Firing the Can(n)on: An Investigation into Why Some Plays Endure and Others Do Not

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Firing the Can(n)on

AN INVESTIGATION INTO WHY SOME PLAYS ENDURE AND OTHERS DO NOT.

By Katrina Foster

Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge; the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signature:

Katrina Foster

Dedication

This is for Russell.

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Abstract

In a climate where new writing struggles to be heard, staging Australian plays from the past can be difficult. How, then, do we develop a dramatic repertoire? And why do we need one? This research aims to analyse the concept of a classic play. It examines the definitions of and distinctions between the terms 'canon', 'repertoire' and 'classic', and it determines how they operate in Australian theatre. Using *The Blind Giant is Dancing* by Stephen Sewell as a case study, this study traces the play over three productions and three decades. Through interviews with directors, designers and actors, the thesis will examine the history of each production and its reception. It also places and frames the play within the context of the specific political and social climate surrounding each production. The thesis asks questions about programming, writing, casting, budget, production, design, actors' responses, theatrical prestige and critical appeal. It aims to discover and discern why and how some plays become classics, while others are forgotten or remain on curricula to be read but not performed. Further, it asks a larger question about canon and repertoire in Australian theatre and if and how reviving plays enriches our theatrical and dramatic past, present and future.

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Introduction

When Thomas Conway, the Irish theatre director and literary manager of Druid Theatre, visited Australia in 2014,he commented:

> It seems you have to struggle to name what is a dramatic canon, whereas in Ireland we know the phases through which the drama was developed. From Boucicault to Synge to O'Casey to Friel and Tom Murphy, right into the present to Martin McDonagh and Enda Walsh and Marina Carr and so forth. People can place themselves into relation to that canon and take on their influences.[1]

He went on to say that he was surprised that Australians could not say what their equivalent was, apart from Ray Lawler's 1955 play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.[2]

Although we cannot name them, the plays do exist; however, as with much of our history, they are lost to us. 'Firing the Can(n)on' is an investigation into why some plays endure and others do not. Plays in Australia typically only have one production and, if they are badly interpreted by their director or badly served on stage, they die. Plays lie forgotten—discarded over the decades. These plays are set in lighthouses, in the desert, in the outback, in suburbia, on sheep stations and homesteads. They deal with themes of gender, race, refugees, family and war. Among these plays are farces and well-made plays and sprawling epic melodramas. They have scope and scale; they tell us stories about who we were and who we are. Whether one views the canon as a discredited list of texts by dead white males or as a valuable list of texts that gives us a shared horizon, it raises questions about our cultural consciousness and how and why (or not) plays become part of that shared horizon. Cultural amnesia is not an unfamiliar concept in Australia, and this is reflected in the discussion around our dramatic canon and the value and capital we give it.

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[1] Richard Watts, 'Should We Fire the Theatrical Canon?', *ArtsHub*, 8 July 2014, https://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/performing-arts/richard-watts/should-we-fire-the-theatrical-canon-244634.

[2] Ray Lawler, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1957).

Three theatre makers were asked to comment on Conway's assessment of the Australian canon: Lee Lewis, former artistic director of Sydney's Griffin Theatre and current artistic director of Queensland Theatre; Robert Reid, Australian playwright; and Chris Mead, literary associate at the Melbourne Theatre Company. Lewis agrees with Conway that Australia does not have a defined concept of a canon but argues that our lack of canon is liberating 'as the oppression of a canon can actually stop the development of new ideas'.[3] Reid disagrees, stating that in the tradition of Western European theatre, 'we do have a canon of influential ground-breaking works stretching back to settlement'. He asks, 'in what sense are we lacking a canon other than in the sense that we cannot call any of these works to mind?'[4] For Mead, as a programmer of a major theatre company, 'questions of canonicity are structural questions about what gets a second and third season. And then there's the kind of broader historical question of what will make it in history?'[5] In essence, these three responses touch on the critical differences between what is published and what is performed, and between what sits in our canon and what lives in our repertoire.

Terms such as 'canon', 'classic', 'repertoire', 'anthology' and 'syllabus' are often used interchangeably; however, while they are often linked, they have discrete definitions and functions that are important to specify when investigating the value, or otherwise, of having a canon. For example, when Lewis comments that a canon can be restrictive, is she referring to published plays, programmed plays or plays that are studied at high school or university? I will address these terms and, by placing them in an Australian context, I will investigate the contingencies around a play surviving over generations. By asking how, and in what ways, our nation's dramatic canon and its theatrical repertoire are linked, I will explore why some plays endure, whereas others are forgotten. Is the reason why we cannot name the plays in

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[3] Watts, 'Should We Fire the Theatrical Canon?'
[4] Watts, 'Should We Fire the Theatrical Canon?'
[5] Watts, 'Should We Fire the Theatrical Canon?'

our canon because we do not have a repertoire of plays that are performed and re-performed, and therefore they fail to enter our collective memory?

To answer these questions, I first need to define the word 'canon' and investigate how the word became politicised. In Chapter 1, by briefly addressing the culture wars that swept through the Ivy League universities in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, I aim to show how the clash between the supporters of the Western Canon and the 'multiculturalists' had an impact that is still being felt. I then reference some of the debates and controversies around inclusion and exclusion from the Australian canon in our relatively recent past. In Chapter 2, I investigate what drives the dramatic canon in Australia. Publication is a major factor, and I examine how Australia's three major publishers of plays—Currency Press, Playlab and the Australian Plays Transform[6]—select plays to publish and how they work to keep older Australian plays visible. If being canonical infers value, it would be fair to assume that prize-winning plays that have been judged as excellent would also be part of our canon. I select the winners of two major playwriting prizes in Australia and investigate their theatrical life after they were awarded first prize. Finally, I examine how programming drives repertoire—another important factor in relation to canon formation—by analysing Belvoir St Theatre's seasons over the last 30 years.

In Chapter 3, I examine the relationship between 'classic' and 'canonical 'and investigate what makes a play a 'classic' play. Taking two Australian plays from different genres—*The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* by Lawler and *The Season at Sarsaparilla* by Patrick White—and borrowing the title of the book by James English, *The Economy of*

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[6] At the time of writing this chapter, the Australian Script Centre (ASC), the organisation behind Australian plays.org was in the process of joining forces with Playwriting Australia to form a new organisation called Australian Plays Transform (APT More detail is given in the section on Publication in Chapter 2.

Prestige, I examine the culture around prize-giving in literature and ask: What is the economy of theatrical prestige in Australia? What are the criteria for a 'classic' play?[7]

I then narrow my focus to how one play has endured over the decades. In Chapters 4–6, using Stephen Sewell's play *The Blind Giant is Dancing* as a case study, I trace three productions of the play spanning four decades. Through interviews and archival research, I explore why it was programmed, how it was produced and how it was received by successive generations, and I speculate on whether it will be staged into the future.

Production is crucial to a play's survival. In his book, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (2009), John McCallum argues that, 'for much of the twentieth century, Australian drama had very little to do with Australian theatre—local plays were not often performed […] the first seventy years of this book is mostly a tale of small activities in small rooms'.[8] McCallum analyses playwrights from the early twentieth century who were excluded from professional productions because the commercial nature of Australian theatre meant that producers were only interested in producing works from London or New York. J. C. Williamson, broadly known as 'The Firm', dominated Australian stages. The only avenues for local playwrights were amateur theatre and radio. McCallum states that playwrights Oriel Gray (1920–2003), Dymphna Cusack (1902–1981), George Landen Dann (1904–1977) and Mona Brand (1915–2007) 'would have been considered major dramatists had they had a theatre to write for'.[9] Writing of the success of Lawler's *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1954), McCallum argues that the play's success:

> is a perfect illustration of a theme that campaigners for a national drama had been emphasising for fifty years; playwrights need a professional theatre to write for. None

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[7] James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).English, *The Economy of Prestige*.
[8] John McCallum, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009), 3.
[9] McCallum, *Belonging*.

> of the playwrights so far discussed had that and many prize-winning plays have sunk without production. [10]

This is still happening in 2021. Funding is scarce and the impact of COVID-19 on theatres has been severe. When I interviewed Eamon Flack and Tom Wright, artistic director and associate director, respectively, of Belvoir St Theatre, they were about to open the theatre for the first time since they had been forced to close due to the pandemic, six months earlier. They were urgently rethinking their programming to speak to an audience who were dealing with a pandemic and would be sitting masked, in a half-filled auditorium in line with social distancing restrictions. The precious slots that comprise the season of the theatre company were being rethought and reshuffled. They were in unknown territory, and the calls they were making were crucial to the theatre's survival. Programming requires precise thinking. New plays compete with revivals, and theatre companies need to make money, speak to their audiences and satisfy their stakeholders. Programming is a juggling act that combines commerce, taste, fashion, the physical space of the theatre, the mission statement of the company, personal ambition, championing playwrights, headlining actors, pleasing subscribers and second-guessing what speaks to different demographics. In the article cited at the start of this Introduction, Lewis commented, 'if we revive a play it is essentially offering it to an audience and saying "What do you reckon? Should this be part of the canon?"'[11] However, I query whether programming is as democratic as this suggests. Plays necessarily move in and out of favour according to fashion and the political climate, but these are not the only contributing factors to a play's selection. What are the considerations around deciding who receives one of the precious slots when a season is announced? What are the criteria for selection? What are the criteria to revive an old work? These questions are related to repertoire, and I aim to address them and analyse how they operate in a practical sense in the

[10] McCallum, *Belonging*, 53.
[11] Watts, 'Should We Fire the Theatrical Canon?'

case study of three productions of Sewell's *The Blind Giant is Dancing* in 1983, 1995 and 2016.

I first came to the idea for this thesis through my interest in plays written from the 1920s to the 1960s. Many of these plays were written by women, and many of them are now largely forgotten. I was interested in whether these plays could be revived and whether they had currency. My background as an actor and dramaturg informed this interest. I first became aware of the plays of Mona Brand when I was working as the Literary Manger for Belvoir St Theatre back in the mid 1990s. Her plays were not considered for programming, but her life and work were fascinating to me, as were the untold stories of her contemporaries. The gap in Australia's dramatic history, the occlusion of so many plays written before the late 1960s lingered in my mind. Years later, in 2016, my partner, actor Russell Kiefel, was cast in his third production of *The Bind Giant is Dancin*g at Belvoir St Theatre. In 1983, he had played Bruce, the younger brother of the protagonist Allen Fitzgerald; in 1995, he played middle-aged politician Michael Wells; and in 2016, he played Doug, the father of Bruce and Allen. It struck me as uncommon that an actor in Australia had played three different generations in the same play over four decades. Plays are rarely restaged in Australia—particularly those that are not on the secondary school syllabus. A play that endures over the decades could be said to be one of the few plays to make up Australia's repertoire, and I was curious about why this particular play was programmed and by whom, and who it spoke to each time it was staged.

I have also had a long association with Sewell and his work, having appeared as an actor in his three major "power" plays *Welcome the Bright Wor*ld (Nimrod Theatre, 1982), *The Blind Giant is Dancing,* (Sydney Theatre Company, 1984*)*and *Dreams In An Empty City* (Melbourne Theatre Company, 1986), and then later *The United States of Nothing* (Griffin Theatre, 2006).

Stephen Sewell established his reputation with three large scale, dramaturgically complex, and fiercely political plays: *Welcome the Bright World* (1982) *Blind Giant Is Dancing* (1983), and *Dreams in an Empty City* (1986). As a playwright, he was instrumental in shifting the dramaturgy from the 1970s inward-facing gaze, to what McCallum terms as "The New Internationalism"[12] of the 1980s. Referencing these three major plays, McCallum notes that "there has been no serious large scale Australian drama that does not owe something to Sewell."[13] Of all these plays, *Blind Giant* is the one that has been revived most often. Given its reprogramming, over several decades, it seemed an ideal case study to test, if through its endurance, it could be considered a classic, and whether it has a place in the canon. McCallum marks *The Blind Giant is Dancing* as "the wildest, most extravagant and neurotic of all his plays"[14] and notes that 'it makes the relaxed larrikin protests of the New Wave seem naïve.'[15] Peter Fitzpatrick comments that the structure of *Blind Giant* with "its rapid forward momentum is an important part of its power in the theatre."[16] It is this structure, the fast, dazzling, cinematic cuts that drive the play, along with the family scenes (nostalgic for the generation that saw the play in the 80s and 90s) that both lightens and deepens the play and that sets it apart from his other two major plays of the period. As a play it also is far from perfect. Some characters lack dimension, some are cyphers, the play sprawls when it should tighten, the dialogue is heightened and can slide very easily into soap opera. It is these flaws combined with its brilliance that have contributed to its reprogramming. Get it right and you have a masterpiece, get it wrong and the flaws are exposed for all to see. Writing about Patrick White, John McCallum comments 'For more than forty-five years most of our boldest and brightest young directors have wanted to cut

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[12] McCallum, *Belonging*, 209
[13] McCallum, *Belonging*, 212
[14] McCallum, *Belonging*, 216.
[15] McCallum, *Belonging*, 216.
[16] Peter Fitzpatrick, *Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991). 98

their teeth on White and if this is not the sign of a playwright who has become a classic then I don't know what is'.[17] The same could be said of *The Blind Giant is Dancing.*

Director Neil Armfield had great success with the premiere; he then introduced it to Sydney audiences in his first season as artistic director of Belvoir St Theatre in 1995, then Eamon Flack as his successor took up the challenge and programmed it in his first season as artistic director of Belvoir in 2016. Personal ambition, as well as the attraction of celebrity to a writer or director, the finances of the company, a company's call to its subscribers, are all factors that include, but sit apart from the literary worth of a text alone and contribute to a play being reprogrammed. It is these factors around programming that I explore in my contention that Australia may have a canon but it has a slim to non-existent repertoire. Situating *The Blind Giant is Dancing* in its social and political contexts from 1983 to 2016, and assessing how critics and those involved in programming, rehearsing and staging the play responded to it, helps to provide insights into the circumstances around how a play might survive or become extinct.

My overall focus here is on playscripts staged in mainstream theatres, as this is where most of my work has existed and the theatre with which I am most familiar. McCallum calls playscripts 'the bones and stones of our theatre'[18] because they enable us to trace the history of theatre just as we can trace life on the planet. I am interested in how these 'bones and stones' enter our canon and make the transition to the stage and into our repertoire.

Plays are a product of their time. Their style, genre, preoccupations, representation of gender, society, and politics are all transient. They may aim to speak of fundamental or universal truths, but they were written by playwrights living in the context of their time. The idea that literary development parallels the social, political and cultural progress of a nation

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[17] John McCallum, 'The Late, Crazy Plays'. *Cross / Cultures*, no. 128 (2010): 139
[18] McCallum, *Belonging*, 1.

can be misleading because it suggests that canons do, and will, reflect what happens in the social, cultural and political spheres in society. But do they? Minority groups and women and Indigenous groups have often been ignored by the 'centre' or have remained mere shadows rather than reflections in the mainstream.

So why keep a record? Why publish? Why revive?

Director and dramaturg Augusta Supple thinks we need to keep a record 'to help theatre develop beyond what is—and contribute to what it could be—what we aspire to, what is unfinishable'.[19] McCallum says:

> Whatever you might think of the idea of canon—with its ideological implications of stamping works with an imprimatur—there is no doubt that if we don't publish the texts of great plays and revive them in innovative ways in real theatres they get forgotten. In the theatre we forget our past at great peril for without history new writers have to keep inventing the wheel.[20]

In an interview with the young Australian–Nigerian performer and playwright Chika Ikogwe, I asked about the Australian plays that she considers significant. Her response was: 'None. I am not interested in going to the theatre to see white people shout at each other'.[21] All of these statements have validity. It is inarguable that we need to be mindful of cultural authority in order to tell a story, and that we need to hear from voices that have previously been excluded because of race, culture, disability and gender. What does that mean, then, for plays of the past? Plays disappear here. They always have. Australia is a large land with a small population. There are not many theatres, touring is expensive and increasingly scarce, and there are very few professional regional theatres. The effect of Covid has had an ongoing impact on touring productions.[22] Further, it has been made very clear through the lack of

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[19] Augusta Supple, *Damage: A Collection of Plays by John Romeril*, http://augustasupple.com/2010/08/damage-a-collection-of-plays-by-john-romeril.

[20] John Romeril, *Damage*, https://australianplays.org/extract/CP-2055.

[21] Chika Ikogwe, interviewed by Katrina Foster, 12th July 2020.

[22] Chris Bendall, 'On The Future of Touring', *Arts Hub* 7 September 2021

recent funding and support[23] for theatre and theatre studies that drama and theatre are considered non-essential in Australia. This is not to say that Australia's theatre culture is dead. There is a definite theatre culture here and an interested theatre-going public. Shows can sell out through word-of-mouth alone. There has been ground-breaking work, with some companies exploring written and theatrical conventions with dedication and innovation. Over the decades these companies have included Rex Cramphorn's Performance Syndicate (1969–1975), The Lighthouse Acting Company (1981–1983), The Keene Taylor Project (1997–2002), Back to Back (1999–present) and the Hayloft Project (2007–present). Despite the work of these companies and others, and despite the small but loyal audiences that seek out theatre, plays continue to disappear in Australia.

Theatre is currently and historically (with a few notable exceptions) not particularly valued in Australia. Julian Meyrick comments:

> Perhaps the first thing to say about the history of Australian drama is how thin it is. After Gough Whitlam doubled the federal arts budget in 1973, the number of Australian plays produced increased, but sporadically, and with ongoing debate about their place and value. What other country of comparable wealth and education has looked on its own drama in the same contingent way as Australia? As if it were an optional extra—like a second national anthem or free kerbside parking?[24]

Local playwrights only started to receive funding in the 1950s, and we began to find our voice in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, with the election of the Howard Government, funding dried up. At the same time, the arrival of the internet changed everything: the world became a global village and it seemed that we barely had time to catch our breath and take stock of who we were and where we are going. This had a crucial effect on a country with a

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[23] Ekaterina Travkina and Pier Luigi Sacco, *Culture Shock COVID 19 and the Cultural and Creative Sectors* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/.

[24] Julian Meyrick, 'Australian Plays: How to Persuade a Nation to Question Its Own Soul?', *The Conversation*, 12 May 2015, https://theconversation.com/australian-plays-how-to-persuade-a-nation-to-question-its-own-soul-40161.

nascent and fragile canon and a repertoire that had barely begun. We could access brilliant new writing and new dramaturgy with ease, and we were challenged with new ways of thinking about theatre. However, we also became more vulnerable to the dominance of the Western canon, and in some ways, we have never quite caught up. And now the moment has passed. In his book, *Belonging*, McCallum concludes:

> we are now beyond the interplay between nationalist and internationalist influences that characterised Australian playwriting throughout the last century. Australian playwrights and theatre are now part of a wider world. There is no going back.[25]

Our canon is fragile—our repertoire even more so. In this thesis, I will make the case for the importance of being able to name plays from the past so that even if now is not their time, they will remain in our consciousness as a kind of inventory. At some time in the future, they may be reimagined through production and speak to us again with both the maturity of hindsight and the freshness of new interpretation. In this way, we can observe how the legacy of older plays both links to new work and reveals our past.

