

John McCallum. *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century*. Sydney: Currency P, 2009, 484+xi.

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John McCallum's *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* is unlike many other books on Australian drama published this decade. Recent publications have been strongly inflected in scope, content and rhetoric by discourses of gender and race, and by the politics of feminism, sexuality, migration, post-colonialism and reconciliation. Their authors offer incisive readings of plays in performance, selectively nuanced by subjective positions, archival research on theatre productions, and the embodied phenomenology of theatrical experience. McCallum's readings of Australian plays are also incisive and nuanced, but the book incorporates those identity-based divisions within a broader embrace. *Belonging* restores to the criticism of Australian drama the national scope of earlier books like Dennis Carroll's *Australian Contemporary Drama* (1985), Peter Fitzpatrick's *After 'The Doll'* (1979) and Leslie Rees's *The Making of Australian Drama* (1973).

Beginning with the popular 1912 stage version of Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* and the 'nationalist theatre' of Louis Esson and the Pioneer Players, McCallum traces the formation of Australian drama through the 'genre playwrights' of the 1930s and 1940s, and the 'backyard realism' of the 1950s and 1960s, into the New Wave of the early 1970s. In fact, McCallum dismantles the apparent coherence of the 'New Wave': 'The central four—Hibberd, Romeril, Buzo and Williamson—now look like as disparate a bunch of writers as you might find' (140). From there, he proceeds to chart the gradual dissolution of the national as a frame for comprehending Australian drama. The 'internationalism' of Louis Nowra's and Stephen Sewell's plays of the late 1970s and early 1980s leads onto the identity and community-based theatres of the 1980s and 1990s, including the work of Indigenous writers whose plays have dramatised the borders within. McCallum concludes by declaring Daniel Keene Australia's first 'post-national' playwright, amongst those theatre artists like Jenny Kemp, Barrie Kosky, Michael Kantor and Tom Wright whose work has redefined the role of the playwright in Australia for the twenty-first century.

McCallum states clearly that the book is not a history of theatre productions and the artists and companies who bring plays to life on the stage. Nor is the book a cultural history of playwriting in twentieth century Australia, if by that one means a history of playwrights, their careers as writers, and the forces which gave shape to their work. Some pivotal institutions like the Playwrights Advisory Board, the National Playwrights Conference and Currency Press, and theatre companies dedicated to the production of new Australian plays—Playbox and La Mama in Melbourne, Griffin Theatre Company in Sydney, and La Boite in Brisbane—are mentioned in passing. Arguably, it has been the interlinking activities of these organisations and others such as Playworks, Playlab and now Playwriting Australia which have collectively come, along with the funding priorities of the Australia Council and state arts departments and various prize schemes, to determine the repertoire of Australian plays given production and recognition, at least over the last four decades.

Like those earlier books, which were written prior to the advent of performance-oriented studies of drama, McCallum sets out to describe the repertoire of dramatic scripts written by Australian writers in the twentieth century. With a frequency that gradually increases as the century proceeds, many of these plays were also given their first production by Australian theatres. Only occasionally does the book refer to the experience of seeing plays in performance or draw on documentary evidence from theatre productions. This is a curious aspect of the book, even a little disappointing, as McCallum has been reviewing theatre since the 1970s. He also regrets it in a concluding remark (378). The focus on play scripts and not their performance retains the distinction between drama and theatre, literature and performance. In theatrical terms, it casts the writer in the role of dramaturgical curator or literary advisor. The reader is referred to other books on the history of Australian theatre, notably Geoffrey Milne's *Theatre Australia (Un)limited* (2004). Maybe we can look forward to another book in which McCallum's theatrical experience as a spectator is given greater rein.

