

Career Playwrights: Working Women Dramatists, 1928–1968

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Plays, the literary product of dramatists, are usually discussed either as works of theatre, placed within their cultural and political context, or dissected for clues about the society which produced them. While my study of Australian women playwrights will situate their plays as works of theatre and as social and cultural documents, I am mostly concerned with the playwrights themselves – how they survived as writers and their experiences as ‘career playwrights’ in Australia. These women wrote plays and radio serials at a time when theatres were scarce and royalties scant – yet for many, writing drama was their means of financial survival. Writing for these women was not an indulgence to be enjoyed in one’s spare time, nor was it necessarily an act of creating high art, to be worked upon when one had time, and money had been earned elsewhere. For many women dramatists of this era, writing plays was a means to earn a living – rather than an escape from the world, it provided the financial resources to survive within it. In the days before substantial government grants and meagre opportunities for publication and play production, to survive as a playwright must be seen as a substantial achievement, arising from considerable skill and dedication. Such an achievement was confined to a select group of writers, almost all of whom wrote radio serials and plays.

Yet this ability to earn a living from writing placed a writer in a culturally precarious position. To earn a living from writing was seen, with rare exceptions, to somehow devalue the writing itself. One exception was the critic F.W.W. Rhodes. Reviewing two collections of plays for the literary magazine *Southerly* in 1946, Rhodes revealed a keen awareness of this distinction. He had harsh words for the playwright often valorised as Australia’s pioneer dramatist, Louis Esson. Esson, that urban bohemian more comfortable in Fasoli’s cafe in Carlton than he ever was in the bush, who nonetheless attempted to forge an Australian drama through his plays of rural hardship, was, according to Rhodes, ‘the last gasp of a dying tradition’, whose plays were as ‘dead as mutton.’ Of the other book he was reviewing, a collection of plays by radio dramatists, Rhodes had high praise: ‘The radio playwrights write for cash (I suppose) rather than for immortal fame, and their work is accordingly vigorous, coherent, and pretty intelligent’ (Rhodes 234).

Rhodes’s is a rare voice in Australian literary criticism and culture. Rather than lamenting the poor quality of work clearly written for a wide audience, a more common criticism of popular writing, he praises the radio playwrights for work he presumes was written for ‘cash’, not ‘cultural transcendency’ (Modjeska), work that

was produced for a particular audience in a particular era, not necessarily written to speak across time or to garner the author 'immortal fame'.

Australian radio played a crucial role in the development of Australian drama, and in the careers of many women playwrights, particularly in the 1940s and 50s. The growth of radio provided a hitherto non-existent market and production channel for many Australian dramatists. The usually pejorative distinction between writing for 'cash' and writing for 'immortal fame' suddenly had real potency, because to actually earn a living from playwriting (at least in radio) was now possible. The development of radio also had implications for the many women who, because of various cultural and social changes, were now able to participate in the radio drama workforce and construct an identity as writers. These 'career playwrights' challenge the still prevalent modernist notions of literature and the 'literary', and the proper cultural status of the writer, and their careers offer an alternative conception of the cultural role of the writer in Australia in the twentieth century. This paper will locate some women dramatists within these important developments, and, with a particular emphasis on radio, look at some of the ways that these women negotiated between writing for cash, on the one hand, and writing for supposed fame on the other.

Women writers in general have not been addressed in histories of women's work. Women playwrights in particular, though doubtless comprising a tiny percentage of the workforce, were certainly amongst those who earned an independent living in the workforce, and their experiences as working writers warrant further attention. Yet if women playwrights were so scarce, is it a pointless exercise to attempt to place them within the broader context of their position in the workforce? Tracy C. Davis addresses this issue in her work *Actresses as Working Women*, a study of Victorian-era actresses. Davis attempts to integrate her subjects' private lives and public careers, noting in her introduction that

I do not see how actresses' professional and personal lives can be separated; they are integrated components, and must be recognised as such in the writing of history. Only then can women be accurately assessed as artistic producers and social entities. (Davis ix)

Davis asserts that there is a wider historical importance in studying a group of women regarded by social historians as exceptional, supposedly too exceptional to warrant an historical examination. So-called 'exceptional' women – for example, playwrights – have fallen through the gaps of social history. Neither are they the preserve of cultural historians, who are more interested in the cultural product resulting from a career, rather than how that career was forged and developed over time. Davis insists on the integration of her subjects' personal and professional lives – an approach that suggests a new field of study, that of the social history of literature and literary production.