[25] McCallum, *Belonging*, 378.

Chapter 1: Loading the Can(n)on

The art of the passing moment is drama. A canon is a mental cabinet wherein we keep that treasure. Julian Meyrick[1]

In this thesis, I contend that Australia has a canon of sorts because lists of published plays exist, and published plays drive the canon. Similarly, production drives repertoire, but as we so rarely give plays a second or third life on stage, Australia does not have a repertoire, or if we do it is very slim. As a result, many plays disappear and successive generations can rarely name the plays from the previous generation. In this chapter, I will define and contextualise the term 'canon'—a term that is often paradoxical and always contentious. I will also attempt to define some of the words that are related to the notion of canon to clarify and identify their functions.

By definition, a canon is conservative, as its primary function is to look backwards and preserve the past. Through this same function, a canon also provides us with a shared history; however, whose history it shares is always an issue. Whether one views the canon as elitist or enlightening, it seems to be the word we reach for when we want to refer to our dramatic past. To talk positively about the canon can infer political conservatism and intrinsic support of dead white male authors with all of the associated baggage of misogyny, elitism and conservatism. But at its simplest and most non-partisan, a canon is a list of plays that someone deems significant. The culture, gender, race, class and physical ability of that 'someone' is where it becomes contentious, because canons have historically been determined by able-bodied white males and disputing the implicit assumptions behind this definition is why 'wars' have been fought over what constitutes a canon.

[1] Julian Meyrick, 'What Are the Great Australian Plays? Refining Our Theatre Canon', *The Conversation*, 30 November 2016, https://theconversation.com/what-are-the-great-australian-plays-refining-our-theatre-canon-64234.

In her article on language and repertoire, Monique Bulbuena writes that the English 'canon' is derived from the Greek word *kanon*, which can be translated to mean a yardstick or a measuring rod.[2] She notes that canon also has a religious context, conveying the idea of authority or seriousness so that canonical works are worthy of study. John Guillory recalls that the term first appeared in the fourth century CE, when 'canon was used to signify a list of texts or authors, specifically the books of the Bible and of the early theologians of Christianity'.[3] The definition of a biblical canon was linked to early Christians' desire to distinguish the orthodox from the heretical, and to impose a set of ways of living on the new Christian community. The Hebrew texts were thus excluded from the biblical canons of early Christianity.[4] This dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in the biblical canon is still reflected in debates around the literary canon. It was only in the nineteenth century that the idea of a canon of literary works emerged to supplant the ancient biblical model. A body of criticism argued in favour of the idea of poetry, drama and fiction serving as a form of secular scripture: 'a canon for the canonless in a post-Christian world'.[5] The poet Mathew Arnold was vocal in his support of literary works assuming canonical status and of the modern world acquainting itself with the 'Great Works'. This idea survived for a century, until it was subject to scrutiny and a scathing critique.

Guillory comments that the milieu of an entire debate can sometimes be evoked using just one or two words.[6] One such word is 'canon'. His opinion is that the word 'classic' has been displaced by the word 'canon'. He writes:

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[2] Monique Balbuena, *Repertoire*, Frankel Institute Annual (Michigan: Jean and Samuel Frankel Centre for Judaic Studies, University of Michigan, 2011).
[3] John Guillory, 'Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate', *ELH* 54, no. 3 (1987): 483–527. https://doi.org/10.2307/2873219.
[4] Guillory, 'Canonical and Non-Canonical'.
[5] Roger Lundin, 'The "Classics" Are Not the "Canon"', in *Invitation to the Classics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1998), 25–33.
[6] John Guillory, 'Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary', *Transition* 52 (1991): 36–54.

> Classic signifies the pre-critical era of Western Literature and the word canon is not so much the name for a historically stable collection of texts as it is the sign of a particular crisis in the history of literary criticism within the university.[7]

This crisis—called the canon wars—dominated the Ivy League campuses of the US in the 1980s and early 1990s. Put simply, people of colour, feminists and scholars from marginalised cultures attempted to wrest power from the dead white males whose work dominated their syllabuses, or to at least transform syllabuses by agitating for university curricula to represent a greater diversity of cultural and female voices. Friction began when US philosopher and classicist Allan Bloom, tapping into general anxiety and debate about liberal education in higher education, wrote *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. His book became an extraordinary commercial success. His targets were rock music, sexual promiscuity, abortion, the sixties, Black Power, divorce and feminism. At its heart, the attack was on relativism—the idea of uncritical openness and tolerance in American universities, which for Bloom was the closing of the American mind, as it was 'the forsaking of the genuine openness and the rejection of the Socratic ideal of the university founded on the search for a good life through reason'.[8] He claimed that abandoning the Western canon had dumbed down universities and that America had made no significant contributions to intellectual life since the 1950s. His answer was 'to deepen the study of the American founders and to renew a classical pedagogy that weaves Eros and intellect into the love of knowledge and natural virtues'.[9] In 1993, Yale academic and critic Harold Bloom (no relation to Allan Bloom) wrote *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* and coined the phrase 'the school of resentment', of which he claimed there were six branches: feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, new historicists, deconstructionists and semioticians.[10] This

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[7] Guillory, 'Canon, Syllabus, List'.
[8] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
[9] Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*.
[10] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1996).

position immediately set him up to become the poster boy for the conservative right. Harold Bloom stated;

> those who resent all canons suffer from an elitist guilt founded upon the accurate enough realization that canons always do indirectly serve the social and political, and indeed the spiritual, concerns and aims of the wealthier classes of each generation of Western society'.[11]

For the sake of brevity, the canon wars can be crystallised into the central arguments represented on the right by Harold Bloom and on the left by the author and academic Toni Morrison. Bloom defended education as a process of intense personal engagement with great works, viewing the traditional Western canon as the time-tested way to 'enlarge a solitary existence',[12] and so produced a list of literary works that he considered worthy of inclusion. Although he included Morrison's literary work in his canon, he despised 'the swamp of cultural studies'[13] that Morrison taught and championed.

Opposed to the timeless embodiment of universal humanity that Bloom advocated, Morrison viewed literary canons as representative of the domination of Western history and the erasure of other cultures through colonisation. In a landmark essay, Morrison used the metaphor of building a house to represent mainstream American ideology, saying, 'if I had to live in a racial house, it was important to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, but rather an open house'.[14]

Through writing, teaching and scholarship, Morrison challenged Bloom's definition of canon, and by pursuing a cultural studies–based approach in the humanities, she aimed to diversify the canon in terms of race and gender. This challenge by Morrison and other academics provoked many recovery projects of texts. Reading lists at universities

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[11] Bloom, *The Western Canon*.
[12] Bloom, *The Western Canon*.
[13] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).
[14] Wahneema Lubiano, ed. *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (New York: Random House, 1999).

subsequently included more contemporary choices, greater representation of diverse cultures and the inclusion of more works by women.

The Western literary canon is a historical artifact formed from university curricula created by academics at prestigious universities who decided which texts should be included or excluded. Books such as Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* were written in part because of an anxiety that the works considered the great classical masterpieces were not being taught in universities, and that this would result in a degradation of Western culture. Bloom's prescribed canon was created somewhat defensively as a list of works that he believed every educated person should know. Ironically, the division and hostility that erupted among academics in reaction to this list meant that the Western canon—from Socrates to Marx—that was once viewed as a liberating force became an oppressive one.[15]

Narrowing the focus to Australia, we could say that our 'canonical' texts, whether of plays or other literature, are mostly published and put onto secondary school curricula and university reading lists. From my experience teaching at different universities, if a student can name an Australian play, it is usually because they have studied it at secondary school. The syllabus can, and often does, stand in for the canon, when the only plays that people know are those that have been taught to them; however, there are differences that need to be distinguished. A canon that is formed by an educational list is arbitrary and related to social context; plays that are chosen for study have been chosen because of their perceived social or cultural value, their formal value or because they are perceived to represent some standard of excellence or prestige. However, canons can and should be much broader and more diverse than a syllabus. Guillory defines the difference, stating that:

[15] Rachel Donadio, 'Revisiting the Canon Wars', *New York Times*, 16 September 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html.

> the canon can be as diverse as we want to be … the determinants of canonicity for any given author may be complex but the needs of the school are always paramount. The syllabus is finite but the canon, being imaginary, is infinite.[16]

The separation of canon and syllabus is useful here because it allows the canon to be viewed as something that is driven less by a subjective set of values and more by an infinite diversity of texts.

Many current debates in theatre about gender and diversity have questions relating to canon at their core. The recent argument that institutions like the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) are Eurocentric has diversity at its core but also canon, because the search for diversity is also about canon.[17] Similarly, the controversy about the proposed Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation at Sydney University was also about canon.[18] Agitation for gender equity in theatre programming is about women's voices being excluded from the repertoire. More than just saying that these plays have worth, it is that these plays are entrusted to give perspective about who we are.

The canon wars in the US largely had the literary canon at its centre, whereas my interest is in the dramatic canon, and specifically the Australian dramatic canon. There are clearly crossovers between the literary and dramatic canons, and some play texts sit within the literary canon. However, I am interested in viewing the dramatic canon as a discrete entity

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[16] Guillory, 'Canon, Syllabus, List', 36–54.

[17] In June 2020, a newly established group called 'NIDA Alumni for Black Lives Matter' sent a letter via email to the Director of the National Institute of Dramatic Art, Liz Hughes, accusing the school of 'systemic and institutionalised racism'. This caused much comment and ultimately led to an apology from Hughes. See https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/alumni-accuse-nida-of-systemic-and-institutionalised-racism-2 a0200617-p553jz.html.

[18] The Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation came from a bequest from private healthcare tycoon and major donor to Australia's Liberal party, Paul Ramsay. The Ramsay Centre offered to fund degrees or majors in the books, art and philosophy of the Western tradition at three universities. It offered $50 million over eight years, which would cover the cost of academics and 30 scholarships annually. Former prime minister and Ramsay member Tony Abbot expressed the hope that the Ramsay Centre would remedy university curricula that had been 'pervaded by Asian, Indigenous and sustainability perspectives'. The centre caused a major furore and divided academics. A group of University of Sydney academics rejected the idea of the centre, saying any course in the Western tradition would be masculinist, Anglocentric and would entrench a hard-right agenda. In 2019, negotiations broke down with the University of Sydney. Queensland University and Wollongong University accepted the offer.

to question how and why plays enter and endure in our collective and individual memories—our 'cultural consciousness'—thus making them canonical. The term 'cultural consciousness' usefully frames how I discuss canon in this thesis. I use it to include both individual and collective memories of plays we have seen that serve as touchstones, reflecting our social, political and dramatic history. I am curious, too, about the factors that influence a play's first reading, its selection for a theatrical season, its interpretation by directors, designers and actors and, finally, the audience's response to it. How do these factors influence the potential canonicity of a particular play?

Literary canons contain works that are perceived as valuable and prestigious, which is why, it is argued, they have endured. However, with dramatic works, prestige does not necessarily imply lasting value or lead to endurance; a play that endures is not necessarily 'better' or more 'valuable' than one that is neglected. Unlike novels, which exist as complete aesthetic artefacts, plays need to live in the bodies of actors and in the imaginations and memories of audiences. This can only occur when they are performed and re-performed in the seasons of our theatre companies, in our repertoires. The word 'repertoire' exists under the umbrella term of 'canon'; it is a French word derived from the Latin *reportorium*, meaning a catalogue or inventory. There is also a parallel understanding of the term with its connection to repertory theatre, which is a model of theatre-making in which a resident company rehearses by day and performs by night, and in this way, presents a rotating repertoire of plays.

Unlike the term 'canon', with its political overtones and inferred authority, the term 'repertoire' conveys the idea of a more fluid list. Perhaps the distinction is as simple as classifying that which belongs on the stage as 'repertoire' and that which belongs on the page as 'canon'. The canon is a list that can be read; the repertoire is a list that needs to be performed. For plays to endure, the canon needs to be constantly refreshed by the repertoire.

It is through repertoire that plays live in our cultural consciousness. If plays are not periodically revived, the dramatic canon is not refreshed and while plays exist as texts to form a canon, they do not exist as productions that form a repertoire, therefore, as is the case in Australia, they disappear from memory.

Anthologies as Canon

A significant driver of canon is the anthology, and observing how some major anthologies are formed reveals much about how dramatic canons are shaped both internationally and in Australia. Anthologies are, on the surface, a collection of several writers collated according to a theme, genre or time frame. The etymology of 'anthology' can be traced to the Greek words *anthos* ('flower') and *loggia* ('collection'), so an anthology is literally a collection of flowers.[19] The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word as 'a collection of artistic works that have a similar form or subject often considered to be the best'.[20]

If selection for an anthology implies collecting the most beautiful or the 'best', it can be seen as a way of forming a canon and, as always, such selection is fraught with questions of representing a narrow set of values and interests. Further, there are often quite pragmatic reasons for why particular works are included in an anthology. Martin Puchner, who edited *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, in an address entitled 'What Gets Performed? The Life of the Dramatic Repertoire', spoke about the selection process and commented that publishing plays will never make anyone a fortune because few people read plays for fun. Plays are read to be studied or performed, and publishers have to reach that market. Puchner commented that 'there is a definite economic drive at the heart of selection as in America, anthologies

[19] *Merriam Webster Online*, s.v. 'Anthology', December 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthology.
[20] *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, s.v. 'Anthology', January 2021, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthology.

feed the universities and selection is also often driven by commercial imperatives more than philosophical ones'.[21] He also discussed the difficulty of gaining rights for publication and commented on the prospect of *The Norton Anthology* becoming purely an online anthology. He warned that when this happens, certain playwrights, or estates of playwrights, might refuse to give online rights, and as a result, 'you would get a kind of B list of playwrights'.[22] An online anthology would then comprise not necessarily the 'best' plays, but rather what was available.

Anthologies provide an interesting perspective on selection when it comes to Australia's place in the world. Three recently published major anthologies of world theatre—*The Norton Anthology*,[23] *The Wadsworth Anthology*[24] and *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*[25]—reveal that a far more diverse range of countries and writers are now represented than in earlier editions of these anthologies. However, Australia is largely absent, apart from Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age*, which was included first in *The Wadsworth Anthology's* section on world theatre, and later in *The Norton Anthology*. Thus, given the etymology of 'anthology' as a collection of flowers, a world anthology of drama can be considered a collection of plays of significance, nominally perhaps the best we have. It is reasonable to assume that the plays included are 'classics' because they are works that have longevity, quality, appeal and influence. As such, we should assume that *The Golden Age* is a classic, which is why it has been chosen to represent Australia in two world anthologies.

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[21] In 2015, I was a participant in the symposium *What Gets Performed: A Life of the Dramatic Repertoire*, held by The Mellon School of Theatre and Performance Research at Harvard University. The quotes are from my notes taken from Puchner's address. https://mellonschool.fas.harvard.edu/2015-session-what-gets-performed-life-dramatic-repertoire.

[22] Notes from The Mellon School Symposium, *What Gets Performed: A Life of the Dramatic Repertoire*.

[23] Stanton B. Garner, J. Ellen Gainor, Jr and Martin Puchner, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Drama* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

[24] W. B. Worthen, ed. *The Wadsworth Anthology*, 4th ed. (Boston: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004).

[25] Lee A. Jacobus, *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*, 8th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018).

The Golden Age is a remarkable and complex play with its interplay of themes of identity and post-colonialism. The play was staged at Nimrod Theatre[26] in 1987 but did not receive another professional production in Australia until the Sydney Theatre Company staged it in 2016. Although the play represents Australia in the anthologies, few Australians have seen it or even heard of it. This reveals the general attitude towards Australian plays and playwrights and raises questions about selection. Why was this particular play selected? Was it because of its themes of colonialism and its significance as a 'state of the nation' play? Was it because of its originality and the uniqueness of its language? Or was it because Nowra has a certain prestige, and so because *Wadsworth* included it, *Norton* followed suit? We may never know, and there is probably more than one answer, but speculating raises useful questions about what is included and excluded from anthologies, from theatre companies' seasons and consequently from canons and repertoires.

Another example of Australia's representation in world canons is critic Michael Billington's list in *From Oedipus to the History Boys: Michael Billington's 101 Greatest Plays*.[27] In 2015, *The Guardian* newspaper, as a teaser for the soon-to-be-released anthology, published Billington's selection as '101 Greatest Plays: From Antiquity to the Present'. Australia is represented by just one play; there is nothing from the swell of work from the 1970s and 1980s, nothing from our Indigenous writers, nor our contemporary playwrights or even our Nobel Prize winner Patrick White. Australia was once again represented by Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, which is indisputably an excellent Australian play and a classic, but there have been many other plays both before and since.

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[26] Nimrod Theatre was founded in 1970 by Australian actor John Bell, Richard Wherrett and Ken Horler. Its first home was in Nimrod Street, Kings Cross, which is now the home of the Stables Theatre, before moving to Belvoir Street, Surry Hills, where it is now the home of the Belvoir St Theatre. Nimrod is regarded as one of the key companies that established and promoted the emerging Australian theatre of the early 1970s.

[27] 'From Oedipus to the History Boys: Michael Billington's 101 Greatest Plays', *The Guardian*, 2 September 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/sep/02/michael-billington-101-greatest-plays.

It seems that while contesting the canon was necessary, world canons created by Europeans and North Americans through anthologies can only nod to their post-colonial cousins, and the choices for canonisation both in Australia and internationally are often eccentric, tokenistic and even reductive. In any case, they are inadequate in representing Australia and its output.

Categorising or anthologising texts and the inherent value system that this infers is significant from the perspective of writers from marginal backgrounds, as can be seen in the example of how works by Indigenous writers are treated. According to Marisa Virtich:

> In terms of mainstream anthologies, Indigenous writers are often neglected or misrepresented, and hence, indigenous groups have found it necessary to produce texts that reflect their own realities rather than the ones prescribed by the mainstream. The paradox for indigenous work is that whilst it resists the mainstream's canon it does at the same time negotiate and challenge what defines the canon by producing alternative literature. Indigenous literature therefore resists, but also ironically participates in canon formation.[28]

Within a performance context, Maryrose Casey's research explores how Indigenous performances were subsumed, appropriated or suppressed by imported colonial theatre practice. In *Creating Frames*, Casey argues that we create frames that comprise information presented to us, and these frames offer competing world views:

> There is the frame established by the Indigenous people themselves, who they are, their history, their individual perspectives. These frames are then interpreted and understood within the frames of the, often, non-Indigenous audiences and critics.[29]

Although an anthology of plays by Indigenous writers might form a putative Indigenous canon that recognises these writers and is a genre sitting close to, but not within, the great works of the Western canon, it still has the coloniser at the centre of the process. One way the coloniser's canon may be subverted is through reappropriation. An example of this is *Hecate*,

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[28] Marisa Virtich, 'Canon Formation and Indigenous Anthologies' (master's thesis, University of Wollongong, 1997), https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/2191.

