

'The Ways We Live Now'

David Williamson

Australia has always seemed a very crude society, and this play explains better than most why so many Australians of talent chose to live in Britain and America ... If this is Australia, the Aborigines should have won.

So opined English-born Clive Barnes in January 1974, reviewing an Off-Broadway production of David Williamson's *The Removalists* for the *New York Times*. Barnes had already seen London's Royal Court production (in July-August 1973) of this play which, first performed in Melbourne and Sydney 'alternative' theatres two years before, had quickly won its young writer a national reputation. By the time Barnes reviewed the play, that reputation was becoming international, for at the end of 1973 Williamson had won the London *Evening Standard's* George Devine Award for Most Promising Playwright.

Barnes's assumption that a play, realist (though also absurdist) in mode, mirrored a whole society, or reflected the perceiver's stereotyped impressions of that society, had not been shared by this London counterparts. Although Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times* felt that the play was evil, pandering to the audience's worst instincts by offering scenes of violence that (curiously) he thought belonged more in the brothel than on the stage, other London reviewers had been more receptive to this black comedy of machismo run riot, in which two policeman meddle in a domestic dispute and end up bashing the husband to death. Most of them saw the play as a psychological-cum-moral fable with implications extending far beyond the particulars of its Australian setting and the issue of police violence.

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But when Williamson's third big success, originally commissioned for the opening of the Sydney Opera House's Drama Theatre, *What If You Died Tomorrow*, opened at London's Comedy in September 1974, B. A. Young in the *Financial Times* struck a note similar to Barnes's. His view was that if the play's characters—a doctor turned novelist (as Williamson was an engineer turned playwright), his new woman, his parents, his publisher, and his attractive female editor—represented the Australian intelligentsia, then 'Australia need take no further steps to reduce immigration, for no decent person could possibly want to live there'. Again, though, others found that the setting was incidental to its qualities, this time as comedy. Herbert Kretzmer in the *Daily Express* thought it showed that 'life in Australia is just as awful as it is elsewhere', and Charles Lewsen in *The Times* thought that, while the battle for a writer's soul could be set anywhere, the first act at least had 'guts and implies a passion that I do not see crowding the stages of England'. The *Evening Standard's* Milton Shulman found that it continued to display 'the witty, candid and virile writing style' that had won Williamson the paper's Most Promising Playwright award the previous year.

What really provoked an indignant outburst of cultural superiority among London reviewers was Michael Blakemore's production of *Don's Party*, which opened at the Royal Court in March 1975. Written immediately before *The Removalists* (their first productions had overlapped in Melbourne's alternative theatres), *Don's Party* is a virtuoso display of eleven characters interacting while the election results, which most are hoping will change their lives, are coming through on the television. The lives they hope will be changed by a Labor victory reveal themselves as, in the first half, the males pursue the females, and then, in the second, their wives gang up on them with bitter revelations and recriminations. After the revels of election night turn sour, life reverts to drab normality—as do national politics because the conservative government is returned. The style is larrikin Chekhov, with the outrageous sexual language and antics of the priapic Cooley masking a traditional theme of youthful, romantic ideals and illusions succumbing to the disappointments of middle age and tired marriages.

Herbert Kretzmer in the *Daily Express*, under the heading 'One Party Worth Avoiding', advised those thinking of migrating to Australia to see the play first, after which they would happily 'settle for a bedsitter

in Neasden'; he concluded, 'I hated every minute'. Arthur Thirkell in the *Daily Mirror* decided, on the evidence the playwright offered, that 'his country is strictly for morons'. B. A. Young's variation on this (in the *Financial Times*) was 'a nation of Yahoos', and he approvingly quoted his own warning against migrating to Australia. Irving Wardle of *The Times* confessed he found it hard to respond warmly to plays by Commonwealth writers that 'hold up their compatriots to ridicule for audiences in the old country'.

Productions of later Williamson works in London attracted quite different reactions. When *The Club*, which the *Guardian's* Michael Billington said used sport as a metaphor for corruption 'in a way that no recent English production gets anywhere near', opened at Hampstead in January 1980, the same Irving Wardle found it 'blissfully funny'. The *Sunday Times's* reviewer was also commendatory but puzzled by the mildness of the language in a play from Williamson, and from a former penal colony. In June the same year *Travelling North*, which in striking contrast to *The Club* is about an ageing couple, opened at the Lyric, Hammersmith. A number of reviewers found their way into discussing it by observing that it upset preconceptions that it would be boozy and brutal, and then invoked the names Chekhov and Miller. Although *The Perfectionist*, a stylish comedy of manners about the battle of the sexes under feminism, had a run at Hampstead in mid 1983. its real success overseas came the next year at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. Clive Barnes described the play and the Sydney Theatre Company's production as 'stunning'.

