

Nostalgia in the Global City: Recuperating the Battler in the Sydney Production of *Cloudstreet*

TOM BURVILL, MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

The theatrical adaptation of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* produced by Company B Belvoir directed by Neil Armfield on Sydney's Darling Harbour docks for the Sydney Festival 1998 was the kind of popular and critical success that most theatre companies (let alone novelists and their adaptors) usually only dream about. This paper explores the Sydney production as a powerful communal cultural moment. The total phenomenon of the production and the audience's occupation of a new space for culture, a hot and cavernous tin-shed on an active urban industrial site, was both metaphorically and physically part of a continuing re-figuring and re-appropriation of urban spaces. Some of these previously industrial spaces have been permanently re-appropriated for theatre, including the former tomato sauce factory in Belvoir St. Surry Hills originally converted to house the Nimrod Theatre Company and now the home of the successor to the Nimrod, Neil Armfield's Company B. Many other industrial sites have of course been reclaimed for up-market housing, tourist hotels and other elements of the restructuring of the Australian economy as part of Sydney's entanglement in globalisation and the shift in the economy from traditional industrial production to the service and finance sectors. In this new economic story theatre often figures as a service or tourist industry. It is a change with wide-ranging and variously unsettling dimensions. Particularly perhaps in Sydney, to be reminded of it is also to be reminded of how uncertain in such times former notions of national identity can be. Perhaps at such times undemanding reassurance that an old story like that of the battler with the heart of gold can be reprised with a new charm is particularly seductive.

The conjunction of *Cloudstreet's* epic narrative of Aussie battling (with all its defining exclusions and occlusions), the heroic physical demands and unusual rewards of the production for both actors and audience, and the ecstatic nature of the reception by critics and audiences alike, given the nostalgic recuperative effort of the narrative, raises questions about the significance for cultural and national identity of this production (in this venue) for the liberal, sophisticated global Sydney audience who attended. This paper offers some speculations toward reading the total 'event' of this production – including not only the theatricalisation of the novel, and its content, but the nature of the critical and popular reception and

its various contexts – as a symptomatic Australian cultural text .

I am puzzled by the theatrical production of *Cloudstreet* because it seems to me to be constructing a sense of legitimacy for theatre-going middle-class to yuppie-affluent Anglo-Australians through a version of the battler-myth made newly luminous and poetic in Winton's prose and Armfield's loving and larkin-improvisational production style. Somehow this very distinctive event appears (reading its apparently unanimous popularity with audiences and critics, the ecstatic terms in which it has been adulated) to have offered its participants a kind of cultural absolution.

Theatre critic Angela Bennie saw it as an epiphany. In a piece titled 'Street of Universal Dreams' for the *Sydney Morning Herald* she wrote:

Everyone agrees: *Cloudstreet* was magical; *Cloudstreet* was memorable. But *Cloudstreet* is important for more reasons than that. Like *The Summer Of The 17th Doll* [sic] was to its first Australian audiences, who felt they were hearing and seeing themselves on stage for the first time, *Cloudstreet* offers a similar epiphany within the repertoire of the Australian Theatre. It is not so much that it was revolutionary or challenging in its form. Although there were many, many moments when (it) was a very exciting piece, overall *Cloudstreet* was no watershed in formal terms . . . But where *Cloudstreet* was special, where it enchanted, was in the story that it told us. It was our story, something quite uniquely ours, and told to us in a language we recognized. It showed us how we are what we are, and why. (22)

If *Cloudstreet* offered an epiphany then it was for Bennie, like its 1950s precursor, an epiphany of nationalist identity – a poetic celebration of the battler as typical Australian all over again.

I see it in fact as a contemporary cultural response to what Hodge and Mishra call the bastard complex – the ingrained but repressed anxiety of legitimacy at the original and continuing uncompensated seizure and occupation of the land of Australia guiltily underlying much of Australian mainstream culture. As with many of the literary and visual texts Hodge and Mishra analyse, *Cloudstreet* seductively attempts the re-inscription of an acceptable foundation myth. Here it is not the myth of the isolated pioneers battling the rigours of the empty outback land , but that of the lovable Anglo-Celtic (by definition) Aussie battler – Hodge and Mishra's 'typical Australian'. The seductive quality of the *Cloudstreet* material is indicated to me by the liberal credentials of Armfield and the Company which produced it. They are part of the anti-racist multiculturalist liberal left, have a history of recently produced work with Aboriginal performers, and would certainly not usually be seen as conservative in its position in the field of Sydney theatre. So this is a case as I see it of a regressive message appearing in a benign package.

