

# Peter Yeldham's *Reunion Day*: An Anzac Day Play on British Television

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Alan Seymour's Anzac Day play, *The One Day of the Year* (1960) has become one of a handful of Australian realist plays remembered in the wake of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955). In his recent history of twentieth century Australian playwriting, John McCallum groups *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* (1957) and *The One Day of the Year* as the only influential plays to emerge from this 'school' of 'backyard realism' before the tradition and its related genres 'moved off, mostly, into film and television' (89). In fact, the writers themselves moved off to television—soon after the Australian success of their plays, all three playwrights went to Britain to work in television as writers, script editors and producers. Sumner Locke Elliott, the author of an earlier 'breakthrough' Australian play, *Rusty Bugles* (1948) had left before the success of his stage play for a career as a scriptwriter in US television. Australia did not provide sufficient theatrical opportunities to keep these writers working here.

The scanty history of Australian drama between *Rusty Bugles* and the New Wave experimental theatre of the early 1970s might be more varied and interesting if we had access to the plays by Australian writers shown on television, in Australia, Britain and the United States, during the period. A few of these plays have been published, but most of them lie unread in the archives, while most film versions have disappeared. Peter Yeldham's *Reunion Day*, produced for BBC television and broadcast in 1962, is one of these—though it might be seen as a companion piece to Seymour's play, providing a different perspective on the changing meaning of Anzac Day at the beginning of the 1960s.

In the first years of post-war television broadcasting, networks drew on the drama traditions of both the stage and radio. In Australia, Britain and United States they tried soap operas and series based on radio serials, variety shows based on vaudeville performance and, at least in the first decades, they broadcast plays, sometimes classics or current theatre performances, but increasingly plays written especially for television. In New York, Elliott became one of the producer Fred Coe's acclaimed group of scriptwriters writing for the NBC playhouse anthologies. Elliott's plays were mostly sophisticated comedies, but another member of Coe's group, Paddy Chayefsky, wrote the television play that established a new form of social realism on television, *Marty* (1953).

By the mid-1950s the various British television companies had followed the American example and were commissioning contemporary plays for their regular playhouse theatres. In his Foreword to *Reunion Day*, Peter Yeldham mentions Sydney Newman and ABC's Armchair Theatre—ABC was one of the independent TV companies established in Britain after 1955, and Newman was a Canadian producer credited with bringing contemporary dramas with a new social realism to British television (Cooke 38-39). John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* from 1956 is generally regarded as marking the move from British 'drawing room' theatre to 'kitchen-sink' stage drama about ordinary people, but television plays were making a similar shift at about the same time. Lez Cooke suggests that Chayefsky's *Marty*

and Ted Willis's *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (made for Associated Rediffusion, 1956) predated the move to naturalistic stage dramas about 'ordinary people' (37). Jason Jacobs explains that a restrained 'intimate' style of performance and a contemporary, topical subject focusing on working class people became the hallmarks of early British television drama (7).

Many Australian writers, like their actor compatriots, travelled to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s to take advantage of the expanding opportunities on British television. Peter Yeldham, already well-regarded as a radio dramatist, left Australia in 1956 when he realised that Australian prospects for television drama would be limited. Within a few years, he had established himself as a television writer in Britain, with more than a dozen single plays produced by ITV and the BBC for their various playhouse anthology series. As well as some script writing for series such as *No Hiding Place* and *Probation Officer*, Yeldham wrote several successful stage plays (including *Birds on the Wing* 1972) and scripts for films (such as *The Comedy Man* 1963) before returning to Australia in the late 1970s. Over the years, his writing output has been so vast that he might be regarded as one of the most significant dramatists of post-war Australia—undoubtedly more people have seen his television dramas than the work of any Australian stage playwright. But his work has hardly penetrated the record of Australian drama, partly because of the ephemeral nature of television and the spread of his career over two hemispheres. With no awareness of Seymour's play, he wrote *Reunion Day* in 1961 as a commission for the BBC. It was filmed in the BBC's Birmingham studios in December 1961 with a cast of mainly Australian actors, including Ray Barrett (Tim), Ron Haddrick (Dave), Madge Ryan (Grace), Ken Wayne (Jack), Reg Lye (Carmody) and Nyree Dawn Porter (Judith). A Canadian producer, Alan Tilvern, played Colin Bailey, with Jerold Wells as Greg Porter and Frank Leighton as Jerry Grant. Patricia Conolly played Val and Lyn Ashley played Kitty.



