

Julian Meyrick. *Australia in 50 Plays*. Currency Press, Sydney, 2022. 352 pages. Hardback \$39.99. ISBN: 9781760627386

Chris Hay and Stephen Carleton. *Contemporary Australian Playwriting: Re-visioning the Nation on the Mainstage*. Routledge, 2023. 300 pages, 7 b/w illustrations. Paperback \$59.19, hardback \$201.60, eBook \$53.59. ISBN 9781032008615

I was reading a gloomy article by Stefan Collini in the *London Review of Books* when Julian Meyrick's attempt "to bring Australian drama into proper consideration of questions concerning the life of the nation" (282) arrived thanks to Auspost, newly invigorated, prompt, and profitable due to Christine Holgate's and her team's unappreciated efforts. *Australia in 50 Plays* is a large and in parts important contribution to Australian theatre studies. It is also a diverse mélange of long quotations of dialogue from the plays with close critical analysis of many of them. Undoubtedly this is the book's major strength, and the comprehensive index will ensure its usefulness for school and undergraduate essays. In addition, *Australia in 50 Plays* provides Wikipedia-like snapshots of general Australian and world political and other events as context for the decades considered in each chapter; an analysis of globalisation and neoliberalism and their discontents; autobiographical musings based on Meyrick's significant career as one of our few successful and senior academic practitioners; and a Conclusion (282–95) which reads like a separate essay on history, nationalism and Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, with reference to arts and culture in general but only scant references to the preceding chapters. Any one section is interesting, but there's a portmanteau feel to the totality.

Locked down during Melbourne's Covid response, Meyrick responded by selecting fifty Australian plays between 1912 (both Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* and Louis Esson's *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe*) and 2020 (the then recently staged and available only in manuscript, Glace Chase's *Triple X*) which he believes all major Australian theatre companies should revive—at least one per year—as their contribution to "[r]eclaiming a sense of the nation (and a national drama)" (287) to promote a "strong, positive sense of nationhood" (287). Meyrick, whose background is in politics and economics as well as theatre making, and who has made major prior contributions to the study of Australian public cultural policy, argues that in the 1980s, largely due to neoliberal economic responses to globalisation (Hawke, Keating, Howard, Costello *et al.*), "Australia gave up thinking about its nationhood in a deeper way" (288).

An even larger and consequent goal, which Julianne Schultz highlights in her Foreword, is that, while "[t]he very notion of national identity has become the last refuge of marketeers and scoundrels," "theatre still has, as it had in the past, a special role in [the] mission" to continue to seek "a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood" (xi), and that, by drawing attention to our long tradition of scripted live performance, Meyrick challenges our "national addiction to the permanent present" (vii).

This brings me back to Stefan Collini, professor emeritus of Intellectual History and English Literature at Cambridge, who begins his review of John Gillory's *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organisation of Literary Study* with a personal comment:

When I tell people I'm writing a history of English studies as an academic discipline in Britain, I encounter the kind of baffled, pitying look likely to be provoked by saying I've spent the last ten years building a scale model of Westminster Abbey out of matchsticks. (*London Review of Books*, 1 December 2022, pp. 19–21: 19)

The title of Collini's review: "Exaggerated Ambitions," is his (or the *LRB* editors') identification of a key argument in Gillory's book, which is that "criticism never quite shook off the aspiration to be in some way the criticism of society, not just literature, saddling the activity with exaggerated ambitions still evident today" (21).

Understandable as it is for those of us who have spent our lives enthusing students about the joys of live theatre and what it can reveal to us about aspects of society we celebrate or deplore, can it really claim a "special role" in national discourse, taking on the marketeers, scoundrels and bigots, and did it ever do so after collapsing as a major public art form in 1930, as the twin tsunamis of the Great Depression and talking movies rolled in one after the other? Might not stronger cases be made for film, radio, television, print and online media, and popular music, with their audiences in the millions rather than the thousands? If it is only possible to give a small cheer for the quixotic notion that there is something special about live theatre, it is both because, partly excepting the commercial musicals, it is a small (and, since Covid, getting smaller) bump on the posterior of both national and international culture; and because, I suggest, Australia is not now in many significant ways unique in its focus on the here and now, or a declining interest in its cultural heritage. (Witness the closing of many orchestras and dance and theatre companies throughout the USA, Europe, and Australia since the fall of the Berlin wall—and Stefan Collini's lament for the state of English studies in the UK today.)

