-formed, less worldly and less worthy. The statistics are – in this humiliating and distressing matter – on my side." She added: "Since the Miles Franklin Award began in 1957, a woman has won only 13 times. Four times this woman was Thea Astley, but twice she shared the award." Cunningham "Why We Still Need Feminism."

the Franklin Miles of earlier drafts, this particular edit could also be argued to diminish the enduring impact of the play's critique of women's experiences within Australian literary and cultural spheres. Although claims of misogyny have characterised Abbot's political career, the incorporation of Phoney Rabbit into the play seems less likely to be enduring than the reference to Franklin which captures not just the contemporary moment but, indeed, more than a century of women writers' professional experiences. Thus, while on the one hand the edit made for the premiere demonstrates the work's adaptability to changing theatrical and social circumstances, it also illustrates a risk inherent in this very quality of flexibility – specifically that its message of women's historical marginalisation as artists will be diluted.

4.5 SWANSONG!!! THE MUSICAL!!! AND THE QUESTION OF THE PLAY'S METATHEATRICAL FUNCTION

Despite the difficulties encountered by Murray in trying to stage *Things That Fall Over*, the work has continued to forge a space for itself in the public arena through its related showings and premiere performance. One showing, which I attended in my capacity as researcher, was a staged reading of the oratorio, *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!*. This performance took the form of an open rehearsal attended by invited guests of the ensemble. The event took place at 1pm on September 15th 2013, in the Bluestone Church, Footscray, a space provided by the Footscray City Council that had been used in an earlier creative development. Attended by approximately 50 guests of varying ages, this showing is relevant to the present discussion as it demonstrates the staging of one particular, metatheatrical component of Murray's work, the oratorio, or play-within-the-play.

One of the unique aspects of *TTFO* is that its oratorio, itself an unusual companion for a dramatic work as previously discussed, is designed as a discrete and self-contained work so that it can be performed independently of the play as a whole. This, as Murray explains, has been her vision since the earliest stages of drafting. The "detachable" quality of the oratorio, so-described by the playwright herself, represents one of the ways in which *TTFO* opens itself up to production by community groups who wish to stage the work, but do not have sufficient resources to produce it in its entirety. It is Murray's intention that, in spite of its epic qualities, *TTFO* should be built around a "sustainable, replicable, portable performance-building model," allowing it to be easily re-mounted "regionally

and beyond, with the involvement of new communities, different participants and in different locations.²⁸⁵

Swansong!!! The Musical!!! has been used for two public showings to date, including the event at the Bluestone Church described above and a subsequent, fully realised production of *Swansong!!!* held on December 16th 2013 at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). It was also performed within the larger work of which it is a part in the 2014 premiere of *Things That Fall Over*. The separate staging of *Swansong!!!* before the premiere is interesting in the sense that it disrupts the traditional sequence of dramatic production and narrative (beginning to end); *Swansong!!!* is an ending to *TTFO*, albeit an open one, that was played out in production, unusually, before its beginning acts (or folios) were ever realised. Although there are a number of practical reasons for the way in which the showings of Murray's work have been sequenced, not the least of which is the requirement to produce performance outcomes as part of grant acquittal processes, the ability of *Swansong!!!* to be staged independently before *TTFO* as a whole begs the question of how important the metatheatrical function of the work as a play-within-the-play is, in fact, to Murray's purpose. An assessment of this issue may, in part, be facilitated by a consideration of a secondary, related, question – to what extent does *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* in fact constitute a play-within-the-play? Both of these questions are usefully preceded by a brief outline of the work.

As discussed previously, *Swansong!!!* is a recitative parable based on swan mythology from around the world that reinforces the exploration of women's voices in an industry dominated by men. The oratorio is led by the Weaver, played in each of the performances to date by Indigenous Australian actor and singer, Lisa Maza. As the dramatisation of Verity's final creative achievement, *Swansong!!!* enacts, in general terms, the writer's passing on of lessons learned to an artist symbolised in the character of the Child. In sung narrative, the Weaver tells of how the Child, reaching a "fork in the road" upon which she is travelling, stumbles upon an injured swan.²⁸⁶ Seeing the animal is in distress, she carries it to a river bank whereupon speaking to it, she is surprised to hear the swan reply. Having been taught that swans can only speak in death, she tries to make sense of this, only to have the fallacy of swans' muteness corrected by the swan herself. As the child

²⁸⁵ *TTFO Blog*: "About Things That Fall Over," blog entry by wandalusst, October, 2012.

²⁸⁶ Murray, "TTFO: Final Draft," 117.

ministers to the wounded animal, the Weaver describes how it transforms into “Verity” the swan woman who, together with a chorus of swan women who now join her on stage, communicate with the Child in song. Thematically, this moment resonates with the larger play’s concern with re-writing the myth of *women’s* silence, both as artists and in society at large.²⁸⁷

In a series of verses, these women sing of a world without boundaries, where people are free to create regardless of gender, age or sexual orientation. The use of swan mythology (via Murray’s depiction of the swan women) is integral to this message; as creatures that, according to mythology, live between realms or worlds, they are a suitable metaphor for female artists and the world that the play (with its own hybrid, interstitial form) envisages. Their songs also express truths related to The Child/Artist’s newfound desire to express herself creatively, a desire which is revealed upon her encounter with the swans. Led by Verity and a three piece girl-group, the “Eternal Verities,” the songs of the oratorio operate as a series of lessons for Artist/Child. Such lessons include: the importance of looking for inspiration in nature; the value of learning from “wise ones,” specifically artists of the past; the notion that “truth” in art is timeless and the virtue of laughter.

Murray’s depiction of the Eternal Verities as soul singers is significant in a number of respects. Firstly, their “songs of the soul” relate to the *Swansong’s* celebration of the female artist, and its message of valuing and nurturing oneself. Beyond this, the singers and the lessons they impart are clearly intended as a reference to black soul music.²⁸⁸ When asked about the music in the Q&A session that followed the September 2013 showing, composer Peta Williams acknowledged this reference, describing the musical, *Swansong!!!* as progressing from the “essentially recitative” form of the traditional religious oratorio, into soul-influenced later numbers.²⁸⁹ The reference to soul may be interpreted either broadly, as a kind of music capturing the play’s sense of spiritual

²⁸⁷ This is an idea that Murray takes up throughout the play: the playwright has also described her work as a way of “contextualising [her] own silence” as a female in a male dominated industry. As she explains: “Writing [the work] allowed me to contextualise my own silence. And to see that my writer’s block was not necessarily just a neurotic behaviour, but was actually a political manifestation of an environment that I inhabited, where my voice wasn’t required.” Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 7.