[29] Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967–1990* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2004).

a recent co-production between Yirra Yaakin and Bell Shakespeare. Directed by Noongar woman, actor and writer Kylie Bracknell, *Hecate* (2020) is a translation of *Macbeth* into the Noongar language and aims to celebrate this ancient language and keep it alive by bringing it to new audiences. No English translation is provided, and the director tells us, 'don't just expect the verbal, expect the whole Noongar language—the body language, the emotion, the way we share words'.[30] The purpose of the play is not to reinforce the canon or even rehistoricise it, and neither does it destroy any link between the source text and the performance text; instead, it repositions a text from the Western canon to enrich our understanding of that text.

Australian Canon Wars

In recent times, the most comprehensive attempt to collate Australia's literary canon was the publication of *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*. The Macquarie website states that the anthology is a:

> comprehensive survey of two centuries of Australian creative writing. This anthology, published in August 2009 and comprising 1504 pages, is a major contribution to our national cultural infrastructure, an authoritative work of reference and a valuable resource for anyone interested in Australian history and culture.[31]

The general editor was Nicholas Jose, and other editors included the writer Kerryn Goldsworthy. After the anthology was published, a heated discussion erupted in the online magazine, *Crikey*.

The anthology created a controversy on two fronts. One centred around critic Peter Craven, who objected to the number of Indigenous writers who were included, stating that 'the sheer quantity of Aboriginal writing included in the volume—much of it devoid of its

[30] Rebecca Turner, 'Shakespeare's Macbeth Translated into Noongar Language', *ABC News*, 25 January 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-25/shakespeares-macbeth-translated-into-noongar-language-hecate/11875152.

[31] Nicholas Jose, *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2009).

literary quality or even literary ambition—is an egregious mistake'.[32] He called it ephemera. Kerryn Goldsworthy replied that the documents in question 'had literary qualities including the use of rhetoric to persuade and to move the reader and that this was enough to make a place for them in an inclusive anthology like this one'.[33] Twenty years after the canon wars, diversity and its cultural worth were still being debated.

On another front, critic and journalist Guy Rundle, along with critic and Currency Press founder Katharine Brisbane, voiced their objections to the paltry number of plays included. Brisbane wrote, 'so after nearly 40 years of public support for our literature, dramatic literature is still the poor relation. Among the 300 authors represented—and twice as many extracts—10 plays have been chosen'.[34] Rundle argued that, 'drama-wise, as a civilisation, we haven't exactly punched anything near our weight. But this anaethemology's [sic] selection is ridiculous'.[35] His first criticism was the choice of plays from the works of leading playwrights. An excerpt of *Emerald City* by David Williamson was chosen, and Rundle commented: 'I suspect even Williamson would be embarrassed that he is not represented to the world by the energy, drive and wit of *Don's Party, Stork*, or *The Club*'.[36] The second omission to which he objected was the exclusion of many leading playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s. There is no mention, for example, of writers such as Jack Hibberd, Alex Buzo, John Romeril, Stephen Sewell or Alma de Groen:

> OK, not everyone can be included, but to not have excerpts of *Stretch of the Imagination* or other Hibberd is just wrong from Wrongtown. The play has been done by a dozen of the country's leading actors and directors, and countless lesser lights—and each new interpretation has added new dimensions to it. Theatre, in this respect, has a more verifiable quality-control than prose or poetry—if it is a literary, ambitious

[32] Sophie Cunningham, 'The Black and White of the Australian Literary Canon', *Crikey*, 4 September 2009, https://www.crikey.com.au/2009/09/04/the-black-and-white-of-the-australian-literary-canon/.
[33] Guy Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology', *Crikey*, 15 September 2009, https://www.crikey.com.au/2009/09/15/rundle-the-plays-the-thing-missing-from-the-pen-anthology/.
[34] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.
[35] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.
[36] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.

> piece, and people keep bloody doing it, then it has become, de facto, part of our literature.[37]

The editor responsible, Kerryn Goldsworthy, defended the selection. First, she argued that the editors were aiming for the anthology to be used in schools, 'so there was some reluctance to include too many gratuitous f-bombs, c-bombs and otherwise R-rated content'. Second, she said that:

> plays are written to be performed, watched and listened to, and it was agreed very early on by the editors that knocking out too much writing meant for the page in order to make more room for writing meant for the stage would be counterproductive.[38]

Alison Croggon dismissed the claim that including more plays would be counterproductive:

> It's hard to read this as anything but a statement that plays are not proper examples of literary art. Yes, there are plays that don't read well on the page, but they tend to be plays that also don't work well on the stage. The very best plays are always works of literary distinction. There has often been a problem in Australian playwriting because of this too-easy idea that works for performance are not aspects of literary art, but that's another and complex question.[39]

Brisbane called the first part of Goldsworthy's defence 'rubbish' and then proceeded to move through our dramatic past with precision and ease, citing plays that were left out, such as Peter Kenna's *Hard God*, Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man*, Williamson's *The Club*, Jim McNeil's *The Chocolate Frog* and the first professionally produced play in Australia, *The Currency Lass*. She concluded her argument with this insight into our dramatic past:

> When we founded Currency Press in 1971 it was with the aim of building dramatic literature in print and returning the Australian accent to the stage. And by degrees we succeeded. But still our playwrights are excluded from high-profile recognition. And we are going backwards. Even this year the new directors of the Sydney Theatre Company announced a policy of exporting Australian actors in the classics as a contribution to our global status. Do we need to imitate our cricketers? Literature is not a competition, it's an assertion of our right to be ourselves. When will we

[37] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.
[38] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.
[39] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.

> recognise our own canon? I applaud Macquarie's aim to get Australian literature back into the schools, but let it be to celebrate who we really are.[40]

The Macquarie PEN Anthology's problems were perhaps rooted in conflating the canon as examples of excellence with the more commercial concerns of marketing the anthology for the secondary school syllabus.

The 2009 debate also raises an important point about the dramatic canon's relationship to the literary canon. Rundle's definition—that if people keep 'bloody doing' a play, it can be considered worthy—is significant. In 2016, Julian Meyrick commented:

> There are two reasons why absolute verdicts about play texts are unwise. The first relates to their staging. A production of a play is more than an extension of its literary features. It is another form of life.'[41]

To become part of our dramatic canon, a play has to be published, but to be part of the repertoire, a play has to be performed and re-performed every generation, otherwise it joins the pile of Australia's forgotten plays. The plays and playwrights that these commentators argued should be included in the anthology form a kind of canon. However, 10 years later, how many people born after 1980—even those with a background in drama—would have heard of these plays? Some of the plays may be familiar to a few because of their inclusion on a high school syllabus, but many have vanished because they were not performed, or they had just one season.

In his chapter, 'World Literature in a Postcanonical Hypercanonical Age', David Damrosch writes that it is too simple to say that the old canon has vanished. Instead, he argues that the two-tier system of major and minor authors has been replaced with a three-tier system comprising the hypercanon, the countercanon and the shadow canon. The hypercanon

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[40] Rundle, 'The Play's the Thing Missing from the PEN Anthology'.
[41] Julian Meyrick. 'The great Australian plays: The Torrents, the Doll and the critical mass of Australian drama' *The Conversation 8* December 2016, https://theconversation.com/the-great-australian-plays-the-torrents-the-doll-and-the-critical-mass-of-australian-drama-69990

is the celebrity list of all major writers—that is, the well-known names of the Western canon. The countercanon is the writers that contest these celebrity names, but in the process, the celebrity names become even more famous because they are associated with those who contest them and thus gain cachet and prominence by association. Damrosch writes: ‘Far from being threatened by these unfamiliar neighbours the old major authors gain new vitality from association with them’. The rich get richer.

The shadow canon comprises texts that people ‘know’ but that are not often mentioned in print. They are:

> the old ‘minor’ authors who fade increasingly into the background, becoming a sort of shadow canon that the older scholarly generations still know or, increasingly, fondly remember from long ago reading, but whom the younger generations encounter less and less. [42]

If Australia has a dramatic canon, it could be said that it is mostly a ‘shadow canon’, in that it exists but is unknown to current generations.

If our canon is unknown, then it cannot be challenged or responded to. In a recent article on the post-modern canon, Aiman Rathore writes:

> For a non-canonical approach to be fully realized as a worthy alternative—the Canonical approach must be first understood. In order to expose the Canon for what it is, an in-depth understanding and knowledge of the Canon is required. This is how the Canonical approach stays relevant, despite its apparent ‘*exposure*’. The main argument being: While postmodernism exposes the canon and is critical of it, it cannot rid itself of the canon completely—as it reluctantly recognizes the paradoxical importance of the canonical approach.[43]

A canon therefore gives us something to push against. But first we need to know what is there.

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[42] David Damrosch, ‘World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age’, in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 43–53.
[43] Aiman Rathore, ‘Exposure of the Canon: A Postmodernist Critique of a Postmodernist Critique’, https://www.academia.edu/15245678/Exposure_of_the_Canon_A_Postmodernist_Critique_of_a_Postmodernist_Critique?email_work_card=view-paper.

To argue about canon seems at once both antiquated and current. It is antiquated because, in the internet age, canon formation may be a democratic process that occurs in blogs, self-published opinion pieces and commentary sections of online newspapers. In an international conversation about theatre, democracy and the role of criticality that was held over five weeks in 2016, academics and critics Duška Radosavljević, Mark Fisher and Karen Fricker responded to Billington's claim in *The Guardian* that 'anyone can be a critic in the digital age'. Fisher commented on 'the great democratic potential of the internet age that lies in the capacity for anyone to take that step from bald opinion to reasoning and to have their arguments heard'. Such democratic access in the form of blogging has had a notable effect in Australia; for example, it influenced the Australia Council to commission and publish a report on gender disparity in Australian theatres. The report, *Women in Theatre* (2012), was largely prompted by the online debate in the comments sections of blogs such as those of Croggan (*Theatre Notes*)[44] and Jane Howard (*No Plain Jane*).[45]

Arguments over the canon also seem antiquated in contemporary Australia, where the Federal Arts Ministry has been subsumed by the Ministry of Roads and Rail, where funding cuts have diminished theatre companies and where theatre studies departments in universities have been forced to close. These have been exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, so the days when people agitated over canon now seem almost luxurious.

And yet arguments about the canon are still current because if we allow our canon to remain a 'shadow canon', then we are engaging in cultural amnesia or 'disremembering'.[46] Canons are as much about exclusion as they are about inclusion, and what is excluded can tell us at least as much about our history as what is included.

[44] Allison Croggan, *Theatre Notes* (blog), http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com/.
[45] Jane Howard, *No Plain Jane* (blog), https://noplain.wordpress.com/about/.
[46] Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 20.

My interest is to find a way to speak of recovering the past not for its own sake or to ascribe a value system to certain plays, but in order to assess what we have. To do this, it is worth considering other terms that avoid the 'charge' that clings to a word like 'canon'. I have mentioned 'cultural consciousness' as a phrase that more closely aligns with my understanding of the canon. Another term is 'inventory', which Scott Newstok used in a Radio National webinar on Shakespeare with Michael Cathcart. Newstok admitted that he deliberately avoids the word 'canon' because, in cultural debates:

> there's often a binary between old things and new things, and there's no relation between them, and you're either for the old or you're for the new and there's nothing between those two poles, whereas we have this great word 'inventory' that comes from the rhetorical term *inventio*, which gives us both the word 'invention' and 'inventory', and the renaissance premise is that in order to be inventive, in order to make something new, you first need to survey your inventory of things you already know. Whether that's things that you've read or your vocabulary; in effect, the first step in creating an argument is going over things that you already know and reconstructing these things and combining them for new circumstances and new demands … In any type of creation, you go off of what you know in order to build something new.[47]

Of course, not all plays can and should endure. In his series on the Australian canon for *The Conversation*, Meyrick writes:

> There is no abstract formula for 'an excellent play'. There is on-going debate about what qualities we value in plays that actually exist. Having this debate is like shining a torch into a dark cavern. We will not see everything. But we will get a sense of the size of the space we are standing in.[48]

It is only by gaining this sense that we can start to assess what we have—that we can start to take stock. We need to create an inventory because if we cannot name our plays, they will remain in the shadow canon, and tomorrow's canon will fade as easily as yesterday's.

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[47] Michael Cathcart, radio interview with Scott Newstok, 'How to Think Like Shakespeare', *The Stage Show*, 20 October 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-stage-show/annette-shun-wah-ozasia-caap-marta-dusseldorp-the-bleeding-tree/12781354.
[48] Meyrick, 'What Are the Great Australian Plays?'

In a recent SBS documentary, *The Whole Table*, director, writer and outgoing Sydney Festival director Wesley Enoch discussed the danger of eradicating our past.[49] He likened the tearing down of statues to the burning of books and said, 'Yes, let's smash that statue but put it back up again so we can see that it is smashed'.

We cannot continue to ignore our past; if we do, we will lose sight of where we have come from and the stories that speak to us, and of us, in our own voices. Perhaps by rethinking the word 'canon', and by replacing it with the word 'inventory', we can take away the implied value judgement. Thus, rather than having a canon that oppresses us, we can have an inventory that liberates us, so we are able to see what we have, tear it apart if we need to, strive to make ourselves accountable and rearrange and build on it.

[49] *The Whole Table*, episode 1, co-produced by Sydney Theatre Company and NITV, aired 20 January 2020, on SBS, https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/1841048131755/the-whole-table-s2020-ep1-.

Chapter 2: Publishing, Prizes and Production

When I reached the front of house window at the Bush [Theatre] and asked, in all antipodean naiveté, how they made money from printing the scripts, they looked at me as if I were stupid. 'It's not about making money', I was told. 'It's about preserving heritage'. Robert Reid, 'Witness' 2020.[1]

For a play to endure, it needs two main drivers: publishing and production. A third driver is winning prizes because these give prestige to a play and mark it as significant. This chapter examines how these drivers function in an Australian context and their role in establishing a particular play in our cultural consciousness.

If a play has any chance of being studied or performed, it is fair to assume that it exists somewhere in print. In the early part of the twentieth century, publishing in Australia was sporadic and highly selective, but it was one of the only means that playwrights had of seeing their work staged. As early as 1932, the critic and journalist William Moore argued for the need for dramatic publishing:

> Probably the most artistic full-length play which has been produced during the last few years is *The Touch of Silk* by Betty Davies[2]. But what happened after the cheering was over? It was put into a drawer, where most of the good plays seem to go … I think the best plan for our dramatists is to have their plays printed and to send copies to little theatres and Repertory societies abroad.[3]

The health of a county's national drama can often be reflected by its functioning publishing and critical sector, as Michelle Arrow emphasises in relation to Australian drama from the 1920s to the 1960s: 'if a body of national drama was ever to be compiled, plays needed to be collected, distributed and performed'.[4] Given that plays by Australian playwrights were only performed in limited seasons in the amateur or pro/am little theatres, the best way to ensure

[1] Robert Reid, 'Australian Plays: Our Lost Canons', *Witness*, 7 May 2019, https://witnessperformance.com/australian-plays-our-lost-canons/.
[2] Betty Roland also wrote under her married name, Betty M. Davies, until she formally changed her name to Roland in 1951.
[3] William Moore, 'The Dramatist in Australia', *Manuscripts: A Miscellany of Art and Letters* 3 (1932): 53.
[4] Michelle Arrow, *Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002), 93.

visibility and prestige was to publish the plays. In 1945, writer, critic and historian Leslie Rees wrote in *Meanjin*:

> One of the lamentable things in discussing Australian plays has always been that so many people look blank when you mention them because the plays have been produced only by small groups and never published. The wonderfully increased chances of the Australian author as paradoxically produced by the war situation, have enabled almost all of the best plays to get into book form.[5]

Currently, there are three main publishing avenues for plays in Australia: Currency Press, the Australian Plays Transform (APT) and Playlab.

Currency Press was founded in 1971 by Phillip Parsons and Katharine Brisbane in response to the increased output of new Australian plays that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. Currency Press lists itself as 'the oldest, independently-owned, active Australian publisher'.[6] It is a unique institution in Australia and a rare one in world publishing: a publishing house that subsists principally on the works of the local performing arts. Currency Press published new Australian drama of the 1960s–1980s, and their publishing list was foundational to the New Wave of Australian theatre that established a national voice and identity.

Most of the recent revivals come from these decades because they were published by either Currency or Yackandandah,[7] and print copies are available. Important recent revivals on our main stages were all plays that were originally published by Currency Press, including John Romeril's *The Floating World* (1975, revived by Griffin Theatre in 2013), Katherine

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[5] Leslie Rees, 'Drama Chronicle', *Meanjin* 4, no. 1 (1945): 31–32.
[6] Currency Press, 'History', https://www.currency.com.au/history/.
[7] Another publishing company, Yackandandah Press, was established in 1971 by Jeff Fiddes, an electrical engineer with a passion for theatre. Operating from his living room in suburban Melbourne, using two dot matrix printers, Fiddes published a select number of plays each year—mostly the overflow from Currency Press. He believed that plays 'should be in print and easily available, not locked away in a government warehouse, its existence known only to scholarly researchers'. Through Fiddes' efforts, Yackandandah ensured that theatre archives today contain printed copies of these plays which, together with the Currency plays, are a large part of our dramatic history. Mark Leehy, 'Yackandandah Playscripts—A Publishing House in Progress', *Publishing Studies* no. 2 (1996): 38–43. https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=761566208012654;res=IELLCC.

Thomson's *Diving for Pearls* (1990, revived by Griffin Theatre in 2017), Stephen Sewell's *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1983, revived by Sydney Theatre Company in 1984, then by Belvoir St Theatre in 1995, and Belvoir St Theatre in 2016), David Williamson's *Emerald City* (1987, revived by Griffin Theatre in 2014 and 2020).

A statement by Currency Press articulates why it might select a particular play for publication, stating that there are implicit standards for selection:

> A play has a chance of being chosen for a secondary or tertiary course in drama or literature (or in social or media studies) if the author's previous work is well known; if the play has been well exposed in the theatre; or if the play deals graphically with a subject of current concern. Subjects in this latter category include, for example, race relations, gender and family relations, technology and adolescent issues.[8]

As a commercial publishing house, Currency Press has recognised the importance of the education market for its plays. Catering to the education curricula has become a primary economic motivator:

> if the play fits our criteria, it is usually printed in a small first edition, around 1,500 copies, and promoted to teachers. The secondary school curricula are the biggest target and if a play is set on the syllabus it can mean a continuing steady flow of sales over many years.[9]

A selection policy such as this produces circularity, whereby plays are selected based on their suitability for high school students and are then produced by theatre companies because they are on the secondary school syllabus and provide captive audiences. This is why, when pressed, current generations of students, theatregoers, many of the general public and even some theatre practitioners might be able to name *Neighbourhood Watch* (2011), *The Removalists* (1971), *Away* (1986) and a handful of other plays on the syllabus as our canon, but little else.