Further, what Meyrick argues is the failure by our theatre companies in the last forty or more years to recognise and reclaim Australian theatre and performance history is contradicted by the fact that these are the years in which such attempts have been most significant, almost solely because of Katharine Brisbane's and the late Philip Parson's Currency Press, founded in 1971, which has published thirty-seven of Meyrick's fifty plays, drawing them to the attention of play directors as well as providing texts for school and university curricula. (Brisbane's Playlab Press is next with four including two I edited.) Even earlier, in 1970, the academic Margaret William's association with Melbourne's Australian Performing Group led to its pastiche revival of the 1889 melodrama, *Marvellous Melbourne*, while in 1980 the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) chose, as its first-ever production, a revival of George Darrell's 1884 *The Sunny South*. Eight of Meyrick's first thirteen, up to and including our one regularly-revived stage classic, the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* from 1955, have had relatively recent professional seasons (some, notably Betty Roland's 1928 *The Touch of Silk* and Dymphna Cusack's 1942 *Morning Sacrifice*, have had several), while the ongoing radical reduction in cast sizes as the economic parameters of live theatre started to narrow since c.2000 probably explains, more than any ideological obsession with the here and now, the inability of even our largest non-commercial stage companies to undertake *Rusty Bugles* (first staged in 1948 with a cast of 17 men) or many of the epic 1980s' works of Steven Sewell or Louis Nowra, though Nowra's 1992 *Cosi* ("4F, 7M" according to Currency's website) is approaching classic status and seems to have become a favourite with amateur companies in particular. Many of David Williamson's many plays (fifty and counting, "the most produced Playwright in the history of Australian theatre," according to davidwilliamsonplaywright.com) are regularly performed by both professional and amateur companies, although Meyrick has only space for brief comment (144–46, 152) on Williamson's very early *Don's Party* (1971), presumably because its subject matter (the 1969 federal ballot where the Labor Party just failed to be elected) responds well to his theme of theatrical engagement with public political and economic issues. It is in the earlier decades that playwrights and theatres struggled to find performance or publication, let alone impact or consideration or reclamation of what had gone before.

In 1953 Leslie Rees, the long-serving head of the ABC's radio drama division, published *Towards an Australian Drama* where he gave scant attention to the Australian plays up to that date written for the commercial stage. He focused instead on the emergence of

“literary” drama in the amateur theatres, starting with the lament in 1904 by the minor journalist Leon Brodsky whose total surviving contribution to Australian culture, according to the *AustLit* database, is one short story from the preceding year. He complained of what he snobbishly regarded as the crass commercial theatre of the time and the absence of serious “intellectual” plays. Only two years after Rees’s short book appeared, so did *The Doll*. (Alrene Sykes, his then assistant, given the task of undertaking an initial read-through and cull of the entries for the 1955 Competition held by the Playwrights Advisory Board which Rees had founded and chaired, dined out for many years on the story of going into Rees’s office to opine, “This one seems a bit better than the rest.”) *The Doll* in fact was only joint winner with Oriel Gray’s *The Torrents*—which, though neglected at the time apart from one amateur season and not one of Meyrick’s fifty has been revived twice since: by the South Australian State Theatre in 1996 (STCSA) and by STC jointly with Perth’s Black Swan Theatre in 2019.