²⁸⁸ For another, earlier, example of a play that explores Australian Indigenous identity and incorporates black soul music, see Tony Briggs’ 2004 musical and later film, *The Sapphires*. This work is discussed by Rosanne Kennedy in “Soul Music Dreaming: *The Sapphires*, the 1960s and Transnational Memory,” *Memory Studies* 6, no.3 (2013): 331-44.

²⁸⁹ Peta Williams, composer. Statement made during Q&A session following the showing of *Swansong!!!* September 2013, Blue Stone Church, Footscray.

celebration, or more specifically, as a symbol of the up-rising of an oppressed social group. Here, in *Swansong!!!* the evocation of black soul music works as part of a re-claiming of the *female* voice, and an assertion that the female artist will not be silenced. There is also a connection between the soul singers as a kind of “black” music and the fact that the Weaver was played by an Indigenous actor, an aspect of the play that will be discussed in further detail below.

In narrative recital interspersed between the oratorio’s verses, the Weaver tells of how the Child connects with the swan women in their songs. Yet after swimming together with them in the river’s “inky water,” she is disappointed to realize her mentors must, ultimately, depart.²⁹⁰ Hearing the flapping of wings, pending the swan women’s departure, the Child longs to go with them, thus transcending earthly life. However, this is not possible. As the swan women take flight, Verity sings of a process through which the Child must pass before entering the realm of the swan. In a song entitled “Rest Now,” she soothes the Child, assuring her that her time has not yet come. She reminds her there are earthly lessons through which she must first pass, among which, first and foremost is to learn the importance of Truth to Self. Here, against the solemn tones of Peta Williams’ composition, Murray incorporates an element of humour, referring back to the wordplay on “beetroot” that pervades the plot of *TFFO*. Accompanied by the Eternal Verities, Verity sings:

- VERITY. Rest now. It is not your time.
So much to seek and to learn.
Artists are teachers, books are too.
Listen. Read. Discern.
Mind grows bright in music’s light
- VERITIES. Literature and art
- VERITY. Lofty homes for mind and flesh
- VERITIES. Truth through hand and heart.
- VERITY. Beetroot to yourself.
- THE CHILD. What did you say?
- VERITY. Beetroot to yourself.²⁹¹
And so, Child, here our lesson ends.
Each life may light one spark
Use whatever lies at hand

²⁹⁰ Murray, “*TFFO*, Final Draft,” 136.

²⁹¹ This can also be seen as an intertextual Shakespearean reference to *Hamlet*, specifically Act One scene three, in which Polonius advises Laertes “to thine own self be true.”

To make a maker's mark.²⁹²

Returning to the water's edge, as the Weaver now explains, the Child discovers the injured swan in the very place she had left it. In these final moments, as the creature takes its dying breaths, the Weaver tells of how the Child gently brings her hand to the injured swan's breast and in a moment of symbolic artistic transference, the swan's heartbeat travels from the creature through the Child's arm and into her own breast. At this moment, the swan, having died, departs in flight, leaving behind a single feather. Taking up the feather and holding it, as described by the Weaver/Narrator to the "murky lake become ink," the Child awaits the Weaver's account of the conclusion.²⁹³ Here she is surprised, as The Weaver informs her that the story being told, specifically, Verity's story, is unfinished.

At this moment, the Child, newly bestowed with the gift of poetry, realises her task of finishing the unfinished play. Calling the ensemble to assist her in this work of artistic creation, she puts quill to paper and begins to write. In these final moments, the ensemble unites to celebrate the creative process and to extend the play's message of artistic legacy to women in the audience and beyond. As they sing in this "Ensemble Finale,"

Do the work, complete it while you can, sisters.
The path of time circles starry spaces, wide.
Do the work. Glory in the work, sisters.
Raise your voice, be ukulele-fied!²⁹⁴

Accordingly, the Women's Chorus who participate in this finale provide ukulele musical accompaniment, while notes provided by Murray on the title page of drafts suggest that the audience be invited to participate by bringing their own ukuleles. Here, as in other moments throughout the work, Murray's text indicates a melding of audience and on-stage action, in a manner that includes viewers as participants and therefore recipients of the play's message. Encapsulated in the ensemble's song, this message is, ultimately, one of light-hearted celebration and humour. Indeed, the incorporation of the ukulele and related reference within this verse creates a sense of levity that, along with the reference to "beetroot" moments earlier, returns the play from the serious register of the oratorio to the humorous, postmodernist, ironic register that has dominated the preceding work,

²⁹² Murray, "TTFO, Final Draft," 137-138.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Murray, "TTFO: Final Draft," 136.

TTFO. This change of tone is vital in ensuring that the play's theme of women's artistic practice, while serious in its intention, is ultimately a celebration of women's capabilities.

One of the striking elements of the staging of *Swansong!!!* as performed within the 2014 premiere of *TTFO* was its performance within the Footscray Community Arts Centre's outdoor amphitheatre. Within this space, the message of the play could be read as a public statement of the value of women's artistic practice, reinforced through a link with ancient ritual, the amphitheatre a reminder of theatre's classical origins. In the outdoor space, with the Maribyrnong River and buildings of the Melbourne city skyline in the background, the connections between theatre and society were also present visually as part of the production, just as they were in many of the theatres of ancient Greece. Against this backdrop, the women's quire, standing together as the group of swan women within the amphitheatre's orchestra, in fact resembled the chorus of an ancient Greek drama (fig 4.5). Moreover, as members of the local Melbourne community, they can be seen to have served a similar function, as civic participants in the production.



Fig. 4.5. The Women's Quire singing in the final moments of *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* From the premiere performance of *Things That Fall Over*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, March 1, 2014, Photograph by Lucy Crossett.

Simple, imaginative staging techniques were an important part of this marathon performance – necessarily so on account of its limited budget, but also inviting an overtly theatrical approach to staging consistent with the play's broader metatheatrical approach. One such technique, simple yet powerfully evocative in its staging, was the use of a long, heavy piece of black rope to represent the swan, one end taped in red to create the nuance of a swan's red beak. When lifted by the Child, played by eleven year old Rosie Bray, the

weight of the rope gave its strands a gradual movement and demanded a care of handling that beautifully reflected the Weaver's poetic narration of the Child's attempt to minister to the wounded creature (figures 4.6 and 4.7). In performance, the effect generated by the apparent movement of the strands of this inanimate prop, was a potent reminder of theatre's ability to transport the viewer's imagination and a demonstration of the viewer's same ability to *apply* that imagination to the idea of a better world for women artists.