In seeking to explain the emotional commitment of Armfield and Company B to this text and its messages I would point to another significant context .This is the position of the *Cloudstreet* production in the design of 1997/1998 Company B

Belvoir season of plays. The linking theme through the 1997 Season and into the January 1998 production of *Cloudstreet* as expressed by Neil Armfield was an exploration of particular ideas and values around the concepts of 'family' and 'home'. As Artistic Director of Company B and director of *Cloudstreet* Armfield explained this to potential subscribers in the 1997 Company B Belvoir Book¹

The notion of family is central throughout the 1997 season. Across the productions I am aware that the linking concern is with family and home on one hand, and the tension of displacement and separation on the other . . . This sense of the central core of family 'certainty' ranged against the shifting sense of stress, striving and sometimes vicious change . . . This theme of home and family is most fully expressed in our great workshop plan that spans the year and reaches its climax at the beginning of 1998 in a production of Tim Winton's monumental work, *Cloudstreet*. (Armfield 10)

Neil Armfield's production of *Cloudstreet* became the leading Australian attraction at the 1998 Sydney Festival. The critics were unanimous in their enthusiasm, and the terms of their appreciation have common themes. David Marr ended a piece on the official opening at the Sydney Opera House, implicitly contrasting its ceremony of thanking of sponsors with the authenticity of *Cloudstreet* :

Meanwhile, two bays around, in an ugly big shed on the wharves, a performance was ending with a standing ovation for everything a real festival provides: something native, new, magic, vast and unforgettable – *Cloudstreet*. You will not forgive yourself if you miss it. (Marr 2)

Joyce Morgan wrote that :

The five-hour theatre marathon *Cloudstreet* is shaping up as one of the Festival's success stories with ticket sales breaking box-office records. Company B sold 643 tickets yesterday, far in excess of its daily 110 average, despite acoustic problems . . . which made it difficult to hear above the rain on the venue's tin roof . . . (Morgan 10)

'I believe it is the most important piece of Australian Theatre to have been produced in the last decade', the Artistic Director of the Sydney Festival, Leo Schofield,

1. The Company B 'Books' are a distinctive form of information and ticket application brochures describing the coming subscriber season, sent each year to people on the Company B subscriber and occasional ticket buyer mailing list. They visually suggest tiny 'old-fashioned' diaries or family albums, and contain a 'Letter from Neil Armfield' as Artistic Director to the reader, telling of his feelings and thoughts about the upcoming season as well as including his introduction to each play in the season. Printed on postcard size A5 format, they manage a design and style of address which suggests that you – the potential ticket-buyer – are already part of the 'Company B family'.

told the *Herald* on the eve of its departure to Perth. 'It has had extraordinary effect on the audience, and touched so many people' (Bennie 22).

The not always effusive critic James Waites wrote that the production was '... simply awesome ... one of the most enchanting and engaging stage adventures I can remember'. In his review Waites summarises the novel and the charm of the theatrical adaptation:

Cloudstreet is a sprawling novel set in a rickety old Perth mansion. Life circumstances find two poor, ratbag Aussie families sharing the premises over decades from between the wars to the near present. It is Winton's homage to old-fashioned family values, to community, camaraderie and blood bonds ... it is a book with many fans. (Waite 16)

So, given all the problems of uncomfortable seating, bad acoustics, a venue either too noisy if it rained or too hot when it was hot (and sometimes both at once), was the production's 'homage to old-fashioned family values, to community, camaraderie and blood bonds' (as in the novel) in fact the secret of *Cloudstreet's* success? The kind of pleasure the audience might get from celebrating these apparently potent nostalgic values could go with primitive reception conditions perhaps. And in this story, for once, the troubling themes of conflicting 'blood bonds' raised for some by multiculturalism were well off stage – Winton's Perth through the 1930s to 1950s apparently didn't have any problem with non Anglo-Celtics and, as we shall see the Aboriginal presence was a benign one, not troubling the concentration on 'our' mainstream histories, our battler ancestries.