However, the assumption by Barnes and some of the London reviewers that the earlier plays directly mirrored Australian society was a not-too-distorted antipodean reflection of the reception they had already had in Australia. There too, reviews have not only been mixed, but also often concerned with the same sort of question that *The Removalists* raised in Clive Barnes's mind: what sort of a society have we here, if this play is an accurate reflection of it? One would like to complicate this by pointing out that Williamson's dramatic images of his own society are by now prolific (he has averaged nearly a play a year over the last two decades, as well as film and television scripts); considerably varied in their subjects and tonality; and as much comic and satiric as realist or 'naturalistic'. But such qualifications should not deny that much of the unprecedented popular, but also critical, success Williamson has enjoyed has been

attributed first of all to his casting himself in the role of 'storyteller to the tribe', regaling Australian audiences (in the first instance) with stories of the ways we live now. Audiences flock to each new Williamson play expecting to see the mirror held up to aspects of human nature, here and now, and to be amused by these—and these audiences help the large state-subsidised companies profitably meet their statutory obligations to include Australian plays in their seasons (a very different situation from when Williamson's earliest plays were produced in fringe theatres, and a situation to which his success has been central).

It has become a commonplace of the local higher journalism that Williamson the dramatist has served as the 'chronicler' of the professional middle classes over the past two decades, the intimate 'diarist' of the generation that grew up to enjoy the educational opportunities and general affluence of post-World War II Australia. This is the generation of the playwright himself (b. 1942), the generation of probably the majority of his immediate audience, and certainly the generation of the majority of his characters who, from play to play, have matured along with both the playwright and his audience. Obviously there are limitations to this uncritical interest in the plays' *mimesis*, their representation or reflection of a changing society, rather than in their *making*, their modes, their moods. Yet, equally obviously, a purely formal reading of the plays as literary texts, rather than as 'scripts for performance' (as Williamson perceives them—though they are widely prescribed by universities and schools), would overlook the social, and political, contexts in which their initial audiences see them and respond.

For example *The Club*, that 'blissfully funny' play about the politics of sport, had its première in Australia after the 1975 constitutional coup that deposed the Labor government Don and his friends had been hoping for earlier, and during a period of bitter disillusion with the treachery and duplicity of politics. To Australian audiences of that time, the play could hardly fail to imply that metaphoric dimension that Michael Billington was also alert to when it was produced in London a couple of years later (whereas reviewers of the American production were more taken by the parallels with the current politics of gridiron). Clearly, plays take on resonances from the circumstances of their first productions, which in the case of Williamson's means the contemporary Australian social and political context. But equally clearly, as successful revivals of his plays at home and productions overseas have shown, they are

not restricted to these; and productions elsewhere have not been limited to the English language—witness the Warsaw production of *The Removalists* during Solidarity's resistance to military dictatorship. How to recognise this further dimension conferred by production, how to relate dramatic texts to the contexts in which they are realised, without reducing those texts to sociological documents or, through their productions, to cultural-historical moments, is a critical problem that playscripts pose with particular sharpness.

In the decade since *The Perfectionist*, Williamson had five more of his 'stories' of the 'ways we live now' produced, plays that reflect power struggles between classes and genders, plays that register the impact on Australian life, private as well as political, of Thatcherite or Reaganomic ideologies—and of the boom, all too soon followed by the bust, in the global economy. Yet, while his 'chronicling' of the times continues, these plays are markedly varied in their mode. A summary of what they are 'about' is not going to provide much sense of their formal and stylistic differences; however, perhaps both subject and form can be accommodated by seeing them as versions of moral comedy, or comic moralities. They are varied also, if the reviewers' opinions are to be respected, in their levels of achievement—and, in the local theatrical context, they can be seen as implying ripostes to his critics.

Sons of Cain (1985), which drew not unfavourable comparisons with David Hare's *Pravda* when it played on the West End, can be seen as responding to those of his unkinders who had been accusing him of no longer writing about 'real' working-class people and challenging issues (as in *The Removalists*), but pandering to his middle-class following and their fascination with seeing what Williamson himself dubbed their own 'pseudo problems' on stage. *Sons of Cain* engages with then topical controversies implicating cabinet ministers, magistrates and police chiefs in conspiracies to pervert the course of justice, with drug trafficking, and with the role of the press in exposing such networks of corruption. At the same time, it also confronts the challenges of how to raise these disturbing issues without the play itself becoming an exercise in the investigative, and ephemeral, journalism it portrays; how to balance topical satiric realism with moral comedy. Especially through the central figure of the crusading journalist Kevin Cassidy, 'last of the macho illiterates'. *Sons of Cain* recaptured that 'larrikin' flavour of the earlier satiric comedies which critics claimed they were pining for.