[8] Currency Press, 'History'.
[9] Currency Press, 'History'.

Australian Plays Transform (APT) is Australia's largest online publisher. As previously noted, APT was originally Australian.plays.org. before its amalgamation with Playwriting Australia in 2019.

Largely non-commercial and established to serve playwrights, Australian.Plays.org[10] sold more than 12,000 playscripts by more than 700 playwrights in 2019. Its mission :

> to effect generational change in Australian theatre; contributing to a society where new plays are consistently excellent, more widely produced, representative of the diversity of all Australians, and embraced by audiences as central to Australian life; where our playwrights are esteemed cultural beacons with unique visions of the world.[11]

To achieve this aim, Australian Plays stated that it wished to publish:

> writers and plays that represent the diversity, difference, divergence and diaspora stories of this country. Works that investigate the problems and possibilities of our time, grapple with 'state of the nation' issues, experiment with form and content, or add to the rich tapestry of theatrical texts available for reading, purchase and production.[12]

Australian Plays had a dedicated program which APT has retained, called The Red Door, which is charged with recovering plays at risk of being lost to obscurity. The company's literary manager from 2018 to 2020, John Kachoyan, states that the program 'is about exploring plays that deserve a deeper read or further celebration'.[13] Plays in The Red Door collection include *Hate* by Sewell, *BC* by Rita Kolnejeas and *The Joy of Text* by Reid (2009) . Written in 1988, *Hate* is probably the oldest play represented. Another Australian Plays program, called BlakStage, provides:[14]

> an international gateway to Australian First Nations playwriting. Developed under the artistic guidance of First Nations writers and theatre-makers, *BlakStage* provides a

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[10] As previously noted APT was originally Australian.plays.org. before its amalgamation with Playwriting Australia

[11] Australian Plays, 'Script Submissions', https://australianplays.org/about/script-submissions.

[12] Australian Plays, 'Red Door', https://australianplays.org/reddoor.

[13] Australian Plays, 'Script Submissions'.

[14] Both The Red Door and Blakstage have been retained by APT and at the time of writing their mission statements are the same.

> starting point for a journey to the heart of this extraordinary and rapidly evolving body of work, grounded in ancient storytelling tradition.[15]

The website contains early works by writers such as Dallas Winmar, David Milroy, Jack Davis, Jane Harrison, Sam Watson and Jack Charles, as well as interviews, production histories and teaching guides.

In 2019, Australian Plays was advised by the Australia Council that it had not been invited to apply for multiyear funding—a development that its chair, Paul Dwyer, declared ‘catastrophic’.[16] In the same year, the future of Playwriting Australia (PWA) also appeared uncertain.[17] This was disastrous for Australian playwrights because, since its inception in 2006, PWA[18] had been the largest supporter of new writing for performance. However, there was a reprieve in early 2020, when it was announced that PWA would join forces with Australian Plays to develop, publish, produce and promote new Australian work. David Berthold, who was appointed chair of PWA, commented that ‘if we land this idea … for the first time Australia will have an organisation that works with playwrights through all stages of a play’s life cycle’.[19] Speaking about the work of Australian playwrights, Dwyer states:

> For these plays to live in the culture, to be widely read and studied, to receive multiple productions (and, importantly, for authors to see some financial return on their labours), they also need to be published and promoted as widely as possible, nationally and internationally.[20]

In February 2021, an independent review from REĂ Consulting recommended ‘that a new entity is formed incorporating agreed key functions of both Playwriting Australia and

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[15] Australian Plays,Transform. https://apt.org.au/blakstage
[16] Nick Galvin, ‘Funding “Catastrophe” Hits Playwrights’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/funding-catastrophe-hits-playwrights-20190819-p52imy.html.
[17] The PWA board announced that it was being disbanded before expressions of interest (EOIs) for multiyear funding were even submitted. EOIs had to be accepted before the company was allowed to apply for funding.
[18] PWA rose from the ashes of two organisations responsible for script development at the national level: Australian National Playwrights Centre, which was established in 1973, and Playworks, which was established in 1985.
[19] Richard Watts, ‘New Organisation to Rise from the Ashes of Playwriting Australia’, *ArtsHub*, 18 February 2020, https://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/performing-arts/richard-watts/new-organisation-to-rise-from-the-ashes-of-playwriting-australia-259798.
[20] Watts, ‘New Organisation to Rise from the Ashes of Playwriting Australia’.

Australian Plays', and it proposed that the new entity be called, Australian Plays Transform (APT). The merger will combine the resources of both organisations and will receive federal funding of about 50% of the combined funding of PWA and Australian Plays. APT is intended to be 'a national organisation [that] will travel with playwrights through the life cycle of a work'. Its mission is to:

> seek new voices for new times, develop plays that change the national story, link them to production, publish them, promote them, and license them for future productions here and globally. We are looking forward to helping Australian plays to have the most profound and lasting impact as narratives for the nation, and for the world.[21]

APT recognises that if Australian plays are to become part of our 'cultural consciousness', every aspect of the play's life, from writing to production and publication, needs support. I am hopeful that APT will ensure that canon and repertoire work together.

The third Australian play publisher is the Queensland-based Playlab, also an online publishing company, which offers development initiatives for Queensland playwrights, helps with licensing and produces a small season of Australian plays. Playlab receives state and federal funding, as well as some private donations. Playlab aims 'to empower diverse voices to interrogate and celebrate Australian society through excellence in theatre'. Its vision is 'to lead new-writing theatre in Australia', and it lists its values as:

- diversity—celebrate and promote difference through equal opportunity
- excellence—produce the highest-quality outcomes with and for artists
- rigour—an uncompromising commitment to best practice in all processes
- courage—practice and encourage bold and fierce artistic expression.

Its criteria for selection include:

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[21] REĂ Consulting, *Playwriting Australia: A Consolidated Vision for Plays and Playwriting in Australia* (Sydney: REĂ Consulting, 2020), http://www.pwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/200217-rea-pwa-review.pdf.

- Audience—does the work possess market potential in at least one of Playlab's key markets and/or ability to open Playlab to new markets?
- Legacy and representation—does the work have cultural and/or historical value and/or represent demographics that have been historically absent from our nation?[22]

Playlab also suggests plays for high school syllabuses and offers a playwright-in-residence opportunity and mentorships. Since 2017, it has also produced two short seasons of plays by playwrights at the Brisbane Powerhouse.

Playlab has a special interest in the plays of the 1930s and 1940s. It has joined AustLit (an online resource for Australian literature), University of Queensland (UQ) Drama and the Ian Potter Foundation to research and digitise 'the forgotten plays and playwrights of the pre-*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* era'.[23] The emphasis on this period is unique in Australian publishing.

From their listed criteria and mission statements, all three publishers are seeking plays with cultural and historic significance, as well as plays that experiment with form and question our identity and the state of our nation. The publishers are developing, sustaining and recovering Australian plays and are instrumental in invigorating and developing our national canon.

Technology has changed the way we find, buy and read plays. The major advantage of online publishing is that publishers can make plays much easier to access. Recovering lost plays is part of the work undertaken by the Australian Script Centre and publishing online makes this much more viable. An example of this recovery work is the recent *Nimrod 50*

[22] Playlab, 'Mission & Values', https://playlabtheatre.com.au/about/.
[23] Playlab, 'Mission & Values'.

collection, which celebrates the founding of the Nimrod in 1970 by publishing a collection of plays produced by the company, many of which were previously unpublished or out of print. Today, the computer hard drives of theatre companies and literary agents contain multiple drafts of multiple plays. We also have a resource such as AusStage, a live performance database that collects digital records of plays, performances and related resources. Plays have less risk of disappearing in digital form than when the only way of producing multiple copies was with a typewriter and carbon paper. However, they are still disappearing—if not physically, then through a lack of opportunity to stage them and a lack of knowledge or even interest in them, particularly in some of the older plays.

Publishing scripts is important because it keeps the conversation about our drama alive. It is about acknowledging in our country that drama matters—that plays matter. The canon exists, but so much of it is in the shadows, and Reid warns us of the risks of never owning our past:

> We continue to ignore our canon at our own risk. We cannot keep pulling up the past behind us as we go and expecting theatre to remain relevant to a wider audience. We invite increasingly great disaster with our wilful blindness. Anecdotally speaking, already only a shrinking number of Australians, even among those who go to the theatre, remember more than that last summer in 1953, and shockingly few remember even that.
>
> In the absence of any ongoing engagement with our national literature, in the silence where our history should be, we allow nightmares to grow. Nightmares that we have fought from the stage over and over again, as we sink into the swamps of wordless ignominy and cultural amnesia.[24]

The first step to taking plays out of the shadow canon is to publish them. Only with tangible and accessible texts can we move forward and invent new forms and have fresh debates, while understanding and acknowledging where we came from.

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[24] Reid, ‘Australian Plays’.

Prizes

I'm good at my craft. And I have enough accolades, which is deceiving because someone might say, well you win prizes all the time, but I would rather have my work put on, I would rather have someone ask to have my work put on. I would rather not to have to scrape for the funding for my work. So it's that funny thing where I spent a lot of my career thinking, I'll just get so good—that nobody can say no! That's right! And it just doesn't work. Patricia Cornelius 2016.[25]

An argument often touted is that if a play is any good, it will last. If that were true, what does it mean for the plays that have been judged against a set of criteria to be the best in their field and have won prizes?

In 1955, two plays—*The Torrents* by Oriel Gray and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* by Lawler—shared first prize in a Playwrights Advisory Board Competition. The prize that year was £200: the largest awarded in its history. The generous prize money produced more applicants than in any other year, so both plays were competing in a large field. Although *The Torrents* was thought to be 'the more complete play', the judges could not ignore the subject matter of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.[26] However, the futures of these two winning plays could not be more different. AusStage lists *The Doll* as having more than 180 productions, including several tours and international seasons. It has been made into a Hollywood movie and an opera, and Currency Press created an app for the play to mark its fiftieth anniversary. In contrast, *The Torrents* has had just two mainstage productions since 1955. It was also recorded as a radio play and was later adapted into a musical, *A Bit o' Petticoat*, which had a short season in Tasmania. It was not published until 1988, when Penguin released it as part of an Australian Playhouse series.

There are several possible explanations as to why one play became Australia's darling while the other slipped into obscurity. The vicissitudes of genre, fashion and relevance,

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[25] Emily Richardson, 'In Conversation with Patricia Cornelius', *The Ladies Network*, 21 April 2016, http://www.theladiesnetwork.com.au/patricia-cornelius/. In 2019, Cornelius won the Windham Campbell Prize for literary achievement. This is a major prize that is judged internationally and is worth A$234,000.

[26] Arrow, *Upstaged*.

gender can all be argued, although it is the production histories of these two prize winning plays that predominately reveal and predict their fates. The opening nights of these two plays could not have been more different.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll premiered after its joint win with *The Torrents*, because a condition of the award was that the board arrange the first production of the winning play. Hugh Hunt, the British director of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, initially rejected both plays for production. Incredibly, he thought *The Doll* lacked 'dramatic impact', but he was eventually persuaded to produce it.[27] *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* premiered in 1955 at the Union Theatre in Melbourne and was the first fully funded, fully professional Australian play to be staged. In contrast, *The Torrents* had a series of false starts and a long list of miscommunications before it finally secured an amateur production in 1957 at Adelaide's Stow Hall. Reportedly the opening night was a disaster, and the play sank:[28]

> On the first night … everything went wrong. There was a new props girl who forgot to place important props where they should have been … Sitting out in the auditorium there was nothing I could do. I just wished I could disappear underneath my seat.[29]

The Torrents had premiered the year before, in 1956, as a radio play on ABC Radio in Melbourne. Its main selling point seemed to be the gender role of its author:

Housewife's Prize Play on the Air
THE TORRENTS, a play by Melbourne housewife Oriel Gray,
which tied with Summer of the 17th Doll

Oriel Gray finally managed to get her name in lights (literally) with a production of *The Torrents* at the Sydney Opera House in 2019.[30] Before this, there had been a production at the

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[27] Leslie Rees, *A History of Australian Drama Volume 1* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 257.
[28] Arrow, *Upstaged*, 25.
[29] Mary Miller cited in Barbara Ann Harding, 'The Torrents and the Doll', in Oriel Gray, *The Torrents*, Australian Playhouse Series, Currency Press in association with the State Theatre Company South Australia, 1996, program note.
[30] In this production, the design featured the playwright's name, Oriel Gray, 'in pink neon lights above the proscenium'.

Playhouse in Adelaide in 1996 directed by Marion Potts. Two productions in 60 years is a poor record for a play that should be part of our history.

The ascendancy of the other prize-winner, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was a completely different story. There seems to be no clear reason why *The Torrents* was not chosen to be staged by The Trust. Lawler maintains that his play was chosen 'because mine was the cheaper to stage',[31] but Arrow believes it was likely chosen because of Lawler's connections in the theatre.[32] At the time, Lawler was running the Union Repertory Theatre Company (URTC), which had been founded in 1953 by John Sumner for the University of Melbourne. Renamed the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1968, the company's first home was the university's Union Theatre.

The URTC was professional in a non-commercial way but at the time of *The Doll*'s production in 1955, it was still regarded as an experimental theatre.[33] Lawler did not think it ethical to program his own play when he was running the company but was persuaded to do by Sumner, despite the recognised financial risk at the time of staging an Australian play. Sumner, who was on loan to the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, came back to direct it and he together with Hugh Hunt, another Englishman who had recently arrived to run the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, underwrote the play, with Lawler eventually playing the character of Barney. Opening night was hugely successful and propelled the play to becoming Australia's most produced play in our dramatic history. Julian Meyrick marks 28 November, 1955, the opening night of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* at the Union Theatre Repertory Company as "the end of the hegemony of the commercial theatre and the ascendancy of repertory theatre."[34]

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[31] Candida Baker, *Yacker 2: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work* (Sydney, Pan Books, 1987), 169.
[32] Arrow, *Upstaged*, 25.
[33] Julian Meyrick, *Australian Theatre After The New* Wave*: Policy, Subsidy and the Alternative Artist*. Boston: Brill, 2017. 42
[34] Meyrick Julian, *Australian Theatre After the New Wave* 43

Niall Brennan, the director of the Union Theatre who was in the audience describes the opening night:

> Some strange conversion took place in the minds of the Australian theatre goers before they even saw the play; for it was the best dressed, and most sympathetic first-night audience I had ever seen at the Union. They came rolling in, in furs and starched shirts, and I remember saying to one of the usherettes.... 'I think this play is going to be a *great* success'. None of us could understand it. The jinx [on Australian plays] had just gone. They clapped the house curtain when it went up, and they clapped the set. They clapped every actor who came on and the roars which greeted Ray's own entrance were tremendous. When the curtain came down at the end, the theatre almost shook... It was the first Union Theatre Repertory play ever to play to an extended season. They took it to Sydney, then on Australian tour, then booked it into London. They sold the film rights to an American organisation.[35]

The timeline for the first five years of *The Doll*'s life was as follows:

- 1955—Tied for first place in the Playwrights Advisory Board of Sydney's play competition.
- 1955—28 November: Premiere, Union Theatre, Melbourne
- 1956—11 January: Elizabethan Theatre, Newtown, Sydney
- 1957—30 April: New Theatre, London
- 1957—Publication by Angus & Robertson
- 1958—23 January: Coronet Theatre, New York
- 1959—2 December: Movie Premiere, Century Theatre, Sydney

One can only speculate about the many reasons for initially choosing *The Doll* over *The Torrents*, to stage, but it is possible that Lawler's play spoke to a belief about who we were in post-war Australia. It perpetuated our largely hypothetical connection to the bush by imagining ourselves as suntanned, slow-speaking shearers, rough but decent, foolish but

[35] Brennan Niall *On Stage* Spring 2005

good. Whereas *The Doll* nostalgically yearns for a mythical Australia, *The Torrents,* although set in the late nineteenth century, is more forward-thinking as a result of its gently feminist theme of a young woman operating in a man's workplace. Arrow asks: 'So why is the Nationalist story of Australia told and retold at the expense of a more complete tale?'[36] It is a question that haunts Australian theatre history; it has largely (as Arrow notes) mythologised playwrights such as Louis Esson and Lawler and ignored many other playwrights, most of them women.[37] Many of these women, at least in the early twentieth century, were the recipients of playwrighting prizes. For example, the plays of Katherine Susannah Prichard, Mona Brand, Dymphna Cusack, Betty Roland and Dorothy Blewett, to name just a few, won prizes but were never produced.

Production of *The Doll* changed Australian theatre history. Julian Meyrick describes it:

> …the *Doll* catalysed not just a sense of identity but a world of possibility. What audiences and critics felt, and said they felt, was that some kind of a corner had been turned. The *Doll* made manifest a realm of cultural action as yet unknown but now imaginable, giving meaningful substance to the phrase 'the Australian play'. [38]

The Doll's success must have been bittersweet for joint prize winner, Oriel Grey. The same year that *The Doll* opened in London, she sat in a church hall in Adelaide wanting to disappear as her play fell apart on stage. The playwrighting prize may have been shared but its ensuing productions delivered vastly different fates. *The Torrents* disappeared for fifty years whereas *The Doll*, ascended from prize winner into the canon, in no small part because it has been staged again and again. Playwrighting awards judge texts and as Julian Meyrick comments, judgments about texts are often specious: "There are two reasons why absolute

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[36] Arrow, *Upstaged*, 25.
[37] Arrow, *Upstaged*, 85.
[38] Julian Meyrick, *Australian Theatre After The New* Wave*: Policy, Subsidy and the Alternative Artist*. Boston: Brill, 2017. 42

verdicts about play texts are unwise. The first relates to their staging. A production of a play is more than an extension of its literary features. It is another form of life."[39] The URTC ensemble cast, along with Sumner and Lawler, and the technical resources of an established theatre, did better justice to the text of *The Do*ll than the scratch cast and crew of *The Torrents performing* in a church hall, could give to *The Torrents*. More than the prestige and sometimes financial reward of a prize, it is production and, importantly, the standard of production, that determines the fate of a play and its endurance. In Australia there are a few second chances. As noted in my introduction, with so few revivals of plays here and with such a small repertoire, if a play is badly served it dies.

Today, playwrighting competitions have grown, but they often remain a salve for the writer and still do not guarantee production. I have judged several over the years, including the Patrick White Award and the Max Afford Award, and I am familiar with the judging criteria that are commonly used. The plays usually have two rounds of judging: one to create a shortlist and the other to select the winners. Judges look for qualities that include:

- compelling narrative and plotting
- rhythmic, playable and scintillating dialogue
- innovative form
- insightful characterisation
- degree of ambition in creating more literary aspects such as metaphor and symbols
- thought given to stage imagery
- originality
- timely engagement with political or social contexts.