For this book, McCallum's primary method was reading play scripts—hundreds of them. The book's list of plays is fifty pages long. In this regard alone, the book represents a remarkable achievement. As a guidebook to the range of twentieth century Australian drama it is unmatched. McCallum's dramaturgically astute synopses of so many plays make an invaluable contribution to drama scholarship and theatre production. The artistic directors and literary managers of Australian theatre companies will find some sound recommendations on which overlooked plays in the repertoire warrant revival today, as will the scholars teaching and studying Australian drama in schools and universities around the world. If, as McCallum acknowledges in the introduction, his selection of plays inevitably delivers something of a 'canon' (x), then it is a broad one, inclusive and wide-ranging. In aim, it seems, *Belonging* seeks to find a place for everyone.

The 'yearning to belong', which McCallum takes as overarching metaphor for the Australian experience, has been dramatically expressed in various ways. Settlers battle against the bush in Louis Esson's *The Drovers* (1923), Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Brumby Innes* (1927), Betty Roland's *The Touch of Silk* (1928). Indigenous playwrights Robert Merrit, Jack Davis, Bob Maza and Eva Johnson 'reversed the bush-hut staging tradition so that the fringe-dwelling black characters who had turned up at the doors of white pioneers' and found ways to belong on the stages of the white middle-class theatre (302). In the plays of Louis Nowra and Stephen Sewell 'groups of troubled misfits cling precariously to an idea and a land that is ambivalently caught between European "civilisation" and an ancient Indigenous culture' (228). Dramas of 'immigrants and exiles', emerging in the 1960s with Theodore Patrikareas' *The Promised Woman* (1963) and cultivated more recently by Tes Lyssiotis, Janis Balodis and Noëlle Janaczewska, display continuities with the 'old bush-city plays' that suggest 'we still live in a continent full of exiles' (300). While the sexual exiles of 'gay and lesbian theatre' are depicted as a passing phase seeping into the mainstream, the book's two closing images of post-national belonging are disarmingly romantic in that grand, erotically-charged tradition of Australian mateship. In Daniel Keene's *Half and Half* (2002), estranged brothers Ned and Luke hug each other as rain falls on the garden they built together in honour of their mother (371). In Susan Roger and Chris Drummond's theatrical adaptation of Robert Dessaix's *Night Letters* (2004), lovers Robert and Peter, one dying, the other 'preparing for a new life without him', are 'both still looking for an exultation based in being there in a place' (379).

Aside from this thematic interest, the book's key divisions are the period, the playwright and the play. Within its broad historical sweep—which compels the writing to move chronologically at a pace—there are also longer passages of critical insight and evaluation. While the chapters on the early 'bush and city' plays take another run around the repertoire's back paddock, I felt the writing really freshen with the chapter on Patrick White. McCallum explains that White is 'one of the few Australian playwrights to attract new generations of theatre artists eager to test themselves on his work' (92-3). A line of innovative directors from John Tasker in the 1960s, to Jim Sharman in the 1970s and 1980s, Neil Armfield in the 1980s and 1990s, and Benedict Andrews in 2007, has given White's plays great depth of production. This, in turn, supplies rich theatrical experiences on which McCallum draws in writing about White's plays. A similar sense of theatrical experience infuses the writing on Dorothy Hewett, Barry Humphries and Reg Livermore, with the latter two recognised as the creators of dramatic characters, if not playwrights in their own right.

The book's commitment to assessing the playwright's oeuvre addresses some gaps in current scholarship. McCallum delivers an overdue chapter-length assessment of David Williamson's forty-years as humanist satirist and dramatist of middle-class mores. He concludes that, 'in the process of supplying box-office success for the mainstream theatres', Williamson 'has supported a great deal of the more adventurous work that many of those companies have produced' (186). McCallum also covers other playwrights whose contributions to the repertoire by the end of the twentieth century merit sustained scholarship, including: Nick Enright, Michael Gow, Hannie Rayson, Joanna Murray-Smith, Tobsha Learner, Katherine Thomson, Debra Oswald, Michael Gurr, Andrew Bovell and Daniel Keene.

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