Figure 1. Peter Yeldham (centre in doorway) with the director Vivian A. Daniels (standing, second from left) and cast of *Reunion Day* on the set for the Rubins' home.

*Reunion Day* does not have the generational focus of Seymour's Anzac Day play. *The One Day of the Year* invokes the Gallipoli legend and traditional class divisions (Marrickville versus the North Shore of Sydney); its chauvinistic and xenophobic Second War veteran, Alf, is a disappointed man, deprived of education and reduced to driving a lift for a living. Yeldham's play concentrates, instead, on a group of Second World War veterans and their lives in prosperous Sydney. It gives a sense of the contemporary energy of post-war Sydney, where returned servicemen, still in their early forties, were making the most of business opportunities. *Reunion Day* is not so much a critique of attitudes to Anzac Day or misguided patriotism, as a chance to consider the new values of a thriving post-war Australia. His Anzac Day reunion brings together a publican, a real estate manager, an insurance salesman, and other men engaged in unspecified business activities. These men are part of a socially mobile society with opportunities for material success—as Dave Rubin tells Tim Anderson, 'There's plenty of chances here.' As opposed to the class stereotypes in Seymour's play where officers live comfortably on the North Shore, it is the officer, Tim Anderson, who has not been able to adjust to peacetime Australia. In contrast, the 'worst soldier' in the regiment, Greg Porter, has achieved the Australian dream of owning a pub, and the man who 'cracked up' under the pressure of war, Dave Rubin, has become a successful real estate agent.

We see three of their homes: Dave's stylish modern North Shore home (all carpets and glass), Jack's western suburbs bungalow, and Col Bailey's flat close to the city. And we meet some of their women: sophisticated Judith Rubin, hard-working Grace Hudson and her mother, the easygoing prostitute Val, and Greg's daughter Kitty. The main action occurs in a private bar on the first floor of Greg's city pub—a relatively quiet place for discussion, though we occasionally hear the noise from downstairs in the crowded public bar where the artillery men are meeting.



Figure 2. Ron Haddrick as Dave and Nyree Dawn Porter as Judith.

The most surprising element in the play may be the decision to make one of its central characters Jewish. Yeldham's stage directions make it clear that this should not be obvious to the audience until the men begin to make half-joking references to Dave Rubin's success. The play first establishes Dave's generosity and comfortable life when Jack tells Grace about his modern house and his hospitality the year before. We see Dave's easy relationship with his wife—he is clearly good-humoured, reflective and intelligent. The first indication of his background comes when he leaves the bar to meet Tim, and Jerry adopts a 'stage Jewish' accent (possibly based on Roy Rene's Mo) referring to Dave as a 'yid' and 'one of the tribe'. But the others react quickly to shut this performance down, insisting that Dave is 'one of us, too'—mateship is more important than difference.

In the park outside the pub, Tim manipulates Dave into offering him a job as well as cash to keep him going. Back in the pub, the audience shares Dave's knowledge that Tim is shouting the bar with his money. When Tim begins to mock Dave as his new 'boss', the others automatically add their joking comments, culminating in Jack's unthinking reference to 'a pound of flesh'. The men's earlier refusal to tolerate Jerry's Jewish jokes indicates a resistance to anti-Semitism, but they have had more to drink by this point and have been goaded by Tim. Still, there is a conscious silence after Jack's comment.

Dave responds to Jack with a clear statement of the limits of Australian tolerance of difference. He distinguishes between anti-Semites and 'good blokes' like Jack who would not offer a conscious insult but find themselves mouthing clichés (admittedly Shakespearean):

I know Jews are supposed to be sensitive, but I'm one of the tough ones. Once in a while some kid tells my boys at school that they killed Jesus Christ, and that hurts. But the rest doesn't matter. It's not what you said, Jacko.

The men ignorantly follow Tim's lead in mockery and these clichés say themselves, once the banter starts.

In a sense, Jack serves as the 'average' Australian in this play, with fundamentally fair instincts but led by his ideas of mateship to join in the banter or go along with Col's suggestion for a night on the town. He still admires Tim Anderson, and cares for the mateship he shared with the other men. He is so appalled by Dave's rejection of the mateship in the bar that he strikes him. And, at the end of the play, when the others have all walked away from Tim in disgust, Jack takes him home.