Emerald City (1987) could also be seen as responding to accusations that Williamson had 'sold out', though tonally it is quite different from its predecessor. Set in the Australian film world (and Williamson, who had been involved simultaneously in the emergence of modern Australian theatre and cinema, continues to be a major figure here), *Emerald City* has marked personal elements that would not be lost on local audiences. Yet to call it 'autobiographical' would be misleading as to its pitch: it combines, at the institutional level, wild satire (but also sharp analysis) of the conflicts over values in the industry—the values of a distinctive national art form versus those of internationally commercial entertainment—with, at the personal level of screenwriter Colin's marriage and his agonies over integrity, comedy of more sophisticated manners reminiscent of *The Perfectionist*. As its title, with its allusion to *The Wizard of Oz*, might suggest. *Emerald City* is also a consciously 'literary' play presenting a comically detached slice of the contemporary Australian writer's life.

Top Silk (1989) bears superficial comparison with *Sons of Cain* in the contemporary issues it embraces: political and police corruption, drug addiction, teenage suicides, the increasing homelessness caused by development. Its focus, though, is more on the personal, on the family, than on an institution like the newspaper in the earlier play. While Trevor Fredericks, a barrister, is grooming himself for leadership of the opposition state Labor Party ('the party of compassion'), his genuinely compassionate public solicitor wife Jane bribes the police in an attempt to assist a lover from her schooldays who is on drug charges. Whereas this former lover, although a drop-out academically and a drug-user, is adored by his family, the professionally preoccupied and politically ambitious Trevor is at odds with his wife over the unrealistic expectations he has of his none-too-bright son. The stage is set for a morality in which he must learn that 'the politics of compassion' begin at home.

With its structure of a well-made melodrama, *Top Silk* is redolent of turn-of-the-century social problem plays. Its neat coincidences and reversals involve both husband and wife with a right-to-life Attorney General who wants to keep Trevor out of politics; Trevor is also involved with a right-wing international media mogul who offers to support him in return for Trevor's assistance in extending his empire (the mogul—shades of Rupert Murdoch—has adopted American citizenship). All

culminates in an implausible court scene in which the brilliant barrister, in an attempt to win back his wife's affections, saves her former lover from prison. But Williamson refuses the final consolations of melodrama, a sentimental reconciliation of Trevor with his wife and son—the only consolation the play offers comes at the end of its first half, and from the media mogul who expects a swing away from the right and towards more compassionate politics in the 1990s. This departure from Williamson's more usual open resolutions makes the mood of this morality about the need for 'compassion, integrity, honesty' in personal and public life uncharacteristically pessimistic, and its mode only equivocally comic.

Although *Top Silk* played around Australia to the usual capacity audiences, the reviewers were not impressed. Williamson declared that his next play, *Siren* (1990), would be totally devoid of any redeeming social message. But, in its opening scene, the members of the Task Force Against Corruption, holed up in a town on the coast in an attempt to entrap a corrupt alderman, introduce themselves to the audience like Vices in a traditional morality—the cardinal vice in his 'contemporary love story of sorts' is lust for sexual conquest. Liz, the only female member of the Force, who comes from three generations of ear, nose and throat specialists—'and in this bloody country you can't do much better than that'—cannot help exploiting her sexual powers, and sleeps in turn with the three male members, who are decidedly not from her genteel social background. With its strong elements of bedroom farce (though bedroom farce in the age of AIDS, and crossed with film noir), *Siren* seemed a deliberate, though updated, throwback to *The Coming of Stork* (1970), one of Williamson's earliest confronting comedies—and an answer to critics who were asking when was he going to write 'gutsy' comedy again. The reviewers (who, in any case, had not been all that impressed the first time around) were appalled by the politically incorrect gender stereotypes with which *Siren* provocatively confronted them; however, they did not deter audiences from attending the play's simultaneous première productions in Melbourne and Sydney. While audiences furnish no record of their reactions, it is clear that Williamson—an unprecedentedly popular playwright at home—is closer to them than he is to his critics, and that they respond to his entertaining engagement with topical but also perennial moral issues.