In 1973 Rees revised and updated his book and later added a second volume. Extremely important as his pioneering and proselytising was, by the 1980s there was an impatience amongst the next generation of performance critics and historians with what they regarded as the high-cultural “literary” bias and preferences in Rees’s works (which the 1970s’ “larrikin” theatre had also done its best to demolish), the scant attention to work and companies outside Sydney and Melbourne or to performers and performances, and the failure to recognise the importance in earlier times of the commercial melodramas, pantomimes, comedies, and farces and that these could also be read in ways that offered valuable insights into the tensions and complexities of post-Invasion Australian society.

Pre-eminent in the next tranche of publications was Harold Love’s 1984 edition *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* which remains a foundational text for all researchers in the field since. It judiciously considered nearly every area of the live stage, commercial and subsidised, from literary drama to tent shows and vaudeville; encompassed theatre buildings and companies, the stars who appeared on stage and the entrepreneurs behind; and, recognising that one-volume one-author compendiums could no longer hold the expanding field of Australian performance history, prefaced each section with scrupulously researched essays from experts on specific periods and topics. (Sykes contributed the essay on “Theatrical Events 1950–1965.”)

Oddly, therefore, *Australia in 50 Plays* also begins with Brodsky, as Rees did seventy years earlier and, for the first 118 pages covering the years through to 1960, adopts the same focus on “literary drama.” These early chapters cover many of the same plays as Rees’s studies. Henrietta Drake Brockman’s *Men without Wives* (1938, publ. 1955 and more recently by Playlab) gets extended consideration and certainly merits revival (though its cast of 9+ may limit opportunities), and it’s good to see the more commercially orientated Max Afford’s *Lady in Danger* given serious attention—though it wasn’t the first Australian drama to play on Broadway, as claimed on p. 79.

From Chapter 5 (1961–1975) there is a marked change of approach, as Meyrick incorporates the analytical challenge of Katharine Brisbane’s observation which he adopts as that chapter’s subtitle: “Not Better Just Different” (119). To me, this second part of his book is far stronger. He reclaims for our renewed attention Alan Hopgood’s *Private Yuk Objects* (1966), Merritt’s *The Cake Man* (1975), Jennifer Compton’s *Crossfire* (1975), and Katherine Thomson’s *Diving for Pearls* (1992), and offers illuminating studies on, amongst others, Patrick White’s *A Cheery Soul* (1963) and, in Chapter 6 which he titles “The Compelling Mood Darkens” (159), Nowra’s *Inside the Island* (1980) and Tes Lyssiotis’s *The Forty Lounge Café* (1990), with Jack Davis’s fierce but ultimately optimistic *No Sugar* (1985, published the next year by Currency though not seen live in the eastern states until later) challenging what Meyrick identifies as the “mood of defeat.” He shares the reservations some felt about Michael Gow’s *Away* (1986) despite its undoubted popularity (191). I attended an opening night in Brisbane

with an overseas playwright who said that its segue without explanation from agony to healing was dramaturgical “cheating,” a claim Meyrick considers more carefully and politely.

The last third of the book (Ch. Seven, 1991–2005 and Ch. Eight, 2006–2020) benefits from Meyrick’s own fresh memories of great performances of compelling dramas by Hannie Rayson, Joanna Murray-Smith, Wesley Enoch, Andrew Bovell, S. Shakthidharan, and others. However, in a book ostensibly about revisiting the past and establishing a canon (however contested and provisional), including these plays seems premature; it could have become a separate book, and a fine one. But most of these authors are still writing and would probably like to see their new scripts taken up rather than their earlier efforts revived. I regrettably missed Shakthidharan’s much-praised *Counting and Cracking* (Belvoir 2019, and more recently seen in Edinburgh at the 2022 Festival as well as in Birmingham and London), but his second, *The Jungle and the Sea* (2022), also at Belvoir, is magnificent. Which of them will seem more resonant and demanding revival as a “classic” in 2042?