[39] Julian Meyrick *The Conversation* The great Australian plays: The Torrents, the Doll and the critical mass of Australian drama December 8 2016 https://theconversation.com/the-great-australian-plays-the-torrents-the-doll-and-the-critical-mass-of-australian-drama-69990

Both the Patrick White and the Max Afford Awards are highly competitive, with each receiving more than 120 entries each time they are held. The biennial Max Afford Award, originally administered by Playwriting Australia and now by Australian Plays Transform offers $30,000 in prize money and $15,000 towards a creative development, making it one of the wealthiest literary prizes in Australia. It was established to promote interest in Australian drama, foster the writing of plays in Australia, and help and encourage young playwrights. The winners from 2012 to 2018 were:

- 2018 *Whale* by Fleur Kilpatrick (10-day season at Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne Victoria)
- 2016 *Pedagogy* by Chris Summers (Hothouse Theatre in Albury had a creative development showing in 2019)
- 2014 *The Silver Alps* by Maxine Mellor (no record of production)
- 2012 *Eight Gigabytes of Hardcore Pornography* by Declan Greene (production at Griffin Theatre).

The Patrick White Playwrights Award offers a cash prize of $7,500 for a full-length unproduced play of any genre written by an Australian playwright over 18 years of age. The readers and judges assessing the scripts seek a work that is original and ambitious, with strong theatrical potential. The winners over the same period were:

- 2018 *Superheroes* by Mark Rogers (season at Griffin Theatre, Seymour Centre in 2020)
- 2017 *Mirrors Edge* by Kim Ho (two-week season at Melbourne Repertory Theatre in 2018)
- 2016 *Hot Tub* by Lewis Treston (season at La Boite in 2017)
- 2015 *Award Kin* by Neil Levi (no record of production)
- 2014 *This Man's Bitch* by Debra Thomas (no record of production)

- 2013 *King Arthur* by Chris Summers (no record of production); this play was also runner up in the Phillip Parsons Award for Emerging Writers in 2014
- 2012 *Minus One Sister* by Anna Barnes (season at Griffin Theatre in 2015).

From the 11 award winners across both prizes, Griffin Theatre Company staged three and programmed another; La Boite staged one; and two plays had short, independent seasons. The remaining four have had no productions at all, although one received a development grant. Although recognised as the best new Australian plays, not one has been produced by a flagship state theatre company or equivalent.

This raises the question: If plays are good enough to win prizes and be selected for development, why are they not good enough to be staged? Cast size may be a consideration and prize winning plays are often 'state of the nation' plays, which assess a nation's history, society and crises: big plays with big themes that often necessitate large casts. It is recognised that staging a play with more than about four characters can be too expensive for theatres, particularly if the play is untested, so the 'big' plays—the new ones that win prizes and may even be published—are rarely staged and may disappear. It is not only plays with large casts and unknown writers that are rejected. Director Julian Meyrick read multi-award-winner Patricia Cornelius's four-hander, *Do Not Go Gentle*, after it won the 2006 Patrick White Award. He knocked on doors for four years, had three public readings, was refused funding from the Australia Council and finally succeeded in securing an independent production at a not-for-profit space, fortyfivedownstairs, in Melbourne in August 2010.[40] Asked about the rejection, Meyrick hypothesised that the mainstage was not ready for Cornelius's play:

> Patricia's work represents a compelling blend of realist and theatricalist (surrealist, expressionist) aesthetics. This is the front line of Australian stage playwriting today,

[40] fortyfivedownstairs is an unfunded not-for-profit theatre and gallery in Melbourne, Australia. Located on the lower floors of a nineteenth-century brick building in Flinders Lane, it showcases visual art, independent theatre and live music. In has two exhibition spaces and flexible theatre space. Its mission statement is: 'As an unfunded and not-for-profit organisation we support independent, experimental and thought-provoking art forms striving to make money for artists not from them'.

> the struggle to articulate the contours of a new public drama. It is unstable, imaginative, risky work and currently has no natural place in the mainstage repertoire, which is divided between traditional narrative drama on the one hand and cross art-form meta-theatricality on the other.[41]

Winning a prize is financially rewarding and offers prestige and encouragement. It raises the writer's profile and draws attention to their work, and it recognises the excellence of their writing. However, a prize does not ensure publication, and it does not automatically lead to production, at least not on Australia's main stages. A prize is no guarantee of endurance or entry into the canon, much less the repertoire.

Production

I was astonished when Lee Lewis called me to discuss producing Splinter, because it had already had a production. It was commissioned by Sydney Theatre Company and premiered in 2012 to good reviews. But the idea of it being produced again, and in the same city, was something I hadn't imagined. Hilary Bell, 2019.[42]

Programming a season for a theatre is a delicate balance that involves pleasing the box office, satisfying subscribers, honouring diversity quotas, and staging both new work and classics. Shakespeare and other 'low-risk' playwrights can often effectively bankroll new work; therefore, juggling new work with recognisable classics is a finely tuned act. For example, through the 1980s and early 1990s, programming a new play by David Williamson at the Sydney Theatre Company was guaranteed box office gold, which in turn cross-subsidised the Sydney Theatre Company's new work. The decision of which plays to stage is in the hands of the artistic director and, to a degree, the literary manager, general manager and associate directors. Programming must honour the mission statement of the theatre and must suit the space. It may also showcase certain directors, actors and playwrights—any one of whom might have celebrity, which in turn boosts box office sales. Programming is often subjective

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[41] Brooker Bem, 'The Life in Them Words', *Sydney Review of Books*, 25 November 2016, https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/the-life-in-them-words-patricia-cornelius/.
[42] Griffin Theatre Company, 'In Conversation: Hilary Bell', 11 September 2019, https://griffintheatre.com.au/blog/in-conversation-hilary-bell/.

and reflects the taste of the artistic director. The British playwright Howard Barker, who was frequently rejected by the National Theatre in London, comments on artistic directors as tastemakers:

> Quality is not the first consideration, the first consideration is whether the text is compatible with the prejudices of the age, as interpreted by these carefully chosen individuals. It's not so far from the model of Soviet communism. You have a police force, but it's done at the level of the appointments.[43]

As Barker highlights, the programming of plays on our main stages directly affects the creation of our canon and building of our repertoire, and it is usually in the hands of a few. Australia, which has only a handful of theatre companies, narrows the field even more.

In this section, to obtain an overview of one theatre's programming, I will examine Belvoir St Theatre's programming choices over a 30-year period. Belvoir St Theatre, the successor to Nimrod, was bought by shareholders in 1984. It has two houses: an upstairs theatre with a corner thrust stage and a 338-seat auditorium, and a downstairs box-shaped theatre that seats 80. Belvoir receives funding from both the Australia Council and Arts NSW, as well as from private donors and corporate foundations. It also has a large subscription base. Belvoir states that 'new work and new stories sit at the centre of Belvoir's programming, alongside a mix of classic and international writing and a lasting commitment to Indigenous writing. In short, Belvoir is about modern theatricality, an open society and faith in humanity'.[44] A document listing productions from 1985–2016 is divided into five categories: Shakespeare, Classic, Classic Australian, New Australian and New International.[45] Out of 230 plays programmed, 129 new Australian plays were staged during this time, including adaptations by Australian playwrights of European classics. Analysis

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[43] James Reynolds, Andy W. Smith, Enoch Brater and Mark Taylor-Batty, *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).
[44] Belvoir St Theatre, https://belvoir.com.au/.
[45] Belvoir St Theatre, 'Belvoir Production History 1985 to 2016', accessed 23 July 2020, https://belvoir.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Belvoir_Production_History-to-2016.pdf.

reveals that, despite Belvoir doing its best to balance its seasons, new works that only receive one production disappear.

There were 17 classic Australian works. Of the 129 new Australian plays, four were subsequently made into films: *Cosi* by Louis Nowra, *The Drover's Wife* by Leah Purcell, *Baby Teeth* by Rita Kalneljas and *The Sapphires* by Tony Briggs. *Cloud Street* by Nick Enright and Justin Monjo went on to have an international tour, and *Keating* by Casey Bennetto had several return seasons and a national tour. There were six adaptations of classics: *Thyestes* (by Seneca, adapted by Henning, Ryan, Stone and Winter), *The Wild Duck* (by Ibsen, adapted by Simon Stone), Oedipus Rex (by Sophocles, adapted by Adena Jacobs), *Nora* (by Ibsen, adapted by Kit Brookman and Anne Louise Sarks), *Hedda Gabler* (by Ibsen, adapted by Adena Jacobs), *The Business* (based on Gorky's *Vassa Zheleznova*, adapted by Jonathan Gavin) and *The Government Inspector* (by Gogol, adapted by Simon Stone). C*apricornia* (by Xavier Herbert, adapted by Nowra) was staged once as a new work and was then entered on the list as a classic Australian work. *Radiance* by Nowra moved its position from New Australian in 1993 to Australian classic in 2015. Sewell's *The Blind Giant is Dancing* is the only play to be listed twice in the Australian Classic category. Of the 50 world premieres, *Stolen* by Jane Harrison, *Parramatta Girls* by Alana Valentine, *Neighbourhood Watch* by Lally Katz and *Cosi* by Nowra went on to the secondary school syllabus and have had multiple productions. Many of the plays listed as world premieres in the New Australian category have had no further mainstage productions, and although they have been published, they are largely unknown today. Nowra's *Cosi* premiered at Belvoir in 1992 and was followed by a further 136 productions, a film adaptation and entry onto the school syllabus and into our canon. In contrast, Beatrix Christian's *Blue Murder*, which was staged two years later, in 1994, had only three productions and then vanished. Without further productions, we

cannot know whether Christian's play was inferior to Nowra's or whether, it was because the male playwright had a higher profile and better connections.

However, having status in the industry does not necessarily guarantee future productions, as revealed by Bell in a personal summary of her career that she wrote for Griffin Theatre:[46]

> As I sat down to write this article, I looked over my body of work, starting in 1987, to see how many subsequent productions my plays have had. I didn't count one-acts, radio plays, or plays written for youth theatres. I left out re-mounts. I excluded school, university and amateur productions, for reasons I'll go into later. And I didn't count unproduced work. I found that of 22 plays with a professional premiere, only three have had a second shot. *Fortune*, first a NIDA production, was done in Hawaii in 1992, then at Griffin in 1993 and at La Boite in 1996. *Wolf Lullaby* premiered at Griffin in 1996, and was staged in 1998 by New York's Atlantic Theater, and later *Steppenwolf* in Chicago. And in a strange anomaly, in 2013 I was asked almost simultaneously by the State Theatre Company of South Australia and Black Swan State Theatre Company to adapt *The Seagull*. The artistic directors came to an agreement, and I had the rare pleasure of seeing two productions of the same script within months of each other. (NB: Geordie Brookman, then AD at STSCA, had a policy of including second productions in his seasons though, ironically, *The Seagull* was not one of these). But three out of 22—and one of them a Chekhov! Sobering.[47]

The Seagull is a wonderful play, but it is reasonable to question why Bell was not asked to adapt a play from our own canon. Belvoir's production history shows that the oldest Australian play to be staged was White's *The Ham Funeral* (1947). Belvoir's artistic director at the time, Neil Armfield, along with Jim Sharman at Lighthouse Theatre in South Australia, championed White's plays and were responsible for making them visible again. The only plays older than *The Ham Funeral* that have been produced at Belvoir are European and American classics, and European classics that have been rewritten by Australian writers.

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[46] Griffin Theatre, located in Sydney, is a small theatre that dedicates itself to 'the nurture, presentation and promotion of outstanding Australian playwriting and contemporary theatre' (http://www.griffintheatre.com.au). In recent years, it has programmed one Australian 'classic' in each of its mainstage season of four plays: *Speaking in Tongues* by Andrew Bovell (2011), *The Boys* by Gordon Graham (2012), *The Floating World* by John Romeril (2013) and *Emerald City* by David Williamson (2014). I do not have the box office figures, but anecdotally the productions were sell-outs.

[47] Griffin Theatre Company, 'In Conversation: Hilary Bell'.

Katherine Kelly makes the point that ‘colloquialising international works, rather than returning to, excavating and confronting historical works of Australian theatre, is continuing a colonial obeisance to the European canon’.[48]

Perhaps it is time to examine our own stock of plays from the past to adapt. While they may not have the celebrity and subsequent marketability of a European or American playwright, they will serve to make our canon visible and our repertoire more solid.

Of course, not all plays are equal, and there are many reasons why some plays survive when others do not. I attempt to uncover some of these reasons in later chapters using *The Blind Giant is Dancing* as a case study. For now, it seems clear that one outing for a play does very little in terms of its survival and in terms of building a repertoire. If we are to recognise our dramatic history, plays need to be staged and restaged multiple times.

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[48] Kathryn Kelly, ‘Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies: Changes Since 2000’, in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s*, edited by Richard Fotheringham and James Smith (The Netherlands: Brill–Rodopi, 2013).

Chapter 3: The Economy of Theatrical Prestige

And so I find my fingers itching anew to press 'record' on a device that can help me once again to archive an aspect of the Australian community in order to play it back on stage, in all its contradiction and surprise, as we continue to wish to see ourselves with not only fresh eyes, but fresh and open ears. Alana Valentine[1]

Having investigated what drives canon, I will now investigate what is meant by a 'classic' play, as well as the relationship the classic has with the canon. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines 'classic' as: 'Judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind'.[2] It is commonly used to describe something that endures; therefore, a 'classic play' is one that has withstood the test of time:

'Classic' and 'canon' are terms that are often, conflated but there are differences. For example, 'canon' is always plural, but a 'classic' is singular. This is significant because there can potentially be an infinite number of classics, but the canon being constantly critiqued, realigned and readjusted has to drop some works to include others. In 1998, American academic and theologian Roger Lundin wrote:

> By its very nature, the classic is a more inclusive and flexible concept than the canon … The poetry of a number of mid-nineteenth-century New England men, for example, has all but disappeared from the anthologies that catalogue the canon. Longfellow, Lowell, and Whittier are out, and Phyllis Wheatly, Frederick Douglass, and Toni Morrison are in.[3]

Given that the classic is deemed to speak to us beyond time and culture, it must be assumed it has the ability to speak to successive generations because it speaks to us about our humanity. We may not literally experience Oedipus's dilemma, but we all have to deal with issues of morality and personal integrity on a daily basis. A classic play can be reinterpreted in different ways, in different physical spaces and in different art forms.

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[1] Pollock, Katie." Now versus posterity " *Storyline*, No. 34, Mar 2014: 62-67. (accessed 23.07.20) <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=225295385898627;res=IELLCC>

[2] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'Classic', http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125.

[3] Roger Lundin, 'The "Classics" Are Not the "Canon"', in *Invitation to the Classics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1998), 25–33.

In the recent documentary titled *The Whole Table*,[4] Wesley Enoch notes that classics are a great way to understand how a society works but contends that classics should not be seen in isolation. He says, 'we cannot hang onto them, they must have other voices attached to them'.[5] He cites the example of *Black Medea*, which he adapted from the classic play *Medea* by Euripides. Enoch wanted to tell a story about the demonisation of women and about domestic violence in Indigenous communities, but the Elders did not want him 'airing dirty laundry'. Instead, he turned to the Greek classic *Medea* and used 'the Trojan Horse effect so that the audience think they are coming to see a classic but that hopefully they see something deeper, something that speaks to us now'. He believes that every classic should be viewed as a starting point: 'Every artist adapting a classic should take it to where they want it to be. Not from where they inherit it'.[6]

To do this a play must be revived. A classic must by definition have survived several generations. There is sometimes a common misuse of the word "classic", where a work is termed a classic because it appeals to a current generation. My focus here is on dramatic classics, and to gain the label "classic", the appeal of a play must survive several decades or at least several generations. It may be a play of merit, but it is not a classic unless it has been staged and seen by successive generations. An example of the common misuse of the word is a series Currency Press ran in 2015 called *Cue The Chorus.*[7] In this series, contemporary Australian playwrights were asked to name and write an essay on a play they considered to be an Australian classic. Looking through the choices one can see plays such as Michael Gow's *Away* and David Williamson's *The Removalists*, all recognised Australian classics, but surprisingly there are plays included that despite the briefing, cannot by definition be called

[4] *The Whole Table*, episode 1, co-produced by Sydney Theatre Company and NITV, aired 20 January 2020, on SBS, https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/1841048131755/the-whole-table-s2020-ep1-.
[5] *The Whole Table*.
[6] *The Whole Table*.
[7] *Cue The Chorus*, Currency Press 2015 https://www.currency.com.au/cue-the-chorus/

"classics". For example *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* by Alana Valentine is there. This is a strong and important play and there is no doubt that its issues speak to the time it was staged in 2009 (as a double bill with Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed)* but AusStage records that is has only had that one production and therefore, by definition, cannot be called a classic. Definitions are important. I say this not to be pedantic but to support the argument in my thesis. The fact that *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, an important play about racial tension in Australia, may never have a chance to prove its classic status is because we so rarely restage our plays. It is a good play but it not yet a classic play because it has not been given the opportunity to be; it has not been revived and therefore tested over several generations.

Whether they are classic plays or canonical, certain plays have earned a level of respect and value for specific reasons. In *The Economy of Prestige*, James English examines cultural capital and the ascendancy of prizes in cultural life. Borrowing from this, I ask: What is the economy of theatrical prestige in Australia and what criteria distinguish a play that has been deemed a classic?

In this section, I am interested in the prestige attached to certain plays and how this lends itself to production. In this chapter, I will attempt to identify the values that denote prestige in Australian theatre. Given that Lawler's play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, has both classic and canonical status in Australia, I will use it as a benchmark from which to discern the criteria that mark this play as a classic. I will then apply these criteria to Patrick White's play, *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, which is a play that speaks of Australia in a very different way and was resurrected decades after critical damnation, to test whether the criteria are sound. Theatre is a temporal form and relies on interpretation through staging; therefore, the criteria required to define prestige need to be appropriate to the medium. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Australia's iconic play, provides the ideal canvas for discerning these criteria. What was it that turned a play about cane cutters and barmaids into a classic?

When *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* toured Australia in 1955, 'it was reported that people drove hundreds of miles and a man swam a flooded river to see it in the Northern Territory'.[8] I have documented *The Doll*'s meteoric rise from prize winner to Australian classic in the previous chapter. As noted, the play had enormous national and international success, and went on to define the beginning of Australian drama, becoming 'the Great Australian Play'.