Fig. 4.6. The Child Ministers to the Swan. Rehearsal photo from production of *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* staged on December 16, 2013, RMIT, Melbourne. Photograph by Lucy Crossett.



Fig. 4.7. The Child ministers to the Swan. Lucy Bray (as Child, left) and Robin Laurie (co-director, right). Rehearsal photo from production of *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!* staged on December 16, 2013, RMIT, Melbourne. Photograph by Lucy Crossett.

4.5a THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY: A DETACHABLE ORATORIO

In returning to the question of *Swansong's* metatheatrical function, we must necessarily address the problem of how a play-within-the-play can be detached from its related text. According to the categories of plays-within-the-play as outlined by Richard Hornby, a play-within-a-play can assume one of a number of forms, but always bears some direct relationship with the work of which it is a part. "There must," he suggests, "be some integration of the inner play with the outer; that is, the outer play must in some way acknowledge the inner play's existence."²⁹⁵ This broad description holds true in relation to *TTFO* and *Swansong!!!* in that *Swansong!!!* is referred to directly within the acts that precede it, and represents the realisation of the character Verity's final creative work. In this sense, *Swansong* qualifies as a metatheatrical play-within-the-play as defined by Hornby. A closer examination, however, reveals some complications in the definition of Murray's oratorio and the related assessment of its metatheatrical function.

In his analysis, Hornby details what he sees as two predominant types of play within the play.²⁹⁶ First is the "inset" play in which "the inner play is secondary, a performance set apart from the action like *The Mousetrap* in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*."²⁹⁷ Second is the "framed" type of play-within-the-play. Here, the "inner" play constitutes the primary action, "with the outer play a framing device, like the Sly episodes in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*."²⁹⁸ While both types of play-within-the-play are shown to have been popular in Elizabethan Drama, Hornby also provides modern theatrical examples. Specifically, he suggests that Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Strindberg's *A Dreamplay* can be viewed as "prototypes" for the use of metatheatricality in the twentieth century. These are shown to contain "inset" and "framed" plays-within-the-play, respectively. According to this assessment, *Swansong!!!* best qualifies as a version of the "inset" play-within-the-play. It is, indeed, set apart from the action of the work that precedes it (*TTFO*) although as the discussion above demonstrates, it is hardly secondary to it and so, in this sense, Hornby's definition of the metatheatrical "inset" play is only a partial fit. Moreover, problematically, Hornby's analysis does not account for the question of the capacity of a

²⁹⁵ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, 34.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-48.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

play-within-a-play (such as *Swansong!!!*) to be detached from the work it is connected to and separately performed. Detachable plays-within-plays do not apparently feature in the history of metatheatrical works that he considers.

When *Swansong!!!* is removed from the larger work and performed independently, it can still be appreciated as a celebration of women's artistic practice. It no longer serves a metatheatrical function, in the sense that it no longer bears a visible relationship to another work, yet its message is potent. Viewed in this light, it is clear that the metatheatrical staging of *Swansong!!!* is not in and of itself, vital to the realisation of the play's key theme. What *is* important, however, is an understanding of the work as part of an immediate, contemporary, social context. In each of the production events to date, this context has been established for the audience through the framing of the work by the playwright. On each occasion, Murray has provided, in some way or another, a performed introduction, announcement, or prologue, in which the contemporary relevance of the work, as the product of women's artistic practice, has been outlined and reinforced for the viewer. In this sense, Murray herself becomes what must be seen as the most metatheatrical element of her work. This was manifested most recently in the playwright's writing of herself as a character into the play, in which, during the 2014 premiere, she appeared as the Narrator/Architect.

4.6 METATHEATRICAL FRAMING: THE PLAYWRIGHT AS ARCHITECT AND THE ROLE OF THE WEAVER

Comparable metatheatrical framing devices have been observed within two of the plays discussed earlier in this thesis. In Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, it is the Aboriginal Australian who provides a narrative choral function, viewing the action from on stage yet outside the play's main action. In *Mukinupin* narrative framing is provided by the theatrical Hummer sisters. They, like the Aboriginal Australian, are characters within the play but also fringe dwellers – artists who occupy a presence in the town's night time realm. It is the marginal status of these characters within the social worlds they inhabit that affords them the distance and perspective required to perform this narrative function. The metatheatrical effect of this narration is powerful (and as I have suggested earlier might be added to Hornby's list of metatheatrical strategies or "tenets"); by separating the marginal character(s) physically on stage from the dramatic worlds they inhabit, the technique highlights the position or status of such individuals within Australian society.

In the recent premiere of *Things That Fall Over*, Murray took this metatheatrical framing one step further by inserting herself into the play. Unlike Hewett who, in a sense, created two dramatic representations of herself in the Hummer sisters (three if we count Bobbie Le Brun), Murray embodied her own argument and performance of women's artistic process. This insertion of herself into the play can be seen to have evolved out of the playwright's close connection to the work. Prior to the premiere this had been seen in Murray's relationship with the production of *TTFO* and her involvement in public showings as producer, co-director and team member. On each of these occasions, Murray had provided some kind of textual and contextual framing, usually in the form of a prepared or improvised speech. It is possible that following this series of articulations of the play, its contexts and her own relationship with the material, Murray's decision to write the role of the Architect (played by herself) into the play had emerged as a logical step and representation of the process the play describes – namely that of women's playwriting.

One interesting aspect of how this was manifested in the premiere was that Murray remained physically present throughout the work. Not only did she introduce it in the Artist's Talk/"prologue," but she remained on or near stage throughout the production. For example, during Folio Two in the Sanitarium, she was visibly present standing beside the stage. The image of the playwright standing alongside her work is highly unusual and holds multiple possibilities for interpretation. As an audience member, it was remarkable to watch the responses of the writer to the performance of the work she had written, particularly in moments where it seemed she was not aware of being watched. Also interesting were moments during which Murray interrupted the action to provide some clarification or, for example, to offer the actors direction. At these moments (unlike the moments at which she was not "in the spotlight" to quite the same extent), the interruptions seemed overtly staged, as though they, like Murray's prologue, were part of a finely crafted performance of a "playwright" persona. The manner in which Murray interrupted the action was theatrical and self-staging, perhaps to highlight her own relationship with the work. Indeed, one of the effects of these metatheatrical intrusions was that they highlighted the kind of multi-tasking required of writers on the margins whereby, as previously discussed, the playwright is frequently called upon to play the roles of producer, director and more.