Anyone consulting *Australia in 50 Plays* can find substantial and insightful comments on all of these as scripts but puzzlingly there is only incidental commentary, if any, on the companies and performers who gave them life. This undercuts a major strength which live theatre can claim if it is indeed to answer the questions with which Meyrick’s book began, asking what drama can “tell us about the social conditions in which it occurs” by examining “the connections between individual plays and Australia’s national life” (7). I would argue it is theatre *in performance*, rather than read scripts, that impacts significantly in wider communities. Though the transmission of published scripts, particularly through education syllabi which forms a major part of Currency’s income stream, is significant, it is the experiences of women and people from First Nations, immigrant, disabled, and gender diverse communities which are not just given voice as characters in stories in plays but up there on the stage performing that also matters. The cultural economics of how, where, and to what numbers and what viewing demographic theatre is created and performed are surely also highly relevant.

An even more recent speedy arrival in the mail all the way from the UK, was Chris Hay’s and Stephen Carleton’s *Contemporary Australian Playwriting: Re-visioning the Nation on the Mainstage* (Routledge). It’s dated 2023; to declare an interest, I received a pre-publication copy having written an appreciative paragraph for the back cover based on a typescript they sent me. It covers the same period (2006/07–2020) in more detail than Meyrick’s Chapter Eight has the space to attempt, and adds an original feature: eight transcripts of what we might consider “conversations between equals” rather than formal interviews: in each, two of the playwrights whose works are considered in the preceding chapter share and compare their own creative journeys.

I re-read *Contemporary Australian Playwriting* at more leisure after finishing *Australia in 50 Plays*, and the two works invite comparison for their different approaches including the latter’s emphasis on performance; their similarities—both combine close textual analysis with consideration of the contemporary political and cultural-political *zeitgeists*—and their different methodologies.

Hay and Carleton agree on the importance of five of the eight plays Meyrick considers (*Black Is the New White*; *Counting and Cracking*; *When the Rain Stops Falling*; *The Bleeding Tree*; and *Triple X*) plus another twenty-one which at least one of them saw live in performance. Their central hypothesis is that, in the “long decade” they consider (starting with the election of the Rudd Federal Labor government in 2007), new Australian plays moved from the small-to-medium sector to the “mainstage” which they define (and list, p. 7, ten in total) as the five mainland state companies plus La Boîte in Brisbane, Malthouse in Melbourne, and Belvoir, Griffin and Ensemble in Sydney. Shakespeare, they begin, was in 2007 the most-produced playwright in Australia; in 2019 it was Nakkiah Lui, whose *Black Is the New White* they select for extended analysis in the first chapter, “Re-visioning the Comedy,” alongside Michelle

Law's *Single Asian Female* and Anchili Felicia King's *White Pearl*. Hay and Carleton apply to the genre of comedy the book's key subtitle, from the US poet Adrienne Rich (1929–2012): "re-visioning," which they gloss as "entering an old form from a new direction 'not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us'" (20). Re-visioning is also the central concept throughout the following seven chapters.

Rather than proceed chronologically, in Chapters 3 and 4 the authors group plays by subject and genre: comedy; postmigrant stories; political theatre; the Anthropocene; landscape and the regions; adaptations from novels; biography; and autobiography. They acknowledge however (using Meyne Wyatt's 2019 semi-autobiographical *City of Gold* as example, before deciding to locate it in the chapter on "Political Theatre and Aussie Naturalism"), that it and other plays they consider lend themselves "to multiple readings and categorisations" (85). *Cities of Gold* in their analysis offers "a blending of forms—of monologue and naturalism; of family drama and political paean; of satirical portrayal of entertainment industry racism and the vicious reality of legal injustice and systemic racism in the police force and elsewhere" (90).

The advantage of their thematic grouping is that it enables each group of plays analysed to be considered drawing on relevant theoretical concepts. Any aspiring playwright considering a new project could do worse than see where their conception might fit within or alongside these categories and examples, and the thoughts of the script writers themselves are honest and often unsparring of their own limitations and challenges. The discussion between Kate Mulvaney and Tom Wright on adapting the novels *Jasper Jones* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* respectively is particularly worthwhile, as each elaborates on their approach, with the Chapter's title quoting Mulvaney's observation, "I don't adapt, I write" (190).