Drusilla Modjeska's landmark text, *Exiles At Home* (1981), a study of inter-war Australian women novelists, takes steps in the direction of a social history of litera-

ture. Modjeska writes that these authors, constrained by family and domestic responsibilities, felt their tenuous position as women writers was heightened by 'the fundamental contradiction between women's dependent social position and the mystique of the writer as a culturally transcendent being' (11). In other words, they were constantly shifting between the material need to earn a living, and the dominant cultural construct of the writer which demanded that they be disassociated with material survival and instead be concerned with the production of great works. This notion of the writer as 'culturally transcendent being' limited the cultural and social space within which women writers could operate in Australia.

Both Modjeska and her subjects took for granted the supposed impossibility of earning a living from writing itself, and indeed, Australian literary history is peopled with writers who lived on the poverty line, who were never able to earn a living from their work. Richard Nile and David Walker, describing the perilous financial circumstances of the majority of Australian writers in the early twentieth century, noted that in the writerly imagination, 'serious writing had become a form of martyrdom' (298). Those writers who did profit from writing, such as Ion Idriess, 'were rarely esteemed for their contribution to the nation's literature' (297). Marivic Wyndham Luther-Davies has identified what she calls the 'victim tradition' in Australian literary history, a tradition which has compelled historians to see the writer as a victim of ideology, publishers, governments, of economics, or simply of 'the times' (1). As she points out, popular, successful writers like Idriess showed 'that there were choices and opportunities open to the Australian creative writer of these years' (8). Yet what room was there for supposedly maintaining one's 'integrity' as a writer, in this climate of victimhood, if financial survival through popular success supposedly devalued one's writing?

Negotiating a path through these perceptions, and forging a means of survival through writing, was attempted by many playwrights throughout this era. Many talented dramatists unable to write for the professional stage in Australia found remunerative careers writing plays and serials for radio. These professional radio writers, many of whom were women, challenge the accepted wisdom regarding the inability of the writer to earn a living throughout much of the twentieth century. The concept of martyrdom suggested by Nile and Walker had currency only for writers unable to earn a living, the culturally transcendent being conjured up by Modjeska evaporating in the face of daily deadlines and a weekly pay cheque.

In her autobiography *Fishing In The Styx*, Ruth Park, radio dramatist and novelist, relates an incident which crystallises this distinction between career writers and culturally transcendent beings. She writes:

Once we heard an established novelist, Eleanor Dark, speaking on the radio about Australian writing and its terrors. 'No one in Australia can make a living from writing', she stated with such curt authoritativeness that I began to cry. 'Now, look here, what's that for?' [her husband] D'Arcy demanded. 'She's so famous. She must know.'

... [D'Arcy] was thoughtful. He had nothing whatsoever against Mrs. Dark; But he disagreed with her ideas.

'What she knows, is that she can't make a living. That's because she sticks to novel writing. Haven't we agreed that diversification is the answer to making a living by writing?' (92-3).

Park and D'Arcy Niland were two writers determined to earn a living by the pen, and, for much of their lives, they did, despite domestic upheaval and the arrival of five children in rapid succession. True to D'Arcy's words, they wrote across genres and mediums, adopting an avowedly non-transcendental attitude to writing. A journalist who interviewed them in 1960 declared that 'the Nilands consider writing a business which must be worked at systematically, not some kind of inspired miracle which vulgar earthlings cannot understand' (Hetherington 18).

This dedication and consistency was doubtless a factor in Park's and Niland's ability to earn a living in what was a highly arbitrary profession. Reading the stories of financial survival of the various playwrights who pitted their wits against deadlines, editors, and rejection slips, one is amazed at their tenacity. Why, with poverty frequently snapping at their heels, did these women choose the relative insecurity of writing? More specifically, why did they write drama for a living?

These women, writers like Betty Roland, Ruth Park, Gwen Meredith, Catherine Duncan, Lorna Bingham, Kathleen Carroll, Lyn Foster, Catherine Shepherd and Oriel Gray, perhaps chose to write for a living, at a risk of stating the obvious, because they were good at it. Many wrote novels and other kinds of work throughout their careers, yet perhaps turned to plays, in the words of Dymphna Cusack, 'because they took less time' (38).