Another way of interpreting Murray's interruptions is as a demonstration of the unreliability of the written text in theatrical production. Through the radically unusual situation of an on-stage playwright watching actors perform her text, notably with scripts in hand, the audience were reminded that even in the presence of a living playwright, a written text is unstable, subject to misinterpretation, poor timing and the restrictions imposed by the physical space. One example of this occurred in folio one when Murray loudly complained that the space the actors were using was inadequate for the scene they were trying to perform. Again, the tone in which Murray, as Architect, delivered this complaint was overtly theatrical; it was clearly not that Murray had a genuine problem with the room in which the scene was being performed so much as she wanted to highlight the problem of access to space for independent women theatre practitioners.

A further dimension of Murray's physical involvement in the play was that, throughout its performance, she continued to wear the banner she had donned during the prologue. With its message "Unfunded Excellence" displayed across her body, the playwright became a physical and public announcement of both her own and her play's marginal status. In this respect, Murray can be seen to have aligned herself, as a late-blooming woman writer, with the marginal characters – artists and Indigenous Australians – who provide the narrative framing for *Mukinupin* and *Our Country's Good* and who appear in the backstage, "unseen" locations of Nowra's *Royal Show*. At the same time, in announcing her own and the work's quality of "excellence," Murray's physical appearance beside the play can be seen as a protest against the contexts that her play critiques and which have prevented women's theatre from being staged. In choosing to perform, and therein extracting herself from the relative privacy of the written page, the playwright offered a complete testament to the value of her work and the importance of its underlying messages.

Viewed in this light, Murray's self-insertion into the play's performance is not only unusual but also carries an enormous risk, both personally and for the work itself. On a personal level, the writer's appearance before a public audience places her in a highly vulnerable position. While arguably protected, in part, by her adoption of a kind of persona, signified in her self-given title of Architect, it is notable that Murray is not an actor. Moreover, though highly articulate, Murray herself has admitted in interviews to

being very shy, making her decision to perform all the more unusual.²⁹⁹ The playwright's writing of herself into the production of *TTFO* also carries the risk that it will further limit the future performability of the play. While the role of Architect could arguably be played by an actor rather than Murray, this would possibly result in a less potent realisation of the playwright's creative process than the physical embodiment offered by Murray in the March 2014 premiere.

Interestingly and in some respects problematically, the narrative framing provided by Murray is only a recent development in the drafting of her play. In fact, until shortly before the premiere, the role of Architect did not exist, its metatheatrical framing functions instead fulfilled by the Weaver. For example, whereas in the premiere, the Architect introduces the play and explains its premise as an attempt to recapture the performance of *Swansong!!!* in previous drafts this introduction was provided by the Weaver.

In the prologue of these earlier drafts, the Weaver begins the play by speaking directly to the audience and on-stage actors, thus establishing her functions as "story-teller, minstrel and stage manager."³⁰⁰ In introductory notes to the play, Murray suggests that this role should be played by "an Indigenous actor where possible," and in line with this suggestion, the part has been assumed in both creative developments to date, by Indigenous actor/singer Lisa Maza.³⁰¹ Murray's play also contains numerous references to Indigenous culture and history. The action of *TTFO* is described by the Weaver as occurring in "a dark period of history" – a period known as "The White Out."³⁰² This, as Murray explains in an interview, is a "literary and stationery joke" used to signify a context hostile to writers, in which female literacy is a dying art. In light of Murray's experience working with Indigenous Australian artists and the play's openness to cultural hybridity in performance, it is also clear that this reference to a "White Out" is partly intended as an allusion to a process of cultural erasure, specifically the continued erasure of Aboriginal culture in the post-colonial context. Murray verifies such an assertion in

²⁹⁹ Peta Murray, "A Dramatic Success," interview by Andrew Bell in *The Writer's News*, November, 1990, 15-16.

³⁰⁰ For example, see Murray, "*TTFO*: Draft 10C," 3.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 8.

her April 2013 interview when she speaks of the ways in which her play represents twenty-first century Australian society. The playwright explains:

There are references, there are particular references for me of Australia and of our particular situation as post-colonial invaders and I've tried to put that acknowledgement of that in the text. [While I realise] it's not my right to tell those stories and I don't *intend* to tell those stories, I wanted to acknowledge that as part of the landscape of the piece and also, you know, trying to talk about who's been silenced. So it's a work about who's been silenced – the Indigenous people of this country have been the most silenced of *all*.³⁰³

Murray's stage directions indicate that the Weaver "*holds the space*," occupying a "*station or prompt corner from where she delivers props*," along with lighting and sound effects (LX and FX respectively) "*as the story unfolds*."³⁰⁴ Speaking directly to the audience, the Weaver establishes her metatheatrical narrative function from the outset. Positioned as a kind of on-stage authorial figure, she plays a similar framing role to that of *Mukinupin's* Hummer sisters, and exerts a similar control over the action. In her initial address, the Weaver sets the scene, explaining that she is connected with a group of actors who have been trying to rehearse a play but whose efforts have been censored by an unspecified party that objects to the creative venture. Nonetheless, the female ensemble, whose belongings have been confiscated, has managed to hold on to enough items to keep working, albeit subversively. Gathering the actors together, the Weaver suggests they all "get to work," continuing rehearsals despite their opposition. It is under these conditions that the performance of the play-proper begins.

In these early drafts it is therefore the Weaver, rather than the Architect, who controls the work, from its beginning, and signals its theatrical status for the audience. It is she who, through the opening prologue (described above) alerts the audience to two important details relevant to this status: firstly, that this is a work of theatre about a process of production (writing, rehearsal and performance); secondly, that they (the audience) will be actively involved, as interpreters and participants. Murray's narrator establishes the idea of a covert and spontaneous on-stage rehearsal in which the audience are implicated by virtue of their presence in the space. The setting up of this dramatised rehearsal process can be seen, on Murray's part, as a way of activating her theatrical metaphor; in other words, by involving the audience as witnesses to the dramatised creative process, she

³⁰³ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 15. Emphasis Murray's.

³⁰⁴ Murray, "TFO: Draft 10C," 7.

simultaneously invites reflection on this work itself, as a contemporary example of the process depicted onstage.

To this end, Murray uses her Weaver/narrator as a kind of stage manager, just as Hewett has her Hummer sisters officiate both the night-time ceremonials of the on-stage drama and the play at large. There is a further similarity between the two plays in the sense that their on-stage narrator figures may be interpreted, at some level, as dramatised authorial voices. The question of Hewett's self-performance via the Hummers has been discussed earlier and it is clear that in this prologue Murray's Weaver, the dramatised "maker" of this play, is more than partly representative of herself and her experiences as a female playwright in contemporary Australia. This is ultimately confirmed in her decision to substitute the Weaver's role in the prologue, with the Architect, played by herself.