Liz, the siren of the title, who lures male power figures on to the

rocks of divorce or separation before abandoning them, is the central character. The battle of the sexes has been a staple element in Williamson's writings from his earliest plays, and those who read *The Removalists* or *Don's Party* 'straight', as realistic records of social behaviour, seemed unaware that they had emerged from an 'alternative' theatrical milieu committed to satirically attacking 'mateship' or machismo. Since at least *The Perfectionist*, in which the 'story' is told by the wife in a sequence of flashbacks (indicating the increasing use of cinematic techniques in his writing), Williamson has created a succession of dominant female roles; and this itself might be seen as a reflection of shifting fortunes in the real-life battle since the early days of modern feminism and *The Removalists*. Certainly Margaret, the 'narrator' of the most recent play to be produced, *Money and Friends* (1992), seems with her penchant for younger men a contemporary independent matron, though she discovers to her embarrassment that her latest toy boy is the estranged son of one of her holiday neighbours.

Money and Friends shows the bourgeoisie—an ecologist turned media personality, a corporate lawyer into development, a surgeon anxious about his investments, and their wives—at their leisure in their neighbouring beach houses. Socially, Crystal Inlet is an artificial environment because it is unlikely that in their working lives they would encounter each other, or the academics Margaret, a historian, and the widowed Peter, a mathematician (who cannot make sense of that summer's prescribed reading, A. S. Byatt's *Possession*). Peter is the confidant of all, especially the wives, but he is unlikely to be there next summer because, in the days of economic optimism, he went surety for his brother; now he stands to lose his holiday house. Will his better-heeled friends come to the rescue?

The Currency edition of the text has a prefatory note by Robert Gottlieb of *Business Review Weekly* on the bursting of the 1980s property boom, no doubt a more than merely topical concern to many members of the audience around the country (and at the time of writing this, the play has settled into a long run in Los Angeles). But, with all its topicality, *Money and Friends* has strong elements of the most traditional, and moral, comedy. This in the Australian production was emphasised by an entr'acte, interpolated by the director, in which the characters, bedecked with carnivalesque beach wear and equipment, blundered around the stage like *commedia dell'arte* figures. While

topical social types, the characters are also humours: the pessimistic surgeon, with a wife he finds dismayingly cheerful, is the Melancholy Man; the ecologist preoccupied by the continuance of his genes, and expecting a child by his new wife, is the Obsessive; the corporate lawyer of Sicilian descent, married to a social climber, is the Braggart. Peter, the confidant of all, is persuaded by Margaret to tell his 'friends'—who have not rallied to her call to assist him financially—the truth about themselves, rather than consoling them as before. 'Ibsen in the Antipodes' the *New Yorker* had dubbed Williamson when *The Club* played on Broadway, and, playfully, *The Wild Duck* is the text 'behind' *Money and Friends*.

PETER: Did you ever see a production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*?

MARGARET: No. I can't bear Lutheran guilt.

PETER: This idiot called Gregers starts telling everyone the truth because he thinks it'll be good for them. It ends up ruining everyone's lives. Conrad and Alex won't ever speak to me again and I'm not counting on any more quiche. [*He indicates the sugar bowl*] Despite massive amounts of sugar even the Lorikeets steer clear of me these days.¹

All ends well, though, and instead of Ibsenite gloom there is a contemporary, parodic version of the hurriedly reached curtain to traditional comedies.

Nearly a decade ago, surveying Williamson's plays up to the early 1980s, John McCullum traced the contours of the 'new map of Australia' they offered; he also charted the shifts in Williamson's subjects and style without, wisely, postulating too neat a congruence among these various contours.² Since then, as Williamson has updated his map, his play within and across a wide range of predominantly comic stage traditions has become more noticeable—though admittedly this has not been met with unalloyed critical acclaim. Play with conventions is simultaneously part of what the individual plays are 'about': the 'stories' about 'the ways we live now' cannot be extricated from the

1 David Williamson, *Money and Friends* (Currency Press, Sydney, 1992), p.60.

All the Williamson plays referred to are published by Currency.

2 John McCullum, 'A New Map of Australia: The Plays of David Williamson', *Australian Literary Studies* 11 (1984), 342-54.

self-consciously theatrical structures that mediate, and complicate them. Such theatrical self-consciousness implicitly invites the question of what, uniquely, theatre can offer audiences in an age in which film and television provide most of their experience of drama and dramatic presentations of a current agenda of issues (power, politics, class, gender, ethnicity ...). Williamson, himself a scriptwriter highly sought after by international film and television interests, yet foremost a playwright committed to the continuing viability of serious yet 'accessible' theatre, is still coming up with answers to that question.