

Nick Enright: An Actor's Playwright. Ed. Anne Pender and Susan Lever. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008, 224 pp. + 6 illustrations.

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Nick Enright, in the aftermath of the New Wave in the late 1970s and early 1980s, emerged as an extraordinarily talented, bright, passionate young artist in the Australian theatre. He had already inspired many people, he had been to New York and done well there, and in 1979 he produced, with Terence Clarke, his glitteringly sophisticated but very Aussie adaptation of Goldoni's *The Venetian Twins* as Nimrod Theatre's contribution to the transitional season at the Sydney Opera House, after the collapse of the Old Tote Theatre and before the establishment of the Sydney Theatre Company. It was a great success.

But something was missing. He didn't seem, in the 1980s, to have a lot to say. His late contribution to the legend-building musical history plays of the New Wave, *On the Wallaby*, came across as rather retro in 1980. The New Theatre had been doing that sort of thing for decades. The musical *Summer Rain* (1983), also with Clarke as composer, was delightful but seemed very light in a time when Louis Nowra and Stephen Sewell were producing their early great plays. The romantic farce *Daylight Saving* (1989) did much more with the genre than any other Australian playwright had done, but it seemed to belong to an earlier period.

Then, in the 1990s, he suddenly turned round and surprised and shocked us all. We know now that this followed a period of personal introspection, referred to in several articles in this tribute volume, but at the time it was a stunning leap forward by a writer who had suddenly found his voice.

In the 1990s he came up, in quick succession, with an extraordinary series of complex, profound and deeply moving dramatic explorations of characters struggling to know each other, to come to terms with their past and with their families, and to find a way of going on. *Mongrels* (1991) looks back on the decade, the 1970s, during which Enright came to maturity as a theatre artist, bringing together two characters, both playwrights, based on the figures of Peter Kenna and the prison playwright Jim McNeill. It is much better than any of their plays. In *St James Infirmary*, in 1992, he wrote about his own past for the first time. It is a beautifully constructed study of a young man struggling to reconcile his rebelliousness with the feelings of duty imposed on him in his school, set during the period of the war in Vietnam. *Good Works* (1994), his masterpiece, tells, with great dramaturgical complexity and sophistication, a saga of two families, from 1928 to 1981, whose relationships and betrayals reach deep into their conjoined pasts.

In 1992 he wrote *A Property of the Clan*, a Theatre-in-Education piece that became the adult play *Blackrock* (1995), released in a film version in 1997. In these works he began his exploration of the ways in which young adults, mostly young men but not always, struggle to find their way in the face of social impositions and cultural formations that, in their young lives, continue to control them. Sometimes they are defeated, sometimes they manage to get through and become successful adults. His last professionally produced play, *A Man with Five Children* (2002), explored this

directly, pursuing the lives from childhood into adulthood of the subjects of a series made by a documentary film-maker very like Michael Apter, who made the *Up* series at 7-year intervals between 1964 and 2005. Enright's wonderfully rich and densely-packed play, *Country Music*, written for a graduating NIDA class, also in 2002, was left unrevised and unpublished at his death. It deserves to be better remembered.

This collection of essays covers much of this and goes further, dealing also, in academic papers and in more personal tributes by colleagues, with his work as a collaborator and teacher. It provides a wide range of perspectives of the work of one of the best-loved Australian theatre artists of the late twentieth century.

One of the aims of this book is to record some of the excitement of the theatrical and community work before it becomes entombed in the traces left by the published and archived scripts. Adrian Kiernander makes this the main goal of his chapter on the screen recordings of moments from Enright's plays that he has discovered as part of his admirable 'Stage on Screen' project, drawing on television archives from the ABC and Channel 9, and now collected at the University of New England. Peter Fitzpatrick, working in the Enright papers held at the ADFA Library, gives a good discussion of the artistic choices that Enright made in the process of turning the life and songs of Peter Allen into the hit 'juke-box' musical *The Boy From Oz*. Fitzpatrick argues convincingly that he was a powerful artist working here within the confines of a commercial medium. Similarly Susan Lever, discussing Enright's screen work, refers to 'his brilliant craftsmanship applied to the ideas of other people' (48) and argues that his personal moral questioning informs and perhaps transcends all that tortuous collaborative work. Jack Teiwes gives a detailed account (including a nice bit of theatre-legend-building in his description of a traumatic opening night in Sydney, 68-9) of the development of Enright and Justin Monjo's adaptation of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, a major triumph, directed by Neil Armfield, that had a world tour and several revivals.