Many women who wrote drama for a living were married with children, or were sole parents in an era before extensive welfare. Writing was a profession that could be worked upon in any setting, and the possibility of working at home was a definite advantage for women playwrights. Radio writing was supposedly a suitable occupation for women because it could be done at home, as Kathleen Carroll apparently did, according to an *ABC Weekly* journalist:

Kathleen Carroll, is married and does a lot of her work at home, but in a highly organised fashion ... Usually she gets up about 4:30 a.m., does an episode before breakfast, and then has much of the day free to cope with household affairs. (Anon 22)

The writer added that 'there are several married women in Sydney, married with families, who make spare time in which to write'. Radio and television writer Mary Wilton wrote from home, but hardly in what could be considered 'spare time': 'it was an ideal way to make a living when one had children ... I wrote when the children were at school, sleeping, at kindergarten. It was tough, exhausting, a lot of staying up most of the night as deadlines approached' (Wilton). Women writers were both bound by the ideology of separate spheres, and yet able to exist

outside it. During a time when the issue of women's participation in the workforce was a fraught and contested one, women writers were members of the paid workforce, without outwardly transgressing the public/private divide. Yet transgressing this split, in a covert way, was exactly what they were doing – selling their writing and supporting their families, yet in a way which allowed them to meet societal expectations about women, careers, and motherhood. As Mary Wilton noted, 'wasn't I lucky? I *could* earn a middle class living ... without neglecting the girls ... no sending them off to school unwell, as other mothers who were alone were required to do because they had to go out to work' (Wilton).

So how did these women experience working as playwrights in the central decades of this century? While this discussion will focus chiefly on writers working in radio, there were some writers who earned a sporadic living from the stage, in defiance of the received wisdom that no playwrights survived from writing before Ray Lawler. Oriel Gray was employed by the Sydney New Theatre as scriptwriter and 'office dogsbody' for a few years in the 1940s – she writes, 'they paid me two pounds ten shillings a week but I do claim that I am probably the first playwright-in-residence in Australia' (Gray).

Catherine Duncan worked in radio as a writer and actress for several years. In a 1986 interview, Duncan claimed 'that in the 1940s she used to write in one week: a) a half-hour serial, b) an hour play and c) four quarter-hour serials. Then act in them all' (Duncan). In addition to her serial-writing work, Duncan wrote stage plays and maintained a long association with the Melbourne New Theatre. She remembered that she was able to live from her writing in the 1940s because 'I worked very hard ... my husband was at the war ... I had to look after my family. We weren't very well paid, but if you worked as hard as I did, you could manage' (Duncan).

Narratives of financial hardship like Duncan's are common among working women playwrights. Serial writer Coral Lansbury declared that when her son was born, 'I used to put the scripts on one side of the typewriter, the bills on the other side and wonder if they'd ever meet in the middle. We didn't have our own home, we had a rented flat and it was tough slogging' (qtd in Guilliat 25). Betty Roland was left with a small child and no money during the Second World War,

in a pretty bad way, in pretty much of a jam, and then again my old friend Jupiter comes to my aid, and Sumner Locke-Elliott ... he was called up into the army. He was one of George Edwards staff writers ... and he rang me up and he said, 'Look, I've been called up into the army and they're absolutely desperate for a scriptwriter. Do you think you could write radio scripts? I said 'just give me a chance!' (Roland 6591–2)

As many writers worked on a contract or freelance basis, they often worked not from offices, but from spare rooms, kitchen tables and lounge chairs. Surviving from freelance writing was a precarious proposition, reliant on a network of informal contacts and dedication to work – 'writing for cash' was a very real and urgent need for most women radio writers.

While women like Lynn Foster, Coral Lansbury, Lorna Bingham and Kathleen Carroll all found steady employment in writing serials, it was Gwen Meredith who was perhaps the most exceptional woman playwright to make her career in radio. After running a small drama club, and working for the Independent Theatre in Sydney, Meredith was contracted to write a 'serial of country life' for 26 weeks. *The Lawsons* soon became phenomenally popular – there are five hefty boxes of devoted listener's letters in the National Library to prove it! Meredith wrote *The Lawsons* and its related sequel, *Blue Hills* for more than 33 years, yet it is evident from her correspondence with the ABC that the arrangement was far from being mutually satisfying. In a letter to Charles Moses, general manager of the ABC, in 1955, Meredith wrote:

My lament is this ... that the success of 'Blue Hills' has been, for me, very much of a pyrrhic victory. Over the years I have had many claims on my time from listeners and organisations, but during the last year these have reached such proportions that I find I have to spend more time as a goodwill officer of the ABC than as a playwright for it. (Meredith to Moses)

Another dispute between Meredith and the ABC over her wages and conditions arose in 1958, when she wrote bitterly to the head of television and radio drama after being refused a salary increase: 'I have always felt that I've not been paid in any sort of proportion to the popularity and the listening audience which the serial has gained for the ABC' (Meredith to Hutchinson). Meredith's frequently expressed displeasure with her salary demonstrates that while it was possible to earn a living by writing, it was not necessarily a comfortable or happy one, even for a popular and respected writer.