Patrick White's play, *The Ham Funeral*, was famously rejected by the governors of the Adelaide Festival Trust as being too difficult.[9] It was given an amateur production in Adelaide in 1961, directed by John Tasker, and was presented by the University of Adelaide Theatre Guild. However, for many, the rejection by the Festival Trust represented the philistinism and monoculture that was Australia in the 1950s and early 1960s. It infuriated White and he spat out *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, subtitled *A Charade in Suburbia*, a play that savaged the philistinism of Australia. Directed by John Tasker, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* was first performed in Adelaide in September 1962 with another production, also directed by John Tasker, opening a month later in Melbourne. While nobody braved floods to see it, the play was a box office and critical success in both cities. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and *The Season at Sarsaparilla* could not be more different in terms of theme, style and genre. However, they are linked in that they continue to be important and meritorious works in Australian theatrical history for different reasons, which I will cover in this chapter.

Written in 1955, the story of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is straightforward. For 16 years, Roo and Barney, a pair of sugar cane cutters, have been travelling south 'like two eagles flyin' down out of the sun'[10] to spend the summer lay-off with their lovers, two

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[8] Philip Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 565.
[9] John McCallum, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009), chap. 5.
[10] Ray Lawler, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1957).

barmaids named Olive and Nancy. They stay in Olive's terrace in inner city Carlton in Melbourne—a house that Olive shares with her mother, Emma. This summer, the seventeenth summer, everything has changed. Nancy has married a bookshop owner and Olive, determined not to relinquish the ritual, has dragged in the somewhat cynical Pearl to be Nancy's replacement. This year Roo is broke, and hostilities simmer between Roo and Barney. It turns out that Roo's position on the cane fields has been challenged by young Johnny Dowd, and Barney has not backed Roo in the challenge. Roo ends up taking a job in a paint factory, and he proposes marriage to Olive, who is devastated at the shattering of her annual ritual—her dream: 'You think I'll let it all end up in marriage—every day—a paint factory—you think I'll marry you?'[11] Roo and Barney are left to stagger off into oblivion, leaving Olive's young neighbour, Bubba, who has become infatuated with the young Dowd, to believe that the dream is still possible.

A strong text is certainly a criterion for denoting a classic. If the text is strong, the narrative and plotting should be compelling, the language should sing, the form should be innovative, the characterisation should have originality and insight, and there should be stage imagery and an interplay of images. Talking about his play *Away* and why is has been revived so often, Michael Gow concedes that his play is "as remote as fifth century Athens to young people today," but he notes, "for me plays are about language. Maybe that makes me a bit of an old fart. But that's what you remember beyond the manipulations of plot, the language of a school master's thank you speech. The mad poetry of it all. Maybe that's what will last. But who knows?"[12]

Criticism of Lawler's text varies in its enthusiasm. In 1964, H. G. Kippax, with conditional approval, writes, '*The Doll* is the most proficient play yet written by an

[11] Lawler, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, 92.
[12] Elissa Blake, "Precision and Artistry 35 years of Away, the quintessentially Australian Play, "*The Guardian* 26 October 2021

Australian'.[13] He lauds Lawler's technical skills in handling exposition and his brilliant use of the vernacular, but concludes that the play ultimately relies on sentiment and does not dig as deeply into the psyche as other plays of its generation, namely Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. His assessment is that the play is 'more of the best seller than a work of art'.[14] Alison Croggon, in her review of Belvoir's 2011 production, writes: 'The play's three-act structure is unadorned and muscular, its characters are vivid and distinct, and the emotional peaks earned'.[15]

If there are degrees of enthusiasm over the merit of Lawler's text, few can argue with the play's enduring appeal. Lasting more than five decades, this appeal has proved that *The Doll* is more than a 'best seller'. It is curious to locate exactly where the appeal lies. When it was first produced, there was real excitement at hearing a broad Australian accent on stage. When it opened in Sydney in 1956, *Sydney Morning Herald* critic Lindsay Browne wrote: 'This fine play, untransplantably Australian in all its accents, gave Australian theatregoers the chance to feel as American audiences must have felt when O'Neill first began to assert American vitality and independence in drama'.[16] The irony was that the middle-class audiences in attendance were a long way from recognising themselves as either cane cutters or barmaids. However, the play spoke to them. It came at a time when industry was forcing rural workers out of the country and into the city, and Roo and Barney represented the bush legends whose mateship survives the test. Perhaps it is this theme of mateship that so resonated with audiences. H. G. Kippax described the last words of the play, 'Come on Roo.

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[13] H. G. Kippax, 'Razzle Dazzle Over Dog Pack', in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, edited by Peter Holloway (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987).
[14] Kippax, 'Razzle Dazzle Over Dog Pack'.
[15] Alison Croggan, 'Review: Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', *Theatre Notes* (blog), 24 January 2012, http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com.au/2012/01/review-summer-of-seventeenth-doll.html.
[16] Jane Cousins, 'Gender and Genre: The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 1, no. 1 (1987), http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/1.1/Cousins.html.

Come on boy', as the most eloquent statement of the inarticulate loyalty yet seen in Australian drama.[17]

The Doll's depiction of working class Australians precisely anticipated the appetite for authenticity that audiences embraced both in Australia and in England. In England's thrall, Australian audiences had never before heard the Australian accent on stage. Even Australian actors seemed to have trouble reproducing one as Ray Lawler discovered to his horror. Niall Brennan, the director of the Union Theatre at the time, reports that during rehearsals, Lawler "came stumbling into the office one day, muttering, 'Those actors out there, do you know what they're doing? They're putting on an Australian accent!" This despite the fact that they were rehearsing right next to Carlton where the play is set. [18]

Australian audiences however proved to be more than ready to see themselves on stage. Niall Brennan described the reaction:

> On the opening the usual first night audience sat with cheerful scepticism, all ready to be magnanimous. But as the curtain went up a miracle happened. The theatre disappeared, there was no acting on the stage, there was no play to act in. We were in Melbourne on a hot summer afternoon, in a stuffy terrace house, living the life of some strangers who were us. Laughing and crying, we took on the swashbuckling lostness of Roo and Barney, the bewildered lucidity of Pearl, the happy resignation of Emma, and Olive's brave reality built of dreams. [19]

The world encapsulated in this 'stuffy terrace house' in inner city Melbourne, set over one hot summer where the only breeze came 'off the gutter,'[20] placed it in a genre that Hugh Hunt called "backyard realism,"[21] characterised by a focus on the urban poor. When the play opened in London in 1957, England was on the cusp of the emerging literary movement

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[17] Kippax, 'Razzle Dazzle Over Dog Pack'.
[18] Niall Brennan Dawn of The Doll, *On Stage* Spring 2005
[19] Brennan Niall *On Stage* Spring 2005
[20] A reference to Emma's line in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* when Olive asks where she is and she calls back that she's sitting outside "getting a breeze off the gutter."
[21] Kenneth Tynan, People as People *Observer* (London)May 5th 1957

dubbed "The Angry Young Men", where playwrights such as John Osborne and Arnold Wesker replaced the drawing room and "anyone for tennis" with the kitchen sink and working class characters represented on stage, with authenticity and dimension. John Osborne's quintessential Angry Young Man play, *Look Back in Anger*, had exploded on to the stage in 1956, a year prior to *The Doll*'s transfer to London. *Summer Of The Seventeenth Doll*, a play about working people written by a man who was born in working class Footscray in Melbourne and left school at 13 to work in a foundry, landed in London at precisely the right time. The influential theatre critic for *The Observer*, Kenneth Tynan wrote in a glowing review 'last Tuesday…against all augury, one of Her Majesty's subjects turned up with a play about working people who were neither grim nor funny, neither sentimentalised nor patronised'. The effectiveness of Lawler's working class characters, the authenticity that he could bring as a writer and actor spoke to the times and the urban milieu that was starting to characterise post-war British theatre. Despite its international success, however, the play did not endure in England and there have been no significant productions since that tour over 60 years ago.

In Australia, its appeal seemed to adapt and develop. It was no longer a play about local colour and the joy of hearing the Australian vernacular on stage; it became a play about disillusionment and the death of innocence. As the play continued to be staged, it became a metaphor for Australian identity and the development of nationhood. Lawler has said that he merely wanted to write 'a play about the alternative to marriage'.[22] Almost accidentally, it seems, he wrote the Great Australian Play.-If a mark of a classic is the ability to reflect the contemporary concerns of the audiences to which it speaks, then *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is certainly a benchmark in Australia. It can be inferred, then, that when defining the

[22] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.

criteria for a classic work, a strong text is important, but more crucially the ideas the play holds need to speak to successive generations.

The success of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* also shifted the dramaturgy of the time. Not only did it bring Australian theatre onto the professional stage, but it also shifted content from the bush to the city. McCallum writes of the play 'its action, plot and characterisation brought the bush legend kicking and screaming into the city, almost literally.'[23] Prior to *The Doll,* Australian plays had centred on the bush, and the closest we came to an urban environment was the country town. Plays like *Brumby Innes* by Katharine Susannah Pritchard and *The Time is Not Yet Ripe* by Louis Esson were dramas of the bush. However, the technical demands of realistically representing the Australian bush on stage, with its inherent elements of flood and fire, were beyond the small non-commercial theatres of the 1950s. This type of technical wizardry was the province of the large commercial companies. Lawler solved the problem by bringing the bush to the city. By introducing us to Roo and Barney, two characters who might have stepped out of Russell Ward's depiction of Australian bush legends, he brought the wildness of the outback into the domestic urban living room. As Kippax writes, 'the play brought the outback into the city and confronted the Australian legend with the realities of modern, urbanised, industrialised Australia'.[24]

Dramaturgically, the play also heralded a new realism that had not been seen before on Australia's main stages. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* had the structure of a well-made play: three acts with a climax. Its success represented a watershed in Australian theatre—a turning point in both genre and playing style—and this must be noted when including it as part of our canon. Given the play's influence in introducing a new realism to our stage, it would be fair to assume that *The Doll* would have a significant effect on future playwrights,

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[23] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 4

[24] H. G. Kippax, 'Australian Drama Since Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, edited by Peter Holloway (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987).

but in *Belonging* John McCallum argues that '*The Doll* school was rather small', noting that 'Were it not for the air of excitement about the sudden professionalisation of the non-commercial theatres, it would not have been critically constructed at all'.[25] According to McCallum, the legacy of *The Doll* can be seen, to some extent, in plays by Peter Kenna and John Hepworth, but the major influence of *The Doll* can be detected in only two plays: Richard Benyon's *The Shifting Heart* (1957) and Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (1960). McCallum claims that what unites these plays is not so much their structure and genre, but the fact that they examine and criticise Australian myths: '*The Doll* did the bush legend, *The Shifting Heart* did tolerance and *The One Day of the Year* did the Anzacs.'

It is notable, as McCallum points out, that despite the play's extraordinary appeal, despite its body of criticism and its many revivals, the play's dramaturgy had little impact on Australian playwrights of 1960s and the New Wave playwrights of the early 70s. Perhaps its lack of influence was because its success was centred around one play rather than a body of work or because realism moved off into television but whatever the reason, as McCallum writes, "The old amateur and the professional theatre passed each other like ships in the night except for that brief moment of contact in the 1950s."[26] That singular moment became a marker in Australian history.

The Doll has also been the inspiration for other art forms, and these adaptations are important when considering its classic status. It was made into a film with Ernest Borgnine and Angela Lansbury The American- made film changed the play's setting from Melbourne to Sydney (with the Sydney Harbour Bridge visible from every window in the house,) cast American actors who struggled with the American accent and even worse, tacked on a happy

[25] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.
[26] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.

ending. In a newspaper interview in 2011, Lawler confessed he had "never had any desire to see the movie". [27]It was also adapted into a chamber opera by Richard Mills and Peter Goldsworthy (1996). Lawler went on to explore what happened before the seventeenth summer in two other plays: *Other Times* and *Kidstake*s. Along with *The Doll*, the plays were staged by Sydney Theatre Company as a trilogy in 1985. *The Doll* even made it into the digital age when, in 2013, Currency Press launched *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* app to celebrate the play's fiftieth anniversary.

In 1983 Australian Nouveau Theatre (Anthill) did a production of *The Doll* in a style as Julian Meyrick comments, that "no one, not even the playwright himself, could have foreseen."[28] Directed by Jean Pierre Mignon and designed by Wendy Black, the set drew on images by surrealist painter Paul Delvaux with "what appear to be broken Greek columns around the space."[29] Meyrick describes the adaptation: "The allusions to Sophocles and Racine drew out the tragic dimension of Lawler's text that successive naturalistic stagings had overscored to the point of invisibility",[30] and reports Lawler's astonishment at seeing the naturalism of his play stripped away. Lawler commented that the director 'has picked up on that sense of ritual I now realise occurs again and again in my work. It was underneath but he brought it to the surface'. [31]

In 2002, nearly 50 years after writing *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Ray Lawler gave his permission for Jacqui Carroll to reconfigure *The Doll* as theatrical fantasy. *Doll*

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[27] Steve Meacham, "A Lucky Play, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 September 32011
[28] Julian Meyrick, *Australian Theatre After The New* Wave*: Policy,* 127
[29] Julian Meyrick, *Australian Theatre After The New* Wave*:* 128
[30] Copyright Agency Readings, University Of Queensland (viewed 26.10.21)https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/8360826
[31] Julian Meyrick, *Australian Theatre After The New* Wave*:* 128

Seventeen, 'a blend of dance and traditional Japanese theatre', replaces most of Lawler's dialogue with movement and music. Carroll's 'designed impression' of *The Doll* was performed at the Brisbane Powerhouse. Such productions where classics are treated like new plays, reference Wesley Enoch's assertion quoted earlier, that a classic should be viewed as a starting point not as a preservation of a prestigious work.

If having a substantial body of criticism written about it is a measure by which a play gains prestige, then *The Doll* is a major contender. For years it has solidly kept its place on the high school syllabus and has had the obligatory guides and notes written about it. As discussed, the play has been interpreted and deconstructed and construed in many different articles and in many different ways. It has been critiqued from a feminist perspective by Arrow[32] and Cousins.[33] In 1978, Katharine Brisbane introduced the idea of the play as a search for identity.[34] The play has been used as an historical marker for critical perspectives in such works as *After The Doll* by Peter Fitzpatrick[35] and *The Doll's Revolution* by Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney.[36] Australian theatre history is often divided into pre-*Doll* and post-*Doll* phases. There has been so much written about *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll,* that it almost clouds the play itself. Croggan, in her 2011 review, states: 'One of the paradoxes of art is the uneasy legacy of success. As soon as a work is labelled a "classic", it becomes curiously invisible: it transforms into a monument, cobwebbed by all the extraneous things its success now symbolises'.[37] However, recent productions of *The Doll* have managed to brush off the cobwebs, and the play resonates beyond its weight of criticism. It should be noted that

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[32] Michelle Arrow, *Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002).
[33] Jane Cousins, 'Gender and Genre'.
[34] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5. 81
[35] Peter Fitzpatrick, *After the Doll: Australian Drama Since 1955* (Melbourne: Edward Arnold (Australia), 1979).
[36] Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney, *The Dolls' Revolution: Theatre and Cultural Imagination* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2001).
[37] Croggan, 'Review: Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'.

it is the play rather than the playwright or his oeuvre that has received such attention. Lawler has written more than 10 plays, but none of them generated the excitement or iconic status of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll.*

Given that this is an examination of theatre as much as drama, production history must also be considered when determining the criteria for a classic. Such a production history includes international success, a measure of which the play certainly earned when the Australian production travelled to London in 1957. The play was programmed by the leading light of English theatre at the time, Laurence Olivier, and as I have described earlier, had a highly successful seven month run at the New Theatre, attracting spectacular attention and celebrity and winning the London Evening Standard award for Best Play in 1957. Back home, having an Australian play and production tour to Mother England was extraordinarily prestigious.

Prior to the London transfer, the play had a successful run at Sydney's Elizabethan Theatre in 1956 and this inaugural season also toured to Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth and later South Australia. *The Doll* has since maintained a mainstage professional production every 10 years, as well as countless amateur productions. Neil Armfield directed a successful production that toured Australia in 2011. In his program notes, Armfield notes that Robyn Nevin, who played Emma, was one of the reasons he wanted to direct the play. He wanted to see her interpretation of this iconic Australian battle-axe.[38] Nevin had previously directed the play for Melbourne Theatre Company in 1995. A young Zoe Caldwell played Bubba in the 1950s, and in 1977 Ruth Cracknell played Emma in Sydney Theatre Company's production directed by Rodney Fisher. That the play attracts practitioners of some significance in Australia also gives it classic status.

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[38] Belvoir St Theatre, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. 2011. Program.

The question must now be asked whether the criteria drawn from examining *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* can be applied to another Australian play. For many reasons, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* by Patrick White makes an interesting comparison. The success of White's play was different in terms of its critical reception, genre and its trajectory to gain prestige. If Lawler brought realism to the Australian stage, then White brought a mix of social realism and theatrical illusion. While Lawler, broadly speaking, wrote about Australian mateship, White savagely dissected Australian values.

White did not enjoy his evening seeing *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. David Marr, in his biography of White, tells us that he was cautious about admitting it 'for fear of being lynched by fellow Australians'.[39] He found reading the play a better experience than seeing it, but despite this, he declared himself to be 'right off realism', as he wanted to see 'imagination, wit and mystery' on stage, not 'photographic realism'.[40]

According to Marr, White was stagestruck. Early in his life, he had dreamed of being an actor, and his first attempts at writing were as a playwright. On the opening night of Michael Kantor's Malthouse production of *The Ham Funeral* in 1989, a few months before White died in September 1990, White said, 'this is the happiest night of my life'.[41] This is high praise from the man who had twice won the Miles Franklin Award, been named Australian of the Year and eclipsed all of these accolades in 1973 when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature 'for an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature'.[42] Clearly White was a man of the theatre.

White's plays came in two separate waves. His first plays—*Bread and Butter Women* (1935), *School for Friends* (1937) and *Return to Abyssinia* (1939)—were unpublished and

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[39] David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney, Random House Australia, 1991).
[40] Marr, *Patrick White*.
[41] John McCallum, 'The Late, Crazy Plays', in *Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010).
[42] The Nobel Foundation, 'Patrick White', press release, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1973/press-release/.

have not survived. In 1947, just before he returned to Australia from London after World War II, he wrote *The Ham Funeral*. *The Season at Sarsaparilla* followed in 1962, then *A Cheery Soul* (1963) and *Night on Bald Mountain* (1964). After a lull of 13 years, White wrote *Big Toys* (1977), and then came the ‘ p plays’, as McCallum names them: *Signal Driver* (1982), *Netherwood* (1983) and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987). *The Season at Sarsaparilla* is his most performed play,[43] therefore making it an appropriate choice when attempting to define theatrical prestige.