Mary Ann Hunter, writing about Enright's work as a teacher and worker with the young, gives a valuable account of the various youth projects that he worked on, including a detailed account of *Property of the Clan* and a critique of its subsequent development into *Blackrock*. The book also includes Veronica Kelly's erudite and deft close reading of *Mongrels* (which first appeared in *Southerly* in 1994) with its interesting discussion of how Enright, coming on their heels, re-examined the writers of the New Wave. There is a good close reading of *A Man With Five Children* by Felicity Plunkett. Julian Meyrick's chapter on *The Venetian Twins* argues that its multi-layered appropriation of a classic became lost in the New Wave enthusiasm for its fun. He underestimates, I think, the broad critical appreciation at the time of what the famous Nimrod classics were doing, basing his argument mainly on evidence from the daily reviewers (who, as we all know, are not to be trusted). Susan Lever and Anne Pender give an account of *Summer Rain*, linking it with past traditions and suggesting, very nicely, that this is the Australian musical that should have been written in the 1950s, in response to the commercial theatre's then love-affair with American musicals, but wasn't.

There is a fine collection of tributes by colleagues who worked with him. George Ogilvie is especially interesting on the making of *A Man With Five Children* and includes a nice anecdote that sums up Enright's work as a dramatist. He had the

‘obsessive trait’, Ogilvie says, of ‘never, never [judging] the actions of his characters’ (191). ‘I’ll leave that to the audience,’ he said.

Sandy Gore contributes a lovely reminiscence of Enright as a good and inspiring friend; Karen Vickery writes movingly, in personal and disarmingly frank terms, about his influence as her as an acting teacher; Terence Clarke claims to have been the artistic equivalent of his spouse, and is good on his musical understanding and how that contributed to making him such a superb lyricist.

These contributions put in something of Enright the man. Was he a merely brilliant craftsman who managed to slip in a few ideas of his own and so exert a moral influence? Was he simply an inspiring collaborator who used his ability to allow other people to tell their stories? Of course not. He had something of his own to say, for all his self-deprecation and civility.

There are two disappointing things about this otherwise useful book. The first is that when it deals with what he wanted to say—for example, that it is hard to be young, that we often betray the people we love and that we need to understand the people who hurt us—the tone too often becomes negative, driven by ideology. Jane O’Sullivan’s discussion of Enright’s sympathetic treatment of troubled young masculinity in *Good Works* and *Blackrock* is the kind of critical writing that wants its subject to have written something else. She uses words like ‘cruel’ and ‘questionable’ to describe his artistic choices. They ‘disquiet’ and ‘disappoint’ her. She doesn’t refer to his treatment of the young and middle-aged women in the two plays, and, in her stern judgement of Ricko in *Blackrock*, neglects to mention that he commits suicide.

The other disappointment is that for all its reclamation of traces this book contains very few descriptions of the great moments in the theatre that Enright enabled. Teiwes refers (67) to what he calls the ‘impossible’ stage direction in the script of *Cloudstreet*, ‘the boat flies through the sky’, but he does not describe (and I know he was there!) that magical moment in Armfield’s production, when the naked light globes that were Fish’s stars descended and his boat, on its journey on the Swan River, really did seem to fly. In O’Sullivan’s discussion of *Good Works* she refers to Angela Bennie’s description of it as ‘a memory play’, but she doesn’t describe (and perhaps she wasn’t there, so fair enough) the great closing scene of Adam Cook’s premier production at the Q Theatre in 1994, when the little snowdome that has come to represent all the memories of the troubled and divided families, friends, mothers and lovers in that wonderful play, suddenly filled the stage, as massive snow started to fall, smothering them all.

A director and a designer may have created these particular moments, but Nick Enright, without using any of his famous words, wrote them. He knew the theatre.

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