The ways in which many of these women represent their careers as radio playwrights in biographical narratives reveal their awareness of the dominant cultural narrative which stated that writers could not make their living from their work without artistic compromise. They often position themselves between the opposing ideals of high art 'greatness' and the more pedestrian need to earn a living. As conventional literary history continues to privilege 'high' literary activity over other forms of writing, such as journalism and radio work, the act of documenting one's writing life can be seen as an intervention, writing oneself into the narrative and into this history. In this final section, I will briefly contrast the attitudes to radio writing expressed by Betty Roland and Ruth Park, who both worked across a spectrum of genres and mediums, including radio drama.

Betty Roland had dabbled in playwrighting from a young age, and her early success with her most famous and enduring play, *The Touch of Silk*, seemed, to Roland, to mark her out for 'immortal fame'. Yet more than ten years later, separated from her partner and with a young daughter to care for, Roland found herself writing for a living, becoming, in her words, 'the breadwinner [who] had to traffic in the market-place and return with the spoils' (Roland *Devious Being* 89). To the woman

who had resolved to be a great playwright, 'writing for cash' was a less satisfying flipside. Depressed and angered by her mixed success as a 'serious' stage playwright, Roland described her feelings when, in 1951, her entry in the Commonwealth Jubilee play competition was passed over in favour of Kylie Tennant's *Tether A Dragon*:

It is possible that Kylie needed the five hundred pounds far more than I did, but she did not need the boost to her reputation as a writer in the way I did. I was filled with disgust at the rubbish I had been churning out. Top ratings did not impress me in the least, they merely indicated the lack of taste on the part of the people who listened. I wanted to be recognised as a serious playwright, and had hoped that, by winning the award for [her play] *Granite Peak*, I might be restored to the position I had occupied in 1928. Had the critic on the *Bulletin* not hailed me as 'Australia's first genuine playwright'? (Roland *Devious Being* 121)

While successfully living from her writing, Roland gained little satisfaction from it, instead yearning to be recognised as 'great' – a culturally transcendent being, an artist. Cultural and social circumstances prevented her from achieving both, economic necessity ensured that she remained shackled, in her view, to the production of artistically unsatisfying 'rubbish'.

Ruth Park held no such prejudices against the type of work that was to be the source of her income and family's wellbeing. When she and D'Arcy Niland moved to a beachside shack, nicknamed Wit's End, they were told that Xavier Herbert lived on the cliff above them. Park recalls:

At night we looked up the cliff, saw a dim light solitary in the engulfing darkness, and told each other, 'I bet he's working on something great!' ... The light may not have belonged to Herbert's house, but we believed it did, and the sight of it strengthened our resolution. We too were writers, little unrecognised ones; we were part of a movement towards indigenous Australian writing, and we were proud of that. (Park 95)

Although Park was living an often precarious existence as a freelance writer, she drew no distinction between herself and the acclaimed Herbert. In this way they legitimised their own writing which, while it may not have always been akin to the great works of their fellow authors, was sufficient to keep them and their family in frugal comfort.

In her autobiography, *Exit Left*, Oriel Gray recalled her correspondence to her then-lover, John Hepworth, noting that 'When I wrote to him I tried to be gay, funny, and a career playwright, as well as a loving, waiting woman' (Gray *Exit Left* 197). Such a perception of herself as a 'career' writer is markedly different to that assumed by the novelists of Modjeska's universe, suggesting a profession rather

than a vocation – a way to pay the rent, not a calling to art. Their careers demonstrate that it was possible to work successfully as a writer in Australia in the period before significant government subsidisation of writers transformed our literary landscape. As literary history continues to be preoccupied with those writers who strove for ‘immortal fame’ and literary greatness, these women who wrote drama for ‘cash’ pose a challenge to the accepted parameters of the discipline. A detailed examination of the writing lives of these pioneering ‘career playwrights’ has much to reveal to historians of women’s work, theatre, and literature.

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