The audience is made aware of Jack's changing attitudes as the day unfolds. At the beginning of the play, he resents the constrictions of married life in the suburbs. As Grace comments, he is one of the men who feel cheated by middle age, 'with mortgages on their backs, and families to tie them down'. We watch him observe the shifting relationships between Dave and Tim, attempting to maintain a friendship with both of them—though he gives up on Col. He brings Tim home, because he recognises that he is 'sort of middle aged and lost' and remembers that he was once 'a real man, and we loved him'. But he also visits Dave and absolves him from guilt about his breakdown, declaring it was in 'another world'. Jack's notion of mateship has become more genuine and compassionate than the cheery fellowship in the bar. It can even include his wife.

Tim serves as an antagonist, disrupting the good-natured banter among the men and testing their allegiances. All of them ultimately align themselves with the present, refusing to revert

to their former relationship with Tim once he breaches the mateship code by telling them about Dave's breakdown. Yet, Tim is no villain; his attempts to manipulate the others are the desperate manoeuvres of a man who has failed. He has flourished in war, but feels rejected by peacetime society: 'It's a dirty word, the war, when it's all over. People don't want to know.' We are invited to share Jack's sympathy with him, just as we share Jack's concern for Dave in the last scene. The play is even-handed and sympathetic to its characters.



Figure 3. Ken Wayne as Jack, Madge Ryan as Grace, Ray Barrett as Tim.

The play, then, might be read as promoting a simple message about the need for masculine maturity in modern urban Australia. Like Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* it rejects the dream of Australian mateship and masculine adventure for the more mundane life of the city. Grace's memory of the Victory March of 1945—'they were like Gods—so young and straight and tanned'—recalls Olive's image of the cancutters in *The Doll*—'eagles flying down out of the sun' (Lawler 48). But *Reunion Day* never mocks the soldiers' achievements. They have survived the full six years of war, including Tobruk and New Guinea, and the brief reference to the battle of Finschafen makes it clear they've faced terrifying situations. When Carmody asks them 'Who won the war?', they have some right to answer 'We did'. If there is any questioning of Anzac Day as an institution it is gentle. These drinking men are not the pathetic drunkards of Seymour's play, and the comic drunk performance of Carmody remains light-hearted as its more threatening possibilities are averted ('We wouldn't have taken his money—it was a gag').

*Reunion Day* is more interested in character observation, and the shifts in the relationships of the men meeting in the bar, than in a didactic message. It is a play with no melodramatic

moments or extreme passions, exemplifying the qualities of television naturalism of its period. John Caughie argues that this naturalism emerged because television was still seen as a writer's medium where the writer was encouraged to see the technology as a 'neutral relay' (100). This naturalism retains some of the principles associated with Zola's 'scientific' approach to fiction, in that it observes ordinary life with a discipline that resists judgement. The play doesn't argue a case, or set up a debate. It is left to the audience to recall the devastating treatment of Jewish people during the war, and to note the ironies of anti-Semitism among those who fought it. The audience must register the difference between calling Greg a 'profiteering old publican' and accusing Dave of being obsessed by money. Yeldham makes no fuss about it.

The play's strengths lie in what Caughie insists is a particular television mode of naturalism—not an accident of the technology but a self-conscious form of art derived from the literary naturalism of the nineteenth century. This kind of realism works by ironic juxtapositions and understatement, rather than the deliberate argument about social justice we associate with social realism. While, as Dave tells Judith, 'nothing important' happens in the play in the sense of nothing improbable or out of the ordinary (if we discount the miracle of Carmody's tightrope walking), the writer gives the characters credible and amusing dialogue while implying a more serious level of interaction. It is up to the audience to notice the ironies and the subtle shifts in relationships.

The men in the bar speak a slangy banter that is realistically banal, a matter of shared jokes and sayings rather than exaggeration. The humour is maintained almost to the point where the play might appear a comedy until the power manoeuvres beneath its surface become obvious. Jerry's impersonation of a Jew is not funny; Tim's jokes about the boss have an edge of malice. Carmody's entrance allows for some broader physical humour but his drunken vulnerability makes us aware of potential threat. At the time that *Reunion Day* was written and produced, Harold Pinter was beginning to bring sinister elements to such ordinary encounters in his stage plays (*The Birthday Party*, 1958; *The Caretaker*, 1960) but this play ultimately refuses such possibilities as Yeldham works within the limits of the ordinary. The scene where Jack makes coffee demonstrates how much Yeldham can draw out of the ordinary domestic moments—it's clearly a new experience for Jack and Grace watches in wonder, though he's just making it with instant powder and hot water. The conciliatory gesture is clear.

