

**Rebecca Clode. *Australian Metatheatre on Page and Stage: An Exploration of Metatheatrical Techniques*. Routledge, 2022. 208 pages. 7 B/W illustrations
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Rebecca Clode invites a mutual exploration for “future scholars and theatre-makers alike” (13) in a book that seeks to highlight “metatheatre’s capacity to illuminate the wider social, cultural and artistic contexts in which plays have been produced” (Preface). Describing metatheatre as sometimes fraught and murky critical territory, this book draws from a range of sources—production history, performance traces in review, literary analysis, and wider scholarship—to develop a reading of Australian metatheatre. The case studies, explored in paired chapters, include canonical works: Dorothy Hewett’s *The Man from Mukinupin*, and UK playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good*; Louis Nowra’s ensemble piece *Royal Show*; and Peta Murray’s practice-led research project, which culminated in a 2014 showing of *Things Fall Over*. Notably *Our Country’s Good*, a drama conceived in the UK but based on Australian Thomas Keneally’s novel *The Playmaker*, is paired with Peta Murray’s performance text, demonstrating that Clode is actively seeking to expand a conversation about drama and performance in Australia. By including Australian content produced outside of the nation state, as well as techniques and performance that extend beyond mainstream drama, Clode’s mixed methodology works to meaningfully account for production exposure. The scope of this book and its methodology are carefully described, and its emphasis on exploration should be taken as an entry point for readers.

The introductory chapter gives a brief survey of key Australian plays that incorporate self-referential strategies, either through the presence of the playwright in performance or the use of plays-within-plays. Clode aligns contemporary and historical production in Australia to traditions discussed in Lionel Abel’s 1963 *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (Hill and Wang). Abel’s study notes that early and mid-century production in Europe and the UK became interested in its own theatrical artifice. Clode argues that this was matched by Australian plays in the same decades, citing Patrick White’s *Ham Funeral* and Dorothy Hewett’s *Chapel Perilous* as examples (5). Working back through plays from the 2000s and 1980s, Clode explains that metatheatre is not a genre definition, and dispenses with that aspect of Abel’s argument, to instead deploy Richard Hornby’s six key features of metatheatre (7). This move from genre definition toward a critical lens enables the bricolage of references to be viewed differently, however, and Clode tends to phrase the arguments in this book in terms of omission. Introducing the study as the first to consider metatheatre in Australia’s late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the book narrows its focus to works that use metatheatrical techniques to evaluate responses to the 1988 bicentennial celebrations in Australia, except for Peta Murray’s work, which takes a looser, more metaphorical view of Australian history. Given the fact that a significant part of the overall argumentation draws on the productions’ relationships to a key historical event, the perspective and scope of the book are unbalanced, particularly in the chapters that take up Peta Murray’s work. While there is a clear awareness of the differences between commissioned and uncommissioned works, and between published and unpublished works, and national and personal interests expressed in each production, a study of the metatheatrical on a case-by-case basis is stronger than the arrangement of the suite of plays in this book.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine *Mukinupin*, Hewett’s most successful play, and its production in 1979, 1988, and 2009. The connection between three distinct productions works well to develop Clode’s view that production exposure significantly contributes to theatre studies. There are also some tantalising finds from the archives, including a preparatory note from Hewett titled “Genesis” (22) and the discovery that a character, Bobbie Le Brun, was cut from production (46–47). To support the call for production analysis Clode cites Bill Dunstone and

Helen Gilbert and suggests that production teams would “doubtless attest” that Hewett’s plays reach “full potential in production” (40). Yet there is relatively little commentary from those involved in production teams; instead, a bricolage of production history is presented to emphasise *Mukinupin*’s canonical status, and its capacity to navigate a celebration and critique of Australian society.

The theme of celebration and critique is carried through Chapters 3 and 4, which examine Louis Nowra’s *Royal Show*. Nowra has stated that this play is peripheral in his oeuvre (64), but Clode sees value in bringing it to the attention of scholarship. Chapter 3 does take some time to work through the play’s methodology, emphasising that a study of its production with Adelaide’s Lighthouse Theatre and a touring production with Queensland’s regional company, New Moon Theatre, offers fresh perspectives on an undervalued play. It is in Chapter 4 where Clode’s discussion pays dividends. Clode gives a close reading of the production and reception of *Royal Show*, and its capacity to conceive a vision for a multicultural Australia in the post-war period through its staging of the sideshow.

Clode makes a significant departure to explore *Our Country’s Good*. Chapter 5 reframes Wertebaker’s play and touring production with the English Stage Company as a significant part of Australian theatre history, in part because a touring production in Sydney was staged simultaneously with a new Melbourne Theatre Company production mounted in 1989 (105). The discussion of the play text highlights its historicisation and presentation of a play within the play in Brechtian terms, before Chapter 6 draws attention to distinctly different casting strategies from the British and Australian companies. Notably, the contested representation of First Nations Australians in close proximity to the contested Bicentennial celebrations reflects Clode’s interest in theatre’s capacity illuminate wider social contexts.

Chapters 7 and 8 take another turn, this time toward a work that was first performed in 2014. Peta Murray’s *Things That Fall Over* pushes the technical aspects of metatheatre to an extreme, and the closing chapters add another element to Clode’s study. The close reading of Murray’s five-hour performance gives a compelling discussion of the “weaver,” a character that holds women’s writing and a relationship with First Nations Australians as a link to the broader themes and select case studies. Clode suggests that there is an empowering gesture toward a hypothetical future that is “more inclusive and culturally representative Australian theatre” (178). Claiming metatheatrical works of the twenty-first century need closer analysis (178) in the conclusion of Chapter 8, Clode reminds readers of the book’s exploratory viewpoint.

Throughout, Clode works to incorporate comparative commentary, building up a production register and critical vocabulary for the ways these plays have been produced across time. The concluding remarks work through the comparisons and suggest that scholarship and practice that understands the critical potential of metatheatre may offer “new perspectives on Australian society” (188). There are some very useful provocations, especially demonstrating the value of production exposure in scholarship. Individual chapters are illuminating, particularly to students unfamiliar with theatre in Australia. Taken as a whole, the most compelling writing comes through the comparison of varied productions in context of individual works (Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8). Clode’s focus on cultural critique is strongest when tied to the significant Bicentennial celebrations, and three of the four case studies are closely connected by their themes and production history. The result for the reader may be that the metatheatrical elements fade in comparison with their historical contexts, until a sudden leap to the 2010s in the closing chapters. Clode offers an exploratory re-examination of production exposure, which indisputably has much to offer to Australian theatre scholarship. The book’s broader argument, that a selection of metatheatrical techniques offers a pathway through the competing and complex interests of playwrights in production, might be better presented as a more discrete line of inquiry.

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