This substitution can also be seen to have emerged from particular concerns that Murray had tried, unsuccessfully, to resolve, in deploying an Indigenous performer in a narrative role within a play written by an Anglo-Celtic playwright. A primary concern had been the potential misreading of this aspect of the play as an attempt, on Murray's part, to try to tell an Indigenous story. Murray was acutely aware of this potential and, when interviewed in April 2013, admitted this was one aspect she had yet to resolve.³⁰⁵ Grappling with the problem at hand the playwright argued "I want to keep the work open to Indigenous actors to play *any* bloody role!!!"³⁰⁶ She also explained that at the time of the first creative development, Maza was cast primarily for her extraordinary singing ability. This is important "because the Weaver becomes the deliverer of a lot of the songs, through the text and in the oratorio as well."³⁰⁷ At the same time, Murray was aware that misreadings may detract from the play's reception, thus her subsequent decision to install herself, as Architect, into the position of narrator, while keeping the Weaver as a character in the play and, ultimately, the singer/narrator of *Swansong!!!* In this way, Murray can be seen to have altered the metatheatrical framing of the work so that it no longer carried the risk of being received as an attempt to tell an Indigenous story.

The symbolism of Murray's depiction of an Indigenous Weaver is nonetheless interesting to consider; as well as placing Indigenous women at the centre of the play's examination

³⁰⁵ Murray interviewed by Rebecca Clode.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

of those who have been “silenced,” it also acknowledges a longstanding tradition of story-telling in Indigenous Australian cultures. At the same time, the description of the character as “Weaver” alludes to traditional women’s handicrafts, *also* important in many Indigenous cultures. Here, in the narrator figure of the Weaver, Murray makes a gesture towards taking a form of women’s traditional, “domestic art,” and offering it a public forum as Theatre. In doing so, she contests those art forms that have typically been viewed as private or domestic on account of their socially perceived femininity, warrant validation as “real” artistic practices.

As references to women’s handicrafts are found throughout *TTFO*, this message is, in fact, not exclusive to Indigenous cultures but, rather, relates to women’s art broadly. One notable example occurs when, in Folio One, a quotation from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is followed by a description of Austen as “The Spinster.”³⁰⁸ This operates doubly as a reference to Austen’s marital status (a status that located her outside the nineteenth-century wedded social norm) and to the physical action of “spinning.” This word is, in itself, multivalent. To “spin,” by one definition, reflects the idea of weaving, the traditional craft already introduced through the character of the Weaver. Another, though certainly not the only, alternative, meaning lies in the notion of “spinning-a-yarn,” the act of story-telling to which the Weaver refers throughout. Partly related to this usage, the physical action of spinning, as circular movement, can be read in connection with the non-linear writing process often observed of female authors and playwrights. The former example of Hewett is a case in point. Viewed in this light, Murray’s references to women’s handicrafts, woven as in fact they are, throughout the play, can be seen as part of her broad strategy of feminising the text. As she explains in her interview of April 2013:

...[it’s] a feminist thing...it was this [question] of ‘Where is women’s Art?’... I’m really interested in maturity of practice and artistic endeavour over the life course. And where *is* women’s art? It’s domestic art. It has been, by and large, domestic art. And for some reason that’s given it a secondary place. But it’s just as extraordinary as any other sort of art. And so I wanted to celebrate that as well. I guess it’s kind of a re-vision of the history, like ‘Hello, we *are* artists, we have produced.’³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Murray, “TTFO: Draft 10C,” 22.

³⁰⁹ Murray, interviewed by Rebecca Clode, 21.

In this sense, the play's performance or "staging" of handicrafts, along with women's writing, becomes a public recovery of women's art. Beginning with the characterisation of the Weaver and continuing with Murray's own process of weaving references to traditionally feminine art forms throughout the work, *TTFO* demonstrates an attempt to re-claim and validate women's artistic practice.

While her reduction in the size of the Indigenous role has troubled Murray, specifically because it diminishes the stage time afforded to a cultural group already underrepresented on the Australian stage, this shift in the play's metatheatrical framework whereby the writer herself becomes the narrator, successfully addresses her other, arguably greater, concern regarding the message that would be conveyed by placing an Indigenous actor in the narrative role. In addition, Murray's re-drafting of her script has resulted in a play in which the Aboriginal Weaver is no longer an outsider to either the play's architecture or the social world depicted on stage, as seen in *Mukinupin*, *Royal Show and Our Country's Good*, but, progressively, is depicted as integral to the play in every sense. No longer a function of the play's metatheatrical framework, the Weaver becomes a part of the social world depicted on the stage – the world of the woman artist. In showing the Aboriginal character as central to the play's argument about the importance of women's art, this play therefore demonstrates the possibility (albeit a remote one, as signified in the play's setting in a "hypothetical future") of a more inclusive and culturally representative Australian theatre, and beyond this an Australian society in which Indigenous women, like each of the swan women depicted in the play, are empowered to sing.

4.7 CONCLUSION

4.7As demonstrated in this chapter, Murray's depiction of women's artistic practice in *TTFO* is historically broad, culturally inclusive and reflective of specific conditions in twenty first century Australian society. It is also unique in its incorporation of the playwright herself into the staging of the work. This dimension of the play has been seen as extending it beyond the narrative functions employed in *Mukinupin* and *Our Country's Good* and arguably beyond the "tenets" of metatheatre outlined by Hornby. The fact that Murray herself assumes the part of the narrator in the process, while in a sense reducing the size of the role allocated to an Indigenous performer, in fact resolves a concern that the playwright had been grappling with throughout the process of writing the play regarding the cultural ethics and politics of authorship. Importantly, the Indigenous

Weaver remains vital to the play's depiction of women's creative practice through her role as a character in the play and in *Swansong!!! The Musical!!!*, while Murray's embodiment of the role of writer/Architect within her work presents us with a remarkable metatheatrical reflection on conditions of women's playwriting today. The "paratheatrical" openness of Murray's *Things That Fall Over* makes it a distinctive contribution to the present study and is worthy of further analysis, both within and beyond the discussion of Australian metatheatre in the twenty first century.

CONCLUSION

Just as Peta Murray's play uses the trope of weaving to demonstrate the complexities of female artistic process, so this study has woven together a wide range of analytical and methodological perspectives, including: close textual analysis, extensive use of ephemeral materials, archival research, consideration of existing scholarly perspectives, cultural and historical research, interviews and my own presence in the rehearsal room and as an audience member. Pulled, or plaited, together as they have been throughout my analysis, these methodological strands have uncovered the existence of a number of common threads – key findings into the kinds of social and cultural reflection effected by playwrights using metatheatrical approaches. These include: the use of metatheatre to offer voice to marginalised groups including Indigenous Australians; the use of metatheatre to reflect conditions of inequality in Australian artistic practice; the creation of critical tension between cultural celebration and critique and the existence of a longstanding and continuing tradition of Australian metatheatre. These threads will be illuminated in this concluding chapter, along with implications for future directions in the study of Australian metatheatre.