The Season at Sarsaparilla (*A Charade of Suburbia*) traces the lives of three families—the Pogsons, the Knotts and the Boyles—living in three near-identical houses. As opposed to the rituals of the seventeenth summer played out in inner city Melbourne, the Australian summer that this play portrays is set in the suburbs and is underscored by the barking of dogs pursuing a bitch in heat, symbolising the primal instincts of these characters who obsess over the material but privately yearn for something they cannot name. The men march off to work each day to pay for the consumer goods the women display with pride in their homes. The play is both an attack on, and a portrait of, the empty heart of Australia. There is birth, death, an unwanted pregnancy, a suicide and infidelity, and it is all watched over by a narrator, the would-be writer Roy Childs, who plots his escape but knows he will return: ‘You can’t shed your skin … even if it itches like hell’ (p. 177). Roy describes the ‘razzle dazzle’—the comings and goings of the characters of Mildred Street.

Opinion is mixed on the strength of White’s text. Influential *Sydney Morning Herald* critic H. G. Kippax was a champion of White’s early plays and welcomed White as finally bringing ‘language’ to the Australian stage.[44] He found that the writing had a ‘truth and power, worthy of playwriting equalled in the Australian drama only by the best scenes of *The*

[43] Austage records 20 productions of the play, 8 of which were mainstage productions.
[44] Kippax, ‘Razzle Dazzle Over Dog Pack’.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'.[45] Writer and academic R. F. Brissenden wrote in 1964 of 'the close, vital texture of the play; action, setting and language work together continuously to produce a dramatic effect of cumulative intensity'.[46] However, the play is not without its flaws, and both Brissenden and Kippax find the narrator figure problematic in that he appears too obvious a device, and his commentary seems extraneous. Kippax compares the narrator device to the highly successful modernist American play *Our Town* (1938) by Thornton Wilder and asserts that White has not succeeded in embedding the narrator in the action as successfully as Wilder. Picking up on White's fascination with the concrete and the magical, Dennis Carroll writes that more than the text is 'the playwright's control of the mise en scene' and how 'this control can effect changes of gear between the different degrees of realism and non-realism'.[47] As discussed, a strong text is not enough to make a classic; enduring appeal also needs to be present. White's plays could never claim to be populist, yet the box office boomed when *The Season at Sarsaparilla* was staged in Melbourne in 1962. *The Age* declared that 'Patrick White is a born playwright', but other critics dismissed the play as trivial. When staged in Sydney in 1963, the *Daily Mirror* blurted that it was 'A Play That Stinks!"[48] The Mermaid Theatre at Blackfriars in London had programmed the play for a production but pulled out at the last minute, rejecting the play as 'indecent'.[49] Apart from two amateur productions cited by AusStage, the play more or less sank until new life was breathed into it by Jim Sharman, who staged a landmark production in 1976 at the Sydney Opera House. The temperature of the time that White captured was one of emptiness and consumerism. Australia's post-war suburban sprawl had begun and, because Australia has

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[45] Kippax, 'Razzle Dazzle Over Dog Pack'.
[46] R. F. Brissenden, 'The Plays of Patrick White', in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, edited by Peter Holloway (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987).
[47] Dennis Carroll, 'Australian Contemporary Drama: Patrick White', in *Critical Essays on Patrick White*, edited by Peter Wolfe (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1990).
[48] Ron Saw, A play that stinks! Daily Mirror, 23 May 1963
[49] David Marr, 'Patrick White's London', in *The Best Australian Essays 2010*, edited by R. Drewe (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2010), 39, https://books.google.com.au/books?id=GKyEp-QTtkAC.

always had a love–hate relationship with its suburban core, the play resonated with audiences. Dame Edna Everage and Kath Knight (*Kath and Kim*) are cut from the same cloth as Girlie Pogson, and these satiric figures have become our icons. However, *Sarsaparilla*'s lasting appeal lies in its humanity. If it were merely a savage attack on suburban values, it would be easy to laugh at the characters and then dismiss them, but it is White's understanding of the Girlie Pogsons of the world that speaks to us. Benedict Andrews, who staged an acclaimed production of the play in 2007, writes:

> His slice of suburbia with its three kitchens and backyards prefigures Australian television's coming portrayal of suburban lives on *Number 96*, or the cul de sac of *Neighbours*' Ramsay Street. Unlike the soaps, White sees the tremendous fragility and nakedness of life. He stages a mythic presentation of ordinary life. With scathing contempt and deep compassion, he brings us close to hidden lives of the onstage community. He achieves what his character Roy Child longs for, 'to change love into the currency of words'.[50]

It is this compassion that gives the play its humanity and marks it as a classic in that the characters still speak to us from another time. The same can be said for *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. To use words like 'timeless' and 'universal' when talking about a classic can be divisive because universality is usually a white privileged universe, however empathy does seem to transcend time and cultures and its presence underpinning a play means the "currency of words" can be translated into any language.

White was one of Australia's most influential playwrights. He introduced a new style and genre to the Australian stage. He attacked and explored areas that had not been touched before. His eclectic style was criticised at the time for its inaccessibility but, as McCallum comments, the weaknesses that the critics spotted in his plays and the umbrage they took with his 'stylistic excesses' have turned out to be his strengths as we embrace heightened realism

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[50] Benedict Andrews, 'To Change Love into the Currency of Words', in *Sydney Theatre Company's The Season at Sarsaparilla: Teacher's Resource Kit*, 2007, https://d2wasljt46n4no.cloudfront.net/pdf/content-pages/community-pages/past-production-resources/Sarsaparilla%20Teachers%20Kit.pdf.

and theatricality on our stages.[51] Under the bare bones of everyday life, poetry lurks in *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, revealing spirituality and sensuality. White's influences are from Europe: Strindberg, the German expressionists and the post-war absurdists. *Sarsaparilla* works on the levels of both naturalism and symbolism, incorporating both the real and the surreal. White's plays also have a large dose of the vaudeville about them. Whatever they are, they are not 'photographic realism', and they determinedly celebrate the theatrical. They were a long way from the realism that dominated the Australian stage at the time. As with his novels, many critics have found White's plays impenetrable. In 1963, Sumner, who had directed the play a year earlier, said: 'a way has to be found of playing Patrick's dialogue, particularly the memory and thought passages. And a way has to be found to encourage people to listen and accept these qualities for they are qualities'.[52] May-Brit Akerholt argues that only after the actors in *Sarsaparilla* were released from the constraints of a naturalistic set, as they were in the later productions, could they properly realise the language and poetry of the text.[53] Advances in stage technology helped this to be realised in later productions. White raised the bar in imagining a new dramaturgy for the Australian stage, and future playwrights had to match it. As McCallum writes, 'it has taken the Australian theatre nearly forty years to catch up with White's early plays'.[54]

White's legacy is significant. Whether they knew it or not, the writers of the New Wave were influenced by both the meta-theatricality of White's writing and the irreverent mixing of styles, including vaudeville. Jack Hibberd's *A Stretch of the Imagination* (1971) owes a debt to White, as does, in part, Romeril's *Floating World* (1975). White's lyricism, passion and fascination with the interior world of characters can be seen in Dorothy Hewett's plays. His novels have been adapted into different art forms, including the opera *Voss* (1986),

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[51] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.
[52] J. R. Dyce, *Patrick White as Playwright* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1974), Appendix C.
[53] May-Brit Akerholt, *Patrick White* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 40.
[54] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap 5.

composed by Richard Meale and with a libretto by David Malouf, and *Eye of the Storm* (2011), which was adapted into a screenplay by Judy Morris that starred Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis. All such adaptations confirm White's classic status, if not that of *The Season at Sarsaparilla* alone.

More has been written about White than possibly any other Australian writer, much of it controversial. According to Marr, White was suspicious of academics and was at times quite hostile: 'He did not like the influence of universities on the small world of Australian writing. There was too little faith in intuition, too much faith in the intellect'.[55] However, it was the avalanche of critical writing from universities and elsewhere that helped give White his prestige. Marr's mighty literary biography, *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) was an important step in ensuring that White's story would continue posthumously, along with White's autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981). Before the second surge of interest in White, Katharine Brisbane lamented 'that everyone wanted to write about him, but no one wanted to produce him'.[56] That was soon to change. Over the years, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* has received critical attention, notably from Kippax,[57] Brissenden,[58] J. R. Dyce,[59] Carroll,[60] Akerholt,[61] Brigitta Olubas[62] and McCallum.[63] The intellectual clout of White is an important factor in his canonic status. His significance as a writer underlies the interest in his plays and has drawn directors to unleash their poetry and theatricality in classic productions.

White's first collaboration with a director was with John Tasker. Like many relationships with White, this was a tempestuous one, but Tasker can be credited with first

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[55] Marr, *Patrick White*.
[56] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.
[57] Kippax, 'Razzle Dazzle Over Dog Pack'.
[58] Brissenden, *The Plays of Patrick White*.
[59] Dyce, *Patrick White as Playwright*, Appendix C.
[60] Carroll, 'Australian Contemporary Drama'.
[61] Akerholt, *Patrick White*, 40.
[62] Brigitta Olubas, 'Some of the Doors of the House Have Never Been Seen Open: Poetic Habitation and Civil Space in Patrick White's Early Drama', in *Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 149–162.
[63] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.

staging White's early plays, including *Sarsaparilla*. Harry Medlin, a scientist at Adelaide University also championed White in the early days and stepped in when *Ham Funeral* was rejected by the governors of the Adelaide Festival Trust, offering White a production at the University Guild in the Union Hall.[64] White chose Tasker to direct it and he and White collaborated until 1964 when they fell out over Tasker's production of *Night on Bald Mountain.* John Sumner directed *Season at Sarsaparilla* for URTC in 1962. After this production White offered him *A Cheery Soul* which he directed for URTC in 1963. His plays received a mixed critical response and eventually White walked away from theatre and focused on writing novels, an area in which many of his supporters felt he was more suited.[65] Jim Sharman's production of *The Season at Sarsaparilla* in 1976 drew him back, and a year later he wrote *Big Toys*. The important creative collaboration he found with director Armfield, inspired him to write his later plays. As with Lawler, timing was crucial for the second wave of interest in White. The new auteur directors were eager to put their stamp on a fuller, bolder theatricality, and White's plays, with their lack of realism, were a perfect fit. Armfield writes:

> That is the thing about his plays—they only work in wonderful productions. Patrick knew this, and that it is why he was so selective about his directors. And it's not a case of bad writing needing to be rescued or papered over; rather the plays present great challenges that need to be overcome.[66]

Were it not for the creative collaborations with directors Jim Sharman and later Neil Armfield, White's plays may have remained an adjunct to his novels, of interest only to devotees of his work. With designer Wendy Dickson, Sharman reworked *Sarsaparilla* on the new Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House on its letter box–shaped stage: it was a memorable and startling production for audiences who were used to seeing representational

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[64] Marr, *Patrick White*. Chap. 19
[65] Marr, *Patrick White*.
[66] Neil Armfield, 'Patrick White: A Centenary Tribute', *Meanjin* 71, no. 2 (2012), http://meanjin.com.au/articles/post/patrick-white-a-centenary-tribute/.

realism on stage. Armfield toured a successful production designed by Stephen Curtis and performed by South Australia's Lighthouse company in 1984. In 2007, Benedict Andrews, with designer Robert Cousins, collapsed the three box-like houses into one Howard Arkley–inspired suburban home and used cameras in the style of the reality television show *Big Brother* to track the 'razzle dazzle' of Mildred Street. Using a relatively contemporary artist and borrowing from popular culture in this way was another nod to the enduring appeal of the play. The cameras, moving in close to the actors, were able to access the interior lives of the characters. These productions met the demands and challenges of White's theatrical vision and confirmed the play as a classic text. Just as with Sewell's *Blind Giant is Dancing*, the plays of White can be considered classics because, "directors want to cut their teeth on them."[67]

As discussed, international success should be considered a factor when defining prestige. White's plays did not travel overseas. There was a brief flurry of interest in *The Ham Funeral* by actor Keith Michel in London, but it came to nothing.[68] For some, this discounts his plays from classic status. However, it can be argued that, unlike Lawler, whose reputation was founded on one play, White's personal reputation and prestige arises from his body of work. It is difficult to separate White's public persona from any one play. Olubas writes of the 'persistent importance of the public dimension of his work that subtends his larger significance in the development of national theatre and through this, of the national culture in the second half of the last century'.[69] There is almost a cult of personality around White. He was a Nobel Prize winner, a novelist of international reputation, a towering intellect and a stately figure among the Australian cognoscenti. He attracted a coterie of artists, actors, writers and directors to his dinner table. Many of these relationships famously

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[67] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.
[68] Marr, *Patrick White*.
[69] Olubas, 'Some of the Doors of the House Have Never Been Seen Open'.

soured, but even so, to be invited into White's inner circle was prestigious in itself. White loved the company of actors and formed close relationships with actors from Zoe Caldwell to Kate Fitzpatrick to Kerry Walker. There is also a theatrical network, spiralling from White himself—a handing of the baton from Sharman to Armfield to Andrews. The influence has been quite direct: Armfield was mentored by Sharman and Andrews by Armfield. The prestige affected both the directors and the new life they breathed into White's plays.

In examining both *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, I have attempted to demonstrate that the economy of theatrical prestige can be defined as necessitating a strong text coupled with themes that transcend time, the introduction into theatrical language of a new genre, the imprinting of a legacy, the creation of substantial literary criticism, the interest to inspire adaptations of the play into other art forms and the power to attract significant theatre practitioners in production.

Plays need a theatre and they need production, which means that they need to be interpreted by directors, designers and actors. It also means that no two performances are ever the same. This is an important aspect of theatre writing that does not apply to novels, poetry or even reading dramatic texts. It means that the economy of theatrical prestige can be volatile, elusive and unpredictable. It will often escape a neat set of criteria. Both of these plays may be classics because they meet certain criteria. They can be said to be part of our canon; however, because neither play has been professionally staged for more than 10 years,[70] they are in danger of becoming part of our 'shadow canon'.

[70] The State Opera of South Australia staged the opera of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* by Mills and Goldsworthy in November 2020.

Chapter 4: *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1983)

My focus now is to examine one play in production and ascertain its place in our canon and repertoire. In Chapters 4–6, I investigate *The Bind Giant is Dancing* by Stephen Sewell, which has had six mainstage productions in Australia over four decades. As discussed in Chapter *The Blind Giant* was considered an important Australian play, attracting critical and popular acclaim and ushering in a new dramaturgy. The mainstage revivals of this play, spanning several generations fit the criteria of a classic, making it an ideal case study. In the following three chapters, through interviews and archival research I examine the reasons behind the programming of the play, the rehearsal or development process, and its critical reception.[1] I have framed each chapter of the case study with a snapshot of the year in which the production was staged, a glimpse into the social and historical background of the times to give context and so better understand why the play may have been programmed, what was happening in the world of the audience who was watching it and of the actors who were performing in it and how it did (or did not) speak to them. By tracing the life of the play on the stage, I will investigate more closely the effect of programming plays on our repertoire. What are the decisions around choosing to revive a play? How is a play reimagined in each decade? How valuable is it to give plays a second and third chance?

The first time Sewell had been inside a theatre was in 1978, when he took his play, *The Father We Loved on the Beach by the Sea*, to La Boite Theatre in Brisbane to see if he could interest anyone in staging it.[2] Sewell was raised in an Irish Catholic working class family in Granville, in the western suburbs of Sydney. He had recently finished a science degree and was living in Brisbane and 'hanging round radical circles'[3] that included

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[1] . Interviews and archival research form the basis of my methodology and I have attached an appendix titled Appendix A, that outlines the details of the interviewees, the dates and place of the interview and the questions asked.

[2] Stephen Sewell, interviewed by Katrina Foster via Zoom, 25 August 2020.

[3] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.

journalist Marian Wilkinson, to whom (among others) the 1983 edition of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* is dedicated.

McCallum describes Sewell as 'probably the first Australian playwright, since John Romeril, Susannah Prichard and Mona Brand to see his plays as interventionist contributions to public political debate, like newspapers or union meetings'.[4] McCallum names Brecht as an antecedent of Sewell in that he is a 'highly serious playwright with a great sense of fun'.[5] Peter Fitzpatrick finds no specific resemblance between Sewell and Brecht but notes some similarities with Edward Bond in the way the two playwrights play 'serious games with theatrical conventions', and with Harold Pinter in the 'presentation of power play between individuals'.[6] However, Sewell claims that in 1978, when he arrived at La Boite with his play, he had never heard of any of these playwrights, and his only association with theatre was 'street theatre at demos' and a knowledge of the Pram Factory in Melbourne and the work of the Australian Performing Group (APG), which he describes as being Mecca at the time.[7] It almost seemed like a point of pride for him when he said in an interview in 1983 that 'I'm not conscious of any influences and haven't really made time to read their work. One of the reasons is, that I'm a pretty good mimic and a pretty lazy person and those two in combination could result in a terrible derivativeness'.[8] When I asked him why he chose theatre as a medium, he answered that it was because he could not get into television: 'As a political person you want to reach as many people as possible, and television was the way to do this'.[9] He gave another response to Jeremy Ridgeman in 1983, saying, 'I think a play is

[4] John McCallum, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009), 332.
[5] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 5.
[6] Peter Fitzpatrick, *Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991).
[7] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[8] Samela Harris, 'The Terrible Life of a Playwright Hermit', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 14 October 1983.
[9] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.

one of the most succinct and insightful statements or observations possible in our culture and I'm trying to get into that dramatic space as much as possible'.[10]

In his 1991 monograph, Peter Fitzpatrick wrote that no Australian playwright has been able to match the scale of Sewell. As noted in the Introduction, McCallum credits Sewell with changing the direction of Australian theatre by bringing to it a new internationalism.[11] At the time, Sewell seemed not so much interested in changing Australian theatre as changing the world. Maths and politics drove him, and he was more influenced by Marx and Freud than by any playwright or writer. He said, 'I was definitely not someone who graduated from university with a degree in English Lit and thought about the ways I could fit into contemporary theatre'.[12] He was, by admission, naïve, but adds that he thinks this was the case for most writers of the time, noting that 'none of us knew what we were doing'. He said he had 'an intuitive sense of drama that rose from watching television, and if there is any sense of structure at all, it was because I watched cartoons'.[13] His first experience of working in theatre was 'as an outsider entering an institution and not being confident of it, the people or its parameters'.[14] All of this perhaps explains the genre of his early writing, which is a curious mix of thriller, family saga and melodrama, all driven by an intellectualism and political urgency matched with an innate theatricality that had not been seen on an Australian stage before, and that remains unique in Australia in its scale and ambition.