Armfield quotes approvingly, apparently without irony, a description of the novel *Cloudstreet* as 'an Australian book of Genesis':

It is a story that stands the middle of the 20th century and aches with love and joy and the shadows of despair, confusion and despair. It is a story above all about family, and inclusion, and reconciliation and suggests a way in which white Australians might finally have found for living in his ancient Aboriginal continent. (Armfield 23)

In the official Program Armfield expanded the implications of this thought: 'The big old house at No 1 Cloudstreet is Australia, perhaps, and this story, if we're open to it, is a kind of map for the future' ('Director's Note').

Going to *Cloudstreet* almost became one of those marathon theatrical occasions where the shared experience goes far beyond the aesthetic content and includes also the shared endurance of the sheer duration of the event – like watching Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* at the Quarry in Adelaide all night – which, as they say, you never forget. Forms of discomfort which would rule out the majority of alternative performances for this audience became part of its charm. A liberal-left middle-class theatre audience took possession with cushions and hampers and cheeses and champers of a space they could normally never enter, nor wish to, and turned

it into a makeshift harbourside picnic venue with uninterrupted views to Pymont, Star City Casino and East Balmain in the warm evening. Even the queuing for a couple of hours necessary to get a decent spot in the unreserved unnumbered-seating, first-come-best-view venue became an informal chatty party all along the long snaking line of meeting and greeting, hailing and snacking in the late afternoon light – and (of course) heat. People made little temporary encampments in the ticket line, shared refreshments, improvised comforts. The best prepared and forewarned sent out scouts to hold a place in the line and then provisioned the advance party from well-stocked car boots. There was something of a childhood holiday adventure, with adult catering of course, about it all, and a certain holiday sense of community.

In this case the sense of identification and belonging which Neil Armfield often refers to the specificity of the Belvoir Street space – indeed to the specific stage-audience relationship brought into being by the ‘Belvoir corner’ – was transferred to a formerly anonymous or even anti-cultural space – not named and baptised as a home for theatre. This naturalisation of normally uninhabitable space, this making familiar and homey of a space outside the experience of most of the theatregoers involved, was I believe central to the attraction and cultural meaning of the event. The content of course was also central, and generally already well-known to the audience prior to their literal theatrical experience of it, if not through the much-loved novel itself then through the ecstatic press write-ups and Neil Armfield’s Company B Book framing commentary. People knew, in general, what to expect and got it. Members of the production cast and crew all quoted their favourite line from the novel and had it attributed to them in the Program.

Before I discuss further the content of *Cloudstreet*, but first I will elaborate Hodge and Mishra’s thesis of the bastard complex in Australian culture. This is particularly important in view of my puzzlement over Armfield’s belief that *Cloudstreet* has something powerfully positive to offer to the process of reconciliation.

Given the content of *Cloudstreet* and the (to me) amazingly effusive reception that content and that way of working received, I believe we need something like this thesis to help explain a curiously symptomatic excess, expressive of a release of cultural tension, a collective sigh of relief and a corresponding rush of approval for a story and a set of values and ways of seeing which it seems to me were astonishingly blind and retrogressive, taking us back to a mythos of the ‘typical Australian’ which is one of the key symptoms analysed by Hodge and Mishra. As they explain:

We see the culture and its literature as still determined massively by its complicity with an imperialist enterprise, co-existing in a necessary but compromised symbiosis with moments and forces of subversion and resistance from within the society. (Hodge and Mishra x)

In their view, this results in a schizoid form of consciousness in which systematic double messages are endemic:

This quality of the Australian mind is hardly recognized, concealed as it is by the Australian stereotype of the feckless simple-minded inhabitants of . . . 'the lucky country'. But this stereotype is itself part of the symptomology of the schizoid nation [. . .] The 'typical Australian' is a hebephrenic construct, but is the product of a paranoid vision, the other half of the single coin [. . .] the figure exists to suppress from the national image recognition of what he isn't. He encodes a class, race and gender identity which classifies women, Aborigines and new migrants as 'un-Australian' [. . . subjecting them to] a symbolic annihilation. (xv)