Using metatheatrical strategies including the play-within-the-play, on-stage narrative, dramatised ceremony and a range of overtly theatrical staging techniques, each of the playwrights examined in this thesis has offered a reflection or critique immediately relevant to Australian society. While the function of social criticism is by no means unique to playwrights whose works rely on metatheatrical techniques, this thesis has illustrated the effectiveness of metatheatre in generating particular kinds of social and cultural reflection. As highlighted at the beginning of Chapter Three, Hewett, Nowra, Wertebaker and most recently Murray, all use metatheatre to demonstrate the ways in which culturally marginalised groups have been viewed and treated in recent Australian history. Part of the “distinctive” effectiveness of this social reflection lies in the use of theatrical (or metatheatrical) metaphor whereby, in each of the plays considered, marginalised groups have been depicted within the “backstage” or “behind the scenes” locales of Australian society. Thus, the after-hours, night-time ceremonials of both *The Man from Mukinupin* and *Royal Show* are populated by social outcasts, of whose presence the participants of the day-time rituals of these plays (and therein Australian society) are

aware but would prefer not to acknowledge. Similar backstage metaphors were also observed in *Our Country's Good* and Murray's *Things That Fall Over*, signifying the exclusion of Indigenous people and women from full participation in Australian society.

One of the key findings of this thesis has been that, in deploying metatheatre for the purpose of social critique, each of the plays considered has entailed a specific focus upon the social treatment and marginalisation of Indigenous Australians throughout the nation's British colonial and post-colonial history. In *Mukinupin*, this critique was shown to be effected via Hewett's linking of Indigenous references to the play's "backstage" night-time ceremonials. Through the depiction of Indigenous character Lily Perkins/Touch of the Tar, the nuancing of Jim Cotter's night-time music with sounds of the didgeridoo, and the performance of the Aboriginal rain dance in Act Two, Hewett's play alludes to the marginalisation and ultimate silencing of Australia's Indigenous people. Echoes of Hewett's metatheatrical social critique were also observed in *Royal Show*, suggesting Hewett's influence upon Nowra's play and a similar concern with Indigenous and non-Indigenous post-colonial Australian relations, historically. Powerful here was the depiction of Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman as one of the after-hours freak show performers, a characterisation similar to Hewett's half-caste Aboriginal character. By locating their hybrid Indigenous/non-Indigenous characters within the realm of such backstage/night-time scenes, Hewett and Nowra both highlight the problematic status historically afforded to Australian race relations.

This theme was again demonstrated metatheatrically in Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*. In examining this play via analysis of its production and reception in Australia, the thesis demonstrated how the treatment of the Aboriginal man, as an on-stage narrator and outside observer of the play's main action, generates a social critique whereby the marginalisation of Indigenous Australians is illuminated. While viewed in the play's original, British, production context as one of its least successful elements, the metatheatrical staging of the Aboriginal Australian was shown to take on a new and powerful resonance in Australian productions.

The social marginalisation of Indigenous Australians was also shown to be integral to the critical function of Murray's *Things That Fall Over*. As acknowledged by Murray, Indigenous women were included as part of this play's depiction of "silenced" female

voices. This was achieved by placing a female Indigenous character, the Weaver, at the heart of the play's action, where at a climactic moment in the drama she leads the women writers' liberation movement by teaching her gagged (and therefore silenced) sisters to sing. Chapter Four's discussion of this play illustrated the value of production analysis in understanding the effect intended by Murray's depiction of the Weaver. Here it was argued that by moving the Weaver from her role in early drafts as a metatheatrical narrator, into the inner narrative of the play, Murray achieves a representation of the Indigenous Australian that, for the first time in the plays considered within the thesis is included (albeit only as part of a hypothetical future) within the "main stage" of Australian society. Unlike Lily Perkins, Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman and Wertenbaker's "Lone Aboriginal," The Weaver of *Things That Fall Over* is not relegated to the margins of the stage.

Before celebrating Murray's play as indicative of a more inclusive Australia, however, we must first note that as discussed in Chapter Four, her entire play in fact operates as a staging of the "backstage" realm occupied by those marginalised in Australian artistic practice. The playwright's casting of the Aboriginal actor in a "leading role" is therefore problematised – a leading role it is, yes, and hopeful in that it alludes to the possibility of a more inclusive future, but it is nonetheless a leading role within a play about those who, the play suggests, have been marginalised. Viewed in this light, the depiction of the Weaver of *Things That Fall Over* can be seen to generate a social reflection similar to that observed in Hewett, Nowra and Wertenbaker's plays. Together, these works illustrate the potency with which metatheatrical depictions of "backstage" Australia can operate in critique of post-colonial British Australia's marginalisation of Indigenous identities.

As well as demonstrating the use of metatheatrical comment upon and critique Australian racial inequalities, this thesis has shown how playwrights have utilised metatheatrical techniques to draw attention to groups who have been marginalised from cultural practice, including from theatre itself. Just as the metatheatrical depiction of "backstage" Australia highlights historical and contemporary divisions between mainstream and marginalised factions of society, so, too, the on-stage divide between main stage and backstage performance illustrates the challenges faced by those who have been marginalised in Australian theatre practice. The marginalisation of women and Indigenous artists is

particularly salient within the metatheatrical critique offered by the plays considered in this thesis. While Murray's play provides the most recent example, highlighting gender inequality through its "backstage" depiction of women's playwriting, the depiction of women artists in Hewett's *Mukinupin* indicates that the problem of women's representation on the Australian stage is no means a recent one. This was demonstrated, in particular, through the relegation of the Hummer sisters to the physical margins of the stage, and to the "backstage" realm of the play's night-time ceremonials. As retired theatrical performers, these characters demonstrate the challenges faced by "late-blooming" female artists in Australia in 1979, and today. The Hummers' predicament is further highlighted in the conclusion of the play in which Mercy Montebello, unable to sustain her mainstage Shakespearean theatrical career following the death of her partner, Max, retires to set up a fish and chip shop in the remote Australian township of Mukinupin.