Regardless of whether Sewell acknowledges antecedents, he could not have found a base without the explosion of new plays, new voices and new forms that occurred in Australian theatre in the late 1960s to late 1970s, a period that is now known as the New Wave. Australian theatre surged with a common goal of finding an identity that was not

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[10] Fitzpatrick, *Stephen Sewell*.
[11] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[12] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[13] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[14] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.

dominated by colonialism, and that was fuelled by global political change: the Vietnam War, second-wave feminism, the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement and student protests. The playwrights were mostly white, male, university educated and left leaning. Their theatre was not always overtly political but more based in satire or observational comedies of manners, commentaries on Australia and the battle of the sexes as women claimed equal status, the rise of multiculturalism and the shifting class structure of post-war Australia and the resulting generational divide. The frontline of these playwrights included APG playwrights David Williamson, Alex Buzo, John Romeril and Jack Hibberd. Although different in genre and style, they had a commonality in the way they reacted to theatre of the establishment state-funded theatre companies and how they formed associations with theatres born in the early 1970s like Nimrod Theatre (Sydney) and La Mama and the Pram Factory (Melbourne). The conservative Old Tote Theatre Company in Sydney had folded in 1978 and was replaced by the more adventurous Sydney Theatre Company, with Richard Wherrett as artistic director.

This was a time of change in Australian theatre—a definite shift away from the restaging of British and European classics to a new and uniquely Australian style with its heart in vaudeville and its head in political satire. There was a swell of new plays at this time, and as McCallum describes, 'there was a new audience and a new generation of practitioners who were suddenly talking to one another in ways that seemed revolutionary'.[15] It was out of this 'golden age' that playwrights like Sewell and Nowra found their audiences and were given freedom and encouragement, both financially and artistically, to explore and expand their respective forms and themes. Armfield links Sewell and his more international gaze to the work of the New Wave:

> In the 70s what can be seen as parochial was a very necessary wave of work that looked at our own voice as Australians. Up until the 60s there'd been a domination in

[15] McCallum, *Belonging*, chap. 9.

> Australian theatre that was the inheritance of British theatre. There were of course Australian voices fighting to be heard, but there was a real discovery in the late 60's and 70's of the beauty, the humour of Australian vernacular … it was really a great liberation. Writers like Stephen Sewell really connected the Australian backyard to places beyond, and I guess it makes you realise if you didn't already know, that we are all part of the same world. And Sewell continued to write about Australia with echoes of international traditions and drama and poetry.[16]

La Boite said it would accept *The Father We Loved on the Beach by the Sea* if it were cut in half, 'so that's exactly what I did', says Sewell. 'I took every second page out and they did it'.[17] It was produced in 1979, and six months later his next play, *Traitors*, a response to the question, 'Where did the Bolshevik Revolution go so wrong?',[18] was staged at the Pram Factory, directed by Kerry Dwyer. It was not published at the time, but it was much talked about, and Ken Horler, one of the founders and directors at Nimrod Theatre, read it and introduced Sewell to Neil Armfield who, at 24, was the newly appointed associate director at Nimrod. Armfield directed *Traitors* at Nimrod Downstairs in 1980. Sewell's next play, *Welcome the Bright World*, was commissioned and staged in 1981 at the Upstairs Theatre at Nimrod. The move from Downstairs to Upstairs was significant. Armfield comments that:

> having a second or smaller company meant that there was a place for writers who were more on the fringes, or who were writing more challenging work to be seriously taken up and explored. It just meant that there were more opportunities around, people rise to fill that space.[19]

In 2016, at a forum at Belvoir St Theatre, Sewell reflected on his early plays, stating that he was not at the time interested in writing a satire of politics. He was interested in drama that was truthful to the times and would speak to the future. The audience he spoke to in the 1980s was young, politically aware, educated and increasingly theatrically sophisticated.

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[16] State Theatre Company South Australia, 'Remembering the Bright World: An Interview with Neil Armfield', *Behind the Curtain*, 13 September 2018, https://medium.com/behind-the-curtain/remembering-the-bright-world-775b02ca1fb3.
[17] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[18] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[19] State Theatre Company South Australia, 'Remembering the Bright World'.

Despite the Marxist ambitions (of Sewell specifically), they were also mostly white and middle class. As a young actor, I played Rebecca in the first production of *Welcome the Bright World* in 1982 at Nimrod. The first preview ran for nearly five hours; Sewell believes 'that you write until someone tells you to stop',[20] so the play was rewritten and rehearsed until the exhausted stage manager refused to change another thing, and the play opened with a running time of four hours. There was a definite buzz around the production—a feeling of being involved in something new. The ambition of it, the noise of it, the content, the open staging and fast cuts between scenes made it an event, and it was something people had not seen before from an Australian writer. However, there was criticism too; playwright Alex Buzo took a swipe at the new internationalism that Sewell represented, saying that he 'wasn't interested in the angst of a German hamburger'.[21] Others cringed at Sewell's 'welter of words',[22] but by now both Armfield and Sewell were at the forefront (in Sydney, at least) of the new guard of Australian theatre. Their theatre was bold and theatrical—epic in its scale and ambition.

Like Sewell, Armfield was the son of working-class parents. His father, Len, worked in the Arnotts Biscuit Factory, and Armfield attended Homebush Boys High School, where he was a keen drama student. Something of a star at Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS), he attracted the attention of Ken Horler at Nimrod Theatre, where he directed his first play, *Upside Down at the Bottom of the World* by David Allen, in 1979 for the Downstairs Theatre. Abandoning a post-graduate degree in literature at Sydney University, Armfield became co-artistic director at Nimrod Theatre in 1980 and almost immediately attracted attention with his productions of Sewell's *Traitors* at the Downstairs Theatre and *Inside the Island* by Louis Nowra at the Upstairs Theatre. Director Jim Sharman had returned

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[20] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[21] State Theatre Company South Australia, 'Remembering the Bright World'.
[22] McCallum, *Belonging*, 332.

a few years earlier from London, where he had directed *The Rocky Horror Show* for the Royal Court, which went on to become an international hit, and in 1978, along with Rex Cramphorn, he had formed a theatre company using the soon-to-be-demolished Paris Theatre in Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst, as a base. Cramphorn explained that the idea was 'to present new Australian work of a large scale which did not necessarily fit a naturalistic nature'.[23] Sadly, the venture failed at the box office, and Sharman's next move was to Adelaide, first to head the 1982 Adelaide Arts Festival and then as artistic director of the State Theatre Company South Australia (which he renamed Lighthouse). For the Lighthouse acting company, he planned a permanent resident company of 12 actors, deliberately echoing Shakespeare's troupe of players and, on the strength of seeing *Welcome the Bright World*, he invited Armfield to join him as co-artistic director. The company's mission was to create new work and review classic texts. Reflecting on Lighthouse, company member Geoffrey Rush described it as:

> a regular company for those of you who haven't read the book that hasn't been written about it. For two years, twelve actors basically worked in an ensemble and we did, briefly I suppose, neglected European classics and new Australian writing with the writers in residence being Patrick White, Louis Nowra, Bill Harding, Stephen Sewell. The company also had a very strong design crucible where I think things shifted in terms of a visual sense of how the theatrical space was used. The in-house intensity was very good.[24]

In those days, Sharman and Armfield were a powerful combination, almost representing an elite in Australia, and the prospect of working with them as a permanent ensemble attracted

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[23] Andrew Fuhrman, 'Return to Oz (1976–1984)', April 2015, http://www.jimsharman.com.au/stage/return-to-oz-1976-1984/.
[24] Armfield Neil, Rush Geoffrey "Tearing The Cat" The Fifth Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture, delivered at Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney on 5 December 1999, https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/ielapa.200011714

some of the best and brightest actors of the time. Stephen Curtis and Brian Thomson were the resident designers, and Armfield's friend from high school and fellow SUDS member, Alan John, was the resident musician. Some of the collaborations that came from the company continued for decades after Lighthouse had ceased to exist. Armfield continued to use some of the actors from this ensemble for decades, particularly Gillian Jones, Kerry Walker, Russell Kiefel and Geoffrey Rush. He continues to collaborate with musician Alan John and designer Stephen Curtis. In 1981, Stephen Sewell, Louis Nowra and Bill Harding, along with Patrick White, were commissioned to write two new plays each for Lighthouse. Sewell wrote *The Blind Giant is Dancing.*

In the early 1980s, Adelaide had a country-town feeling to it: fruit trees bloomed in back gardens and everyone seemed to know each other. There was a quiet conservatism to the place—a gentility that mostly ignored the occasional violent gay hate crime that shadowed the city.[25] Although it had a progressive premier in Don Dunstan, who was a pioneer of the arts and was committed to raising the profile of Adelaide as a centre for the arts, and although companies based in Adelaide had previously made forays into doing work that departed from the mainstream, the company prior to Lighthouse was run by English director Colin George along quite conservative lines. It comprised local and interstate actors, some of whom were permanently contracted. The company's subscribers were attached to George and his revival of mostly English classics staged in the Playhouse, with a sprinkling of local writers included in the programming. South Australian Theatre Company (SATC) had a policy of taking two actors straight from NIDA as 'apprentices', and I was one of these in 1980. I have two distinct memories of that time. The first was playing a nameless Irish colleen in Dion Boucicault's *The Shaugraun.* Receiving a (possibly ironic) cheer during the opening night

[25] Mark Whittaker, 'Out of Sight: The Untold Story of Adelaide's Gay-Hate Murders', https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/feature/out-sight-untold-story-adelaides-gay-hate-murders

curtain call, I did a tiny spontaneous jig and was castigated by George in front of the entire company for not knowing my station. The second memory relates to the technical rehearsal for *Hamlet*, which had Michael Siberry in the lead. At one point, the stage went to black and Siberry stumbled and called out, 'I don't know where I'm going, Colin'. A voice boomed from the auditorium: 'to the RSC my boy, to the RSC'. This was the attitude that Sharman and Armfield eschewed, and they arrived with their company ready to shake it out. The first press release read:

> In 1982 LIGHTHOUSE ushers in a new era at the PLAYHOUSE. An ensemble of actors, directors and designers working with our finest writers will create a repertoire of new productions and explore classic theatre traditions in a bold and, we trust, exhilarating theatrical venture … We have gathered an acting company of exceptional talent and commitment, ready to spend 1982 creating a vital and distinctive theatre. We have involved superb stage designers … Now we invite you to join us.[26]

In his thesis on Australian avant-garde theatre, Adrian Guthrie writes:

> There was a consciously post-colonial perspective to the work of Lighthouse. It was Australian, and it took the traditions further into a complex pluralist nationalism. It went beyond either the easy nationalism of the larrikin voices, or the stultified reverence for all things British which had dogged Adelaide theatre at times. There emerged in Jim Sharman's program for Lighthouse, a set of postmodern Australian preoccupations and identities that reflected the values of the classical theatre and set a new agenda for Australian theatre.[27]

Sharman wrote at the time: 'We are not going to compromise it by chasing box office hits … We are pursuing a theatricality similar to that of the Elizabethan theatre'.[28]

Most of the Lighthouse actors were under the age of 30, and they converged on Adelaide, excited and energised by the prospect of working as an ensemble. Kerry Walker describes the schedule of rehearsing by day and performing by night as punishing and all-

[26] Lighthouse Theatre Company, Press Release, State Theatre Company South Australia. 1982
[27] Adrian Guthrie, 'When the Way Out Was In: Avant Garde Theatre in Australia 1965–1985' (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 1996).
[28] Peter Ward, *A singular act: twenty five years of the State Theatre Company of South Australia*, Wakefield Press, Cowandilla, SA, 1992

consuming.[29] Gillian Jones had her three-year-old twins with her and describes having to take them everywhere with her because childcare was difficult to find.[30] Geoffrey Milne wrote about the company, saying, ‘it is worth noting that the actors took responsibility not only for the productions they were in: they also took responsibility for the whole project and company’.[31] He went on to describe how the actors organised lavish themed opening night parties with entertainment, attended board meetings and stuffed envelopes for the 1984 season launch.[32]

Many of the company, including Russell Kiefel, Jacquy Phillips and Alan John, were politically active, and they went on to join with local South Australian musicians and activists to form the band *The Mambologists*, which was aligned with the international branch of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). In his review for *The Tribune* of *The Blind Giant Is Dancing in* 1983, journalist Keith Preston noted “The performance I attended happened to be the day after the invasion of Grenada and at the curtain call several actors held a banner condemning the U.S. The applause was thunderous”[33]

Most of the actors were of the generation after the publication of Peter Brooks’ *The Empty Space* and his idea of ‘deadly rough, holy and immediate theatre’;[34] this generation of actors believed that theatre could effect social and political change, and the ensemble was committed to doing just that. Sharman describes the Lighthouse acting company as central to his vision:

> The actors that interest me have an independence. The kind of actor who sits smiling at rehearsal saying silently, ‘What would you like me to do?’ is not an actor that appeals to me. Rehearsals should have a lot of ideas flying about. The most important

[29] Kerry Walker, interviewed by Katrina Foster by phone, 23 February 2020.
[30] Gillian Jones, interviewed by Katrina Foster by phone, December 8 2020
[31] Geoffrey Milne, ‘Lighthouse: A “Mainstage” Ensemble Experience’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 53 (2008): 42–57.
[32] Milne, ‘Lighthouse’.
[33] Keith Preston A Critical But Committed Eye *Tribune (Sydney, NSW: 1939 - 1991)*Wednesday 7 December 1983.
[34] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Pelican Books, 1968).

> part of the company is the repertoire. And that is what attracted my present company—they are interested in taking risks. After working with them … I think I can say that the most striking aspect of Lighthouse is the actors. They have a strongly individual approach.[35]

For actors, who were used to begging for jobs and the accompanying endless search for approval, this was an empowering statement. The company, at least at the start, felt valued, and this resulted in cohesion, commitment and energy that were reflected in the approach they brought to the work. It was an energy that was ideally suited to the values and ambition of a play like *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, which was written for this company.

Sewell arrived with the first draft of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* in 1982. A press release describes the play as:

> located within the bitter power struggles of factions inside a governing political party. On the rise within the bureaucracy is Allen Fitzgerald. The play traces his rise: it examines how in the course of it, he must examine what family, religion and political power have scarred him with.[36]

It was very long and full of Sewell's trademark exclamation marks, which were a clue to the actors of the emotional intensity he wanted from the dialogue. There was even a note to the actors about punctuation in this early draft that does not appear in the published text. The note, all in upper case, states:

> IT MIGHT BE PERTINENT TO NOTE HERE THAT ENGLISH PUNCTUATION DOES NOT DO GOOD SERVICE TO THE COMMUNICATION OF EMOTIONS. AN EXCLAMATION MARK HAS TO COVER A WIDE VARIETY OF INTENTIONS, FROM SURPRISE TO ANGER AND DISMAY.

This was Sewell's attempt to communicate a playing style that could often prove elusive in his work. Exclamation marks and some of the dialogue were eventually cut back, or at least made more specific over the next drafts, which were written after further readings of the play. This long process of working and reworking a play with the same actors, designer and

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[35] Milne, 'Lighthouse', 42.
[36] Press Release, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, Lighthouse at State Theatre Company of South Australia, 1983.

director for whom it was written and who will eventually stage it is the sort of luxury that can only occur with a resident company of actors, and it was a process that suited Sewell. According to Armfield, the text was honed to keep its rawness but focus its drive.[37] Kerry Walker recalls that after the first reading and suggested edits, 'Stephen came back with an even bigger mound of paper'.[38] Sewell says, 'I just wrote and wrote until Neil walked in and took the play away'.[39] Armfield recalled this first read-through and remembered Geoffrey Rush, who played Allen Fitzgerald and who, like his character and like Sewell and Armfield (all beneficiaries of free tertiary education) was the educated son of working-class parents, crying at Allen's scene when he says 'It's as if I was knocked off balance and I've been falling ever since! That everything I do to try to resign myself only makes it worse … as if I want to destroy everything'.[40]

This play spoke to the generation who was reading it for the first time. It was a play about their generation, for their generation and performed by the same generation. They understood the characters. The politics were their politics, the family scenes set in suburban working-class Australia reflected the values of the previous generation, and how they provoked guilt and division between Allen and Louise were familiar to this generation:

Louise: Do you feel real standing under these icons?

Eileen: They're only pictures Louise.

Louise: And a house and a garden and children?

Eileen: Any woman wants these things it's only natural.

Louise: Can you forgive me if I don't?

Eileen: It's not up to me to forgive.

[37] Neil Armfield, interviewed by Katrina Foster via phone, 20 August 2020.
[38] Walker, interviewed by Foster.
[39] Sewell, interviewed by Foster.
[40] Stephen Sewell, *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1983), 76.

Louise: I don't want to hurt you, Eileen.

Eileen: How will you feel real if you don't do what a woman does?

Louise: I'm a woman and I'm doing what I'm doing.

The suburban backyard was Armfield's territory—he knew it intimately. And this, with Kerry Walker's dry-as-dust delivery, added humour and softness to the unrelenting drive of the play, with its cinematic shortcuts escalating to Allen's cry of 'Burn!' and Louise's final scream. Allen and Louise were embroiled in tensions around politics, feminism, religion and family. They hurl lines of dialogue at each other with no reprieve. Another note from Sewell observes that 'the central difficulty as will become apparent is that the agreement between Allen and Louise concerning sexuality based on an understanding of capitalism and his family prevents either from expressing clearly anxiety and jealousy':[41]

Allen: They want you to eat with them.

Louise: No not in that castle of patriarchy with your mother beetling around under huge platters of meat and your father acting like he's just opened the Red Sea.

Allen: That's their home!

Louise: Well it's not mine and I don't like it.

(a slight pause)

Louise: All I want is to be treated like I actually exist!

Allen: What's wrong with the way they treat you?

Louise: They treat me like your wife.

Allen: Will you stop mouthing off like some feminist primer——

Louise: A 'feminist primer', Allen. What's that?

Sewell was conflicted about feminism. In an interview in 1983, he declared himself as anti-sexist, yet he sees himself as an unreconstructed man: 'As a man I have become aware of the

[41] Sewell, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, 43.

power I have over women and of times when I have used that power emotionally, professionally and sexually. That is why I am unreconstructed'.[42]

Armfield recalls the stage manager, Lee-Anne Donnolley, objecting to the perceived sexism in Scene 23, where Louise visits Rose to confront her about the affair she is having with Allen. Louise screams, 'you whore, you slut, you abomination!'. The scene remained for this production.

In 1982, during the first read, no one could have known how prescient the play was. Set in the immediate future, it is a cautionary nightmare in which Australia, under an opportunist and essentially right-wing Labor government, is a society alienated from the political process and shifting into fear and violence. Some of the shifts and fictional debates in the play were about to become part of the historical record, with violence and branch-stacking becoming a feature of the Sydney inner-city branches of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in the 1980s.

Rehearsals for *The Blind Giant is Dancing* began in September 1983. It may be useful here, to give a snapshot of the year as a backdrop to the production. In March of that year, the ALP won power and Bob Hawke was elected as prime minister after eight years of a coalition government led by Malcom Fraser. Hawke, former head of the ACTU and a shadow minister, had challenged Bill Hayden, who promptly resigned to avoid a leadership spill. Fraser called a snap election to capitalise on the opposition's apparent disunity. It was thirteen years since Germaine Greer wrote *The Female Eunuch* but the values of Second Wave feminism still permeated the age. In 1983, Australia signed a treaty against the discrimination of women, and SBS, Australia's multicultural