One thread which weaves through the close readings and which emerges fully in the last chapter on "Telling Stories in Person" is a comment they pick up and repeat from Alana Valentine's discussion on biographical scriptwriting: "I feel like what we crave in the twenty-first century is authenticity" (225); following on from her earlier explanation that she began by "mining herself" (222) but when she decided "I just wasn't interesting enough," moved on to "more researched, biographical . . . more journalistic" playwriting (223), including on Sydney's Wayside Chapel and Lindy Chamberlain. In relation to explicitly autobiographical works which Hay and Carleton define (following Phillipe Lejeune's "The Autobiographical Pact" [1989]) as being what "an audience member enters into when encountering a text that purports to be based on the author's lived experience" (237, from Lejeune 124–26), they suggest that this "promise to give us truths (if not truth)" has unexpectedly become a dominant genre, starting with Lally Katz's *Stories I Want to Tell You in Person* (2013, at Belvoir Downstairs) which they regard as "a watershed moment" which led to "a cavalcade of other commissions of [in some way autobiographical] plays from artistic directors working with mainstage companies" (235). They point out that these to some extent preceded the "toxic narcissism" of reality TV, social media, the selfie, and "Trumpism" and instead "problematise or *are themselves a response to* the vexed question of authenticity and representation" (250, italics in original).

Contemporary Australian Playwriting ends its survey of plays and performances with Glace Chase's *Triple X*—as did Meyrick, whose slightly earlier *Australia in 50 Plays* they quote approvingly in relation to Chase's astonishing "trans rom-com," and "deliciously naughty anti-romance" (245). Set in New York with Chase herself, described by Chad Armstrong in the *Queer Review* (28 November 2021) as a "[m]ulti-hyphenated, trans queen, drag performer, playwright, screen writer and New York City tour guide," playing the transsexual Dixie, it's not in the slightest interested in telling us about Australia. (Though Australian-born, Chase lives and works in New York and was unhappily stuck in Australia during the pandemic.) The cheery fact that such contemporary and internationally significant work can debut here—

initially in Brisbane at Queensland Theatre (QT/STC)—is diluted by the sense that Chase is using Australia as an out-of-town try-out. Interestingly, Hay and Carleton observe that, while Dixie's/Chase's "lived experience" is central to the play and its marketing, and that the "non-trans characters are abusive, greedy, double-crossing, vulgar and narcissistic" (246), it is the "emotional arc" that the hetero-male Scotty makes from this set of prejudices to becoming Dixie's lover that is the central subject: "To one reading, *Triple X* is in fact Scotty's play" (248). It's a fascinating conclusion to a fine study of remarkable plays from a difficult period in Australian theatre history.

In relation to the overall theses *Contemporary Australian Playwriting* proposes about the shift from the margins to the mainstream and about the way in which autobiographical writing has changed from a "trickle into a stream" (250), it's worthy of note that they don't make a distinction between large auditoria and the small "second" (or third) theatres which the five state companies have opened. In these theatres they mounted most of the twenty-six plays in Hay's and Carleton's study: Wharf One (STC), Bille Brown (QTC), Fairfax Studio (Melbourne Theatre Company), Space (STCSA), and Blue Room (Black Swan). The seating capacity at Griffin, Ensemble, Belvoir (particularly downstairs), Malthouse and La Boîte—theatres that have done much of the heavy lifting in bringing new playwriting to Australian stages—is half the size or less than those where the state companies present their large-scale works. This is worthy of note since Meyrick doesn't mention at all Tom Wright's *Black Diggers* (2014–15), and the other volume only once (193). A large-scale historical work officially chosen to open the commemorations of the Centenary (2014–18) of Australia's involvement in the Great War, with an all-Indigenous cast directed by Wesley Enoch, it played in large theatres in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, and Adelaide and was also digitally transmitted to many regional movie screens in Queensland and Western Australia. In consequence, it probably has been witnessed by more Australians than any ten of these other plays combined, and the script (from Playlab Press) plus the digital online version and an extensive educational resource kit have given it enduring educational value and exposure.