Like the people watching *Reunion Day* on television, its characters are not given to excesses of expression or behaviour. In Yeldham's foreword to the script he imagines his audience sitting in their armchairs 'at the mercy of interruptions from the telephone, the children, or friends coming to call'. In the play itself, the newsreel clips remind the audience that they, too, might watch such a march on television, as Grace and her mother intend to do (even in Seymour's play, the characters have hired a television in order to watch the Anzac Day march). The play offers its audience the experiences of ordinary people like them (though Australian) and invites them to recognise something of their own lives.

On paper, the script may seem little different from the stage dramas of its time. Certainly, it appears remarkably confined in set and characters by the standards of today's television. There are no outside broadcasts. Newsreel footage of the homecoming from war and the Anzac Day march, a few more sets than usual in realistic stage dramas, and the call for close ups at moments of tension are the only clear signs that it was designed for television rather than the stage.

Without the film version of the play, we can't know what the actors made of their moments of close-up intensity. We can't see the manner in which Jack strikes Dave, or Dave's physical response beyond that 'faint smile'. Carmody's extraordinary ability to walk a tightrope might seem a production challenge for any stage version; presumably the television cameras allowed for some visual tricks. A photograph of the production shows the men holding Carmody upside down while he drinks a beer with the help of Greg, so it seems that there was some business with Carmody beyond the script. We can only imagine the kind of ambivalence Ray Barrett would bring to the part of Tim, and the control that Ron Haddrick would give Dave.



Figure 4. Reg Lye as Carmody is upended by other members of the *Reunion Day* cast.

In the context of British television history, *Reunion Day* serves as an example of the kind of single plays produced during what Caughie calls a transition period in drama—between Sydney Newman's commissioning of original social realist plays from 1956 to Troy Kennedy Martin's attack on television naturalism in 1964. During this time writers were regarded as the primary creators of television drama and they generally adopted a naturalist approach in style and subject matter. Kennedy Martin and his supporters called for a more director-

centred drama though, and as Caughie notes, the revered British dramas of the late 1960s and 1970s, such as *Up the Junction* (1965) and *Cathy Come Home* (1966) developed the naturalist modes into a kind of documentary realism or 'progressive realism' (105). Yeldham's play demonstrates that Australian subjects were not beyond the range of British naturalism.

In Australian discussions of drama, naturalism has long been dismissed as retrograde, conservative and anti-modernist. Television drama has hardly been taken seriously as part of Australian drama history, so we have little sense of the shifts in approaches to writing for television over the years, and, despite sporadic attempts to produce serious television drama, Australian television realism is generally associated with melodrama or soap opera. In the absence of any serious consideration of Australian television drama of the 1960s, Jack Hibberd and other New Wave dramatists were forced to attack *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, a play from 15 years earlier, as an exemplar of the limitations of the Australian version of naturalism they were rejecting. Though landmark British television plays such as *Cathy Come Home*, Peter Watkins's *Culloden* (1964) and John Hopkins's *Talking to a Stranger* (1966) were seen on Australian television soon after their production, writers in Australia had little opportunity to emulate them. By contrast, Caughie, Cooke and Jacobs demonstrate that since the early 1950s there have been ongoing arguments in Britain about the aesthetic of television drama. Caughie argues that far from reactionary and anti-modernist, the naturalist plays of the 1950s and 1960s were a function of a modernist sensibility, co-existing with the experiments of Brecht and Beckett, and with clear links to the theatrical work of Pinter (who also wrote television plays). In Australia we have only a few naturalist plays to consider from the period so that one tradition of serious drama, co-existent with European theatrical experiment, has been neglected in Australian drama history. *Reunion Day* offers an example of this naturalist tradition on television, from a period when writers were given a central place in the creation of serious television drama.

In the event, the play was never seen on Australian television. According to Yeldham, Sir Frank Packer's Channel 9 bought the Australian rights to show the BBC film, but Packer then decided not to show it on Australian television on the grounds that it might offend the RSL. By contrast, a German television company broadcasting from Cologne bought the script and produced a German-language version which it broadcast several times. The Germans were particularly interested in the central role of an Australian Jew and asked Yeldham to develop Dave Rubin a little. Yeldham later wrote a foreword (published here with the play) when the German version was published in the magazine *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* in 1963. So far as Yeldham knows, no copy of the film, in either its British or German productions, is extant.