As with the depiction of women artists, the metatheatrical depiction of Indigenous performers and performance practices within the plays studied here can be seen to operate as a vital part of the playwrights' cultural critique. Through their staging of the relegation of Aboriginal performers to "backstage" scenes, the plays I have considered highlight a process of cultural erasure in which the Indigenous performer is identified and then sidelined. Hewett's incorporation of the didgeridoo and Indigenous rain dance can both be seen as metatheatrical acknowledgements of a longstanding tradition of Indigenous Australian artistic practice. Yet the relegation of these elements to the township's night-time ceremonials reflects a national culture unable, or unready, to incorporate Indigenous performance practice into its "main stage" theatrical identity. This is highlighted, again, towards the play's conclusion, when Aboriginal Lily Perkins returns to Mukinupin after failing in her attempt to forge a career as a Shakespearean performer.

Echoing the metatheatrical critique offered by Hewett, Nowra's *Royal Show* has been shown to depict a similar kind of reflection on the ways in which Indigenous performers have been sidelined. This was seen in the characterisation of Ivory the Albino Aboriginal Woman, a "freak" whose relegation to the Royal Show after-hours Sideshow event signifies both the social marginalisation of Indigenous Australians and, more literally, a process of marginalisation from Australia's staging of its own theatrical identity. Wertenbaker's depiction of the Aboriginal man in *Our Country's Good* re-instantiates

this process of marginalisation. Moreover, by staging the convict performers' discomfort with the Aboriginal presence within the audience of their 1789 production, this work offers a powerful metatheatrical performance of the early moments in post-colonial Australia's exclusion of Indigenous participants from artistic practice.

The use of metatheatre by the playwrights considered in this study can thus be seen to have served two common functions, the first being to generate reflection upon the marginalisation of Indigenous people within Australian society, the second (related) function being to highlight and critique the denial of Indigenous and women's involvement in Australian theatre practice and, more broadly, cultural self-definition.

These critical reflections are vital to the cultural discourse offered within each of the plays considered here, specifically because of the way in which they complicate the works' celebratory functions. Herein lies the central theme and finding of this thesis – the capacity of metatheatre to qualify, or lend critical tension to, the on-stage celebration of Australian society and culture. While the nature of the celebration has differed from play to play, in all four plays it is placed in critical tension with an element of social or cultural critique. This critique is itself enabled in the works considered, with varying degrees of success, by the incorporation of metatheatrical techniques.

The celebratory overtones of Hewett's *Mukinupin* were discussed at length in Chapter One in relation to the playwright's commission to write the work as part of a national celebration. This chapter demonstrated how Hewett's use of metatheatrical character doubling and her depiction of the night-time ceremonials allowed her to strike a critical tension between celebration and social critique within the play's reflections upon the history of West Australian post-colonial society. Hewett herself, in "Genesis," described her own attempt to "keep the light and dark elements of the play in precarious balance until the very end," thereby signalling the importance of critical, darker elements, to *Mukinupin's* representation of Australian society more broadly.¹

As well as its celebratory critique of Australian society, Hewett's work has been shown to present a similarly complicated reflection on Australia's theatrical history. On the one hand, the play celebrates Australia's longstanding tradition of theatrical, and indeed

¹ Hewett, "Genesis."

metatheatrical, performance. As demonstrated, references to Shakespeare along with the Wirth Bros and performance events from the nation's post-colonial past, provide a kind of celebratory homage. On the other hand, and again highlighted through Hewett's use of metatheatre, the play generates criticism of the way in which marginalised groups have been excluded from participating in this theatrical history.

Nowra's play, unlike *Mukinupin*, was not written in celebration of a national occasion. Rather it demonstrates, via the construct of the Royal Show, the ways in which Australia has performed and celebrated its national identity upon the international stage. The exclusion of Indigenous and other marginalised groups has been discussed at length, as has the use of metatheatrical strategies to effect this critique. Here as in Hewett's work it is the metatheatrical depiction of Nowra's marginalised people that offsets celebration with critique.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the British contexts in which Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* was written have lent themselves particularly to privileging of the theme of theatrical celebration. This theme has dominated critical receptions of the play in London, including its performances by the Royal Court and Young Vic casts. In spite of this, Wertebaker's treatment of the Aboriginal Australian has provided a mechanism through which, in its Australian production contexts, the work can also be seen as a more nuanced social (and theatrical) critique than has been realised in productions elsewhere.

Murray's *Things That Fall Over* depicts a celebration unlike that seen in any of the other plays considered in this thesis. Unique in its performance by an entirely female cast and its related focus on women's playwriting, this work places women, including the Indigenous Weaver, at the heart of its celebration. By celebrating the mature-aged female artist, Murray's play simultaneously critiques the lack of recognition and opportunity afforded to women in Australian cultural production. It is through this conflation of celebration and critique, highlighted in her own metatheatrical narration of the play, that Murray offers theatrical voice to her women artists. What she celebrates is therefore critical, in the sense that it is important, urgent and necessary within the contexts of the play's production.

In addition to highlighting the ways in which playwrights have employed metatheatrical strategies, this thesis has suggested that, beyond the apparent contemporary metatheatrical moment in Australia, metatheatre can indeed be viewed as part of a longstanding tradition. This tradition has been demonstrated in the use of intertextual, metatheatrical references within each of the four plays considered. As well as highlighting these plays' references to canonical texts from the Western theatrical tradition including Shakespeare, the thesis has demonstrated a possible development in Australian drama of recent decades in its citation of its own metatheatrical works. In the 2009 production of *The Man from Mukinupin*, for example, reference to the metatheatrical nature of Hewett's drama was made by the addition of a further metatheatrical framework, as discussed in Chapter One. This recognition of the play's metatheatre on the occasion of its thirtieth anniversary production, can be seen as a celebration of both the play's canonical status and of the Australian metatheatrical tradition of which it is a key example. The self-citation of *Mukinupin* in this Company B Belvoir production might further be seen, in Puchner's terms, as a moment when Australian theatre "comes to itself," indicating a kind of maturity in the sense that our national drama, after striving to define itself throughout the middle years of the twentieth century, is able to look back on itself in metatheatrically performing its own history.²

Looking beyond the findings, or common threads, discussed above, this thesis has laid the groundwork for future research in two key areas. In my Introduction, I attempted to justify my omission of works written by Indigenous Australian playwrights on the grounds that a more inclusive study would necessitate a broader theatrical historical discussion than the study would afford. In doing so, I note reflectively that this omission may in fact be seen to demonstrate the same cultural bias, oversight or "whitewashing," that is critiqued within the metatheatrical works considered here. Thus my thesis highlights the need for a broader study of Australian metatheatre, encompassing the work of Indigenous playwrights. Examples of such plays might include the 1990 musical *Bran Nue Dae*³ written by Aboriginal playwright Jimmy Chi.⁴ A work combining hybrid

² Puchner, "Introduction by Martin Puchner," in *Tragedy and Metatheatre* by Lionel Abel, 13.

³ Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991). Kuckles was the Indigenous band that, together with Chi, wrote the music for the play.

⁴ Chi is of Chinese-Aboriginal heritage, identifying as Australian Aboriginal and the play as first conceived was an Indigenous theatre project. I draw, here, on Maryrose Casey's definition of Indigenous theatre as "theatre produced by Indigenous Australians or produced in collaboration with Indigenous Australians in the primary creative roles." Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-1990* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2004), xxiii. See also Peter W. Johnston,

dramatic influences and styles, *Bran Nue Dae* employs a number of metatheatrical framing and narrative strategies as part of its own celebratory cultural critique. Other plays for possible inclusion in such a study might include recent works such as Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony*⁵ and Therese Collie's *Goin' to the Island*⁶ along with earlier plays by Eva Johnson, Jack Davis, Bob Maza and traditional Indigenous Australian performance practices.⁷ Further perspectives on Indigenous theatre by Maryrose Casey, Jack Davis, Helen Gilbert, Mudrooroo and Geoffrey Milne, for example, may provide useful inroads into such a study, while the broad-weaving, holistic methodological approach adopted in this thesis may again prove useful to an understanding of Indigenous playwrights' uses of metatheatre.⁸

As well as suggesting the need for a broader definition of Australian metatheatre, this thesis points to possible new directions of research. In particular, my discussion of Peta Murray's innovative *Things That Fall Over* lays the groundwork for a more detailed analysis of the ways in which her play incorporates digital technologies and the multimedia platform. In Chapter Four, Murray's engagement with contemporary texts, textualities and technologies was shown to be vital to her play in its broad, paratheatrical approach. The use of the blog in charting the play's creative development was put forward as one of the ways in which the play incorporates new technologies into its public performance, taking the work beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of theatre by opening it out for interpretation and analysis beyond the specific theatre event. The

⁴ "Australian-ness in Musical Theatre: a *Bran Nue Dae* for Australia?," *Australasian Drama Studies* 45 (2004): 158-179.

⁵ Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell, *Box the Pony* (Sydney: Hodder Headline, 1999).

⁶ Therese Collie, "Goin' to the Island," in *Only Gammon: Three Plays from Kooemba Jdarra* (Fortitude Valley, QLD: Playlab, 2002), 125-199.

⁷ Jack Davis' *Kullark*, for example, may prove an interesting comparison to Hewett's *The Man from Mukimpin* as it was written in response to the event of the Perth sesquicentenary. For discussion, see Tompkins, "Celebrate 1988? Australian Drama in the Bicentennial Year," 109, 110.

⁸ Casey's *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre* is a particularly important contribution to this field. Beginning with her own discovery "that there was a whole body of performance and production that I knew nothing about," Casey sets out to address a major critical gap in the documentation of Indigenous theatre practice, with a focus on the years 1967-1990. Her study addresses the fact that in this given timeframe there have been "hundreds of plays and performance texts created by Indigenous Australians," few of which have been viewed as part of the national narrative of Australian Theatre. See Casey, *Creating Frames*, xv, xxiv. See also: Jack Davis "Aboriginal Writing: A Personal View," in *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers*, eds. Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 1-19; Helen Gilbert, "Reconciliation? Aboriginality in Australian Theatre in the 1990s," in *Our Australia Theatre in the 1990s*, ed. Veronica Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 71-88; Gilbert, *Sightlines*; Mudrooroo, "White Forms, Aboriginal Content," in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, 21-33; Geoffrey Milne, "Black and White in Australian Drama," *Meridian* 9, no.1 (1990): 33-44.

performative function of blogging and other forms of social media has garnered critical interest in recent years, and this blog, which has been used to document the production's development since November 2012, can indeed be seen as a kind of performance – a public voicing – of the work.¹ In fact, in demonstrating the process of producing this play (its challenges and its triumphs) the blog, to which Murray and members of the ensemble have all contributed, can be seen in its own right, as a kind of metanarrative – a work about the making of a play. As such, just as this study has woven itself into the ongoing archive and story of *Things That Fall Over*, the digital blog becomes a valuable public record, an archival paratext to Murray's 2014 metatheatrical work and a document that may, ultimately, prove useful to future companies wishing to produce the work.

In conclusion, the study of metatheatrical strategies, through which playwrights have looked to the past, present and into the future, has revealed itself as integral to an understanding of Australian drama. An analysis of metatheatrical strategies in these four plays has provided insights, not only into the traditions upon which each of the playwrights has drawn, but into the kinds of social and theatrical discourse offered and, importantly, the challenges that in some cases the use of metatheatrical strategies have presented in production. Such insights, valuable to scholars and practitioners alike, may usefully inform future scholarship of Australian drama and approaches to production, as the critical potential of metatheatrical strategies is understood and put to use in ways that offer new perspectives on Australian society, both "on-stage" and "behind the scenes."

¹ For analyses of the various performative functions of blogging, see for example: Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008); Tara Chittenden, "Digital Dressing Up: Modelling Female Teen Identity in the Discursive Spaces of the Fashion Blogosphere," *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no.4 (2010): 505-20; Melissa Gregg, "Posting with Passion: Blogs and the Politics of Gender," in *Uses of Blogs*, eds. Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 151-160; Rosie Findlay, "O Hai Guyz: Between Personal Style Bloggers, Their Readers, and Modern Fashion" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/11726>.

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry should be supported by a valid receipt or invoice. The text also mentions the need for regular audits to ensure the integrity of the financial data.

In addition, it highlights the role of management in overseeing the financial operations and ensuring that all employees are aware of the company's financial policies. The document concludes by stating that transparency and accountability are key to the success of any organization.

The second part of the document provides a detailed overview of the company's financial performance over the past year. It includes a summary of the revenue generated, the expenses incurred, and the resulting profit. The text also discusses the various factors that contributed to the company's success, such as market growth and effective marketing strategies.

Furthermore, it outlines the company's financial goals for the upcoming year and the strategies that will be implemented to achieve them. The document also mentions the need for continued investment in research and development to stay competitive in the market.

The third part of the document discusses the company's financial risks and the measures that will be taken to mitigate them. It identifies the main sources of risk, such as market volatility and changes in consumer behavior, and outlines the strategies that will be used to manage these risks.

The document also mentions the need for regular communication with stakeholders, including investors and creditors, to ensure that they are kept up-to-date on the company's financial situation. It concludes by stating that the company is committed to maintaining a strong financial position and ensuring the long-term success of the organization.

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