Overall, Hay's and Carleton's observations are probably accurate within their 2007–2020 window—but time will tell if they continue in the post-pandemic years and also after the May 2022 change of government which might lead to a less punitive approach to arts funding, an approach that had driven even major companies to program more smaller-cast plays at smaller venues, which most of those that *Contemporary Australian Playwriting* celebrates were. Right at the end of 2022, the new federal Arts Minister Tony Burke used the Woodford Folk Festival, held annually north of Brisbane between Christmas and New Year, to announce an end to the "culture wars," and to foreshadow a new arts policy in 2023 that promised increased funding overall, financial support for writers, arms-length funding decisions, and content quotas for entertainment streaming platforms like Stan and Netflix. Foxtel was already subject to such regulation, which has led to significant speculative capital being directed towards developing making, and screening Australian stories.

This could be a significant opportunity, since the claims about "national significance" would be a lot more plausible. Live theatre is ontologically limited to one place and time, involving "Representation without Reproduction," as Peggy Phelan subtitled one chapter in her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), giving it both strength at the local level and weakness nationally. Hay and Carleton rightly see as significant (83) the televising in 2020 on the ABC *Q&A* program of Wyatt performing one of his monologues from *City of Gold*. They offer a Conclusion, "Australian Playwriting in Lockdown," which chronicles the *Dear Australia* "postcard project" initiated by David Bertholt at the start of the Covid pandemic under the auspices of the then recently defunded Playwriting Australia. Through this project twenty-five theatre organisations nominated two playwrights each, and the fifty chosen dramatists each contributed a short monologue. Each script was filmed by one of fifty actors,

often in their own homes (264). The authors offer a fascinating meditation on the ways in which, although the customary “liveness” of performance was absent, “[p]resent, instead, were real-time Facebook comment threads spooling out through . . . social media feeds, providing platforms for friends and family barracking for writers and performers they knew, company staff offering encouragement, live ‘lol’s at humorous content, quoting of favourite lines, and so on” (270).

Contemporary Australian Playwriting is the third in an informal sequence of “decade” studies emanating from the drama staff at the University of Queensland, starting with *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s* (Rodopi, 1998; that title was a riff on George Bernard Shaw’s series of essays in the London *Saturday Review* 1895–98, later collected as *Our Theatre in the Nineties*). It was edited by Veronica Kelly and was more a snapshot of activity in the middle of that decade than a longitudinal survey, but it was followed by *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s* (Rodopi, 2013, edited by James Smith with assistance from me). If there is a further instalment at the end of the 2020s, a short but hopefully less fraught decade after the reopening of Australia’s live theatres, it would be worthwhile examining whether non-commercial Australian live theatre has managed to make its voice(s) heard more importantly and influentially within national (and international) culture—both *per se*, and in penetrating the screen industries—or whether the shrinkage and marginalisation evident in the 2010s continues until it is merely making matchstick replicas of national discourse.

It could also consider whether Hay’s and Carleton’s thesis about margins and mainstream holds true for the years 2022–2029. The evidence could begin with an email sent to the Sydney Theatre Company’s audiences on the 29 December 2022 by its Artistic Director, Kip Williams, reflecting on the first year of the decade in which “every scheduled [STC] production reached the stage.” *Triple X*, *White Pearl*, and *City of Gold* were mounted/remounted (all at the Wharf Theatre 1) and there was new work by others considered by Meyrick and/or Hay and Carleton: Alana Valentine, Angela Betzien, Suzie Miller and Michelle Law, plus a remarkable staging by Wesley Enoch of Lorraine Hansberry’s American classic *A Raisin in the Sun*. But the big STC shows attracting the big audiences in the big theatres (the Opera Playhouse and the Roslyn Packer) were five British stories (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*, *Blithe Spirit*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*) plus the Broadway hit *The Lifespan of a Fact*. By 2030, will there still be an enduring shift in what constitutes the mainstream and the voices with which it speaks, or will it be *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*?

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