*Reunion Day* also belongs to an Australian tradition of playmaking about the memory and meaning of Australian war experience. In the 1930s, Sydney Tomholt's *Searchlights* and Edgar Holt's *Anzac Reunion* imagined the return of the First World War dead to speak to the living. Veronica Kelly argues that the spiritualism of these plays expresses the national need for mourning the absent dead, also evident in the building of elaborate war memorials. Tomholt's and Holt's plays develop from these sites and rituals of mourning—the vast War Memorial in Melbourne in *Searchlights*, and Anzac Day in *Anzac Reunion*. In *Anzac Reunion* a survivor of the war is visited by his four dead mates who ask him whether the world is a better place for their deaths, and he must tell them: 'They are preparing for a more horrible war than ours' (225). The plays written after the Second World War offer a more materialist and robust view of the world, perhaps reflecting the relatively light casualties and damage to Australia during that war—and the booming post-war economy.

In this quite different context, Seymour's play can address the burden of Anzac Day for a younger generation and question the values behind it. Yeldham's play about war veterans does not mourn the dead, but rather it relegates the war experience to the past in the interests of the future. Naturalism, then, might appear the appropriate style for this moment in Australian history. More recently, John Doyle's six-episode television series *Changi* (2001) uses the reunion idea to consider the experiences of survivors of imprisonment by the Japanese, and in doing so he adopts some of the postmodernist strategies associated with the British television writer Dennis Potter.

As well as these plays associated with reunions, two of the finest Australian plays—Elliott's *Rusty Bugles* and John Romeril's *The Floating World* (1974)—consider the experiences of the Second World War. A partial performance of *Rusty Bugles* by Sydney's New Theatre several years ago demonstrated how close its supposedly naturalist depiction of the experience of war—as an anti-heroic, mind-numbing waiting for nothing to happen—was to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955). Of course, recent reconsiderations of Beckett suggest his play may have as much to do with his war experiences in France as with the universally absurd condition of humankind. *The Floating World* observes a Second War veteran break down from the memories of his Burma railway experience, while adopting a mix of popular and serious theatre forms to establish its different levels of reality.

Yeldham's play adds to this tradition, referring to men who fought and survived the war, rather than the 'chockos' of Elliott's play or the prisoners of the Japanese in the plays by the younger generation of writers. True to its naturalist form, *Reunion Day* presents characters who share the experiences of the majority of Australian Second War veterans of fighting, surviving and 'winning' the war, rather than the extremes of suffering that more recent plays prefer to remember. Taken together these plays map the shifts in Australian dramatic styles over the years, from the mix of realist and 'spiritualist' elements in the 1930s, through the naturalism of the postwar decades to the more experimental theatre after the 1970s. Plays written for television such as *Reunion Day* and *Changi*, but also Cliff Green's *Mud Bloody Mud* (1985) about the New Guinea campaign, deserve to be included in this history, and they, too, display interesting engagements with dramatic form.

Biographical accounts indicate that Lawler and Seymour each wrote some original screenplays for British television, though they mainly adapted literary classics or worked as script editors (Alomes, Fitzpatrick). Sharon Clarke lists more than twenty original television plays by Elliott for the American CBS and NBC networks in the 1950s, before he decided he could never live in California and turned to writing novels (1996, 257-260). Yeldham's website lists a host of other original television and stage plays, as well as film screenplays. There are clearly many original plays by these Australian writers currently inaccessible to readers, let alone for viewing.

After his return to Australia, Yeldham became best-known for his adaptations of literary classics (including *Ride on Stranger*, *The Timeless Land* and *1915*) for the ABC. He wrote original screenplays for *Tusitala* (1986) about the last years of Robert Louis Stevenson, and *Captain James Cook* (1987) so that his work has become associated with the presentation of Australian literary and historical heritage on television. In retrospect Yeldham regards the era of single television plays as 'the best period of television' (<http://www.peteryeldham.com/web/pageid/1008>, accessed 30/9/09).

The screenplay of *Reunion Day*, published with this article, gives us some idea of how an Australian writer participated in this period of contemporary naturalist drama on British television in the 1960s.

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