The operation of a resistant form of analysis involves reading important symptomatic Australian texts with a particular recognition:

These texts [the symptomatic texts of the Australian consciousness] have something of the structure and function of dreams [. . .] like dreams many of these texts encode the deepest desires and fears of individuals and groups. And like dreams, the seeming unity of these texts decomposes into different levels and unmediated contradictions, layered over with disguise upon disguise yet repetitiously insisting on flaunting its secrets before the public gaze, sprinkling its truths in the pleasure of the text as well as in its hidden recesses. (xvi)

There is a particular consequence of this for the representation of Aboriginal people in these texts. Again, it is a cultural formation with a schizoid structure:

Until recently [. . .] Aborigines appeared only on the margins of works in the mainstream of white literature. But total suppression is too crude to meet all the aims of control, because those who are controlled by the regime are Whites as much as Aborigines. Alongside the system of suppressions must be another system of controls on permissible forms of representation. Otherwise, leakage may occur, and uncontested accounts of the supposedly non-existent may circulate and acquire force. There is another reason why Aborigines cannot be completely effaced from the record. They still have a crucial role to play [. . .]: to confer legitimacy [. . .] *So they cannot be silenced: or more precisely, a voice that is labeled as theirs must have a place, legitimated as theirs yet not disrupting the fine balance of contradictions in the foundation myth.* (27) (my italics)

Within *Cloudstreet's* sophistication-as-simplicity we are invited back to a time when life was simpler. Because it was 'back then' gender relations are unproblematised (although of course the war of the sexes is in full swing) and sexual and gender identities stereotyped and unquestioned. The centrality of male homosociality (known as mateship) is unchallenged and the primary love rela-

tionship we are to attend to was between everyone else and a boy-man called Fish, brain-damaged by almost drowning as an early adolescent and thence able to see visions of stars and talk to the family pig. Seen through a rosy glow of sentimentality, immediately pre- and post-war family relationships though often clumsy are warm and unthreatening. A serial killer stalks only women, and a rambling old house becomes invested with the value of the national home. The old postwar social conflict of Catholic and Protestant values is re-inscribed as a mythic Anglo-Celtic dialectic between (Irish) immoderation and fecklessness and Protestant hysterical-fundamentalist religion and constant thrift. The gradual learning to rub along together without strife of the two families with their contrastive ways became, somehow, an emblem of a solution to the national problem of reconciliation. And moving around on the outside of this story, indeed always literally on the margins of the playing space, appeared from time to time a lone Aboriginal presence. A linking and storytelling function was given to this wandering voice, who securely in the margins of the diegesis, never troubling the drama of the Pickles and the Lambs, blessed the entire muddle from a super-commentary position outside the fictional horizon of the central actors and their lives. As Angela Bennie put it:

[*Cloudstreet*] took small everyday lives – lives like our own – and showed us the potential for grandeur, their mythic stature, their redemptive nature. And then it took those simple lives and wove them into the universal, placing them up among the stars and into the dreaming. The trials of the Pickles and the Lambs – their births, deaths and marriages, their Odyssey through No. 1 Cloudstreet, watched over and shadowed by the Koori spirit haunting the plays moral landscape – are told to us in the theatrical language and a tongue we recognize as our own on a deeply emotional level. In other words it was our own in Theatre speaking to us, revealing out secrets and dreams, our ideas and problems . . . (Bennie 22)

works cited

- Armfield, Neil. 'A letter from Neil Armfield'. *Company B Belvoir Book* 1997: 8–11.
- , 'Director's Note'. *Cloudstreet Playbill Program*, Sydney Festival season, January 3–26, 1998.
- Bennie, Angela. 'Street Of Universal Dreams'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 February 1998: 22.
- Hodge, Bob and Vijay Mishra. *Dark Side Of the Dream – Australian literature and the postcolonial mind*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990.
- Marr, David. 'The vodka flows . . . but not His Excellency's Russian. Marr at the Festival'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 January 1998: 2.
- Morgan, Joyce. 'Cloud's Silver Lining'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 January 1998: 10.
- Waites, James. 'Triumph over the elements'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 5 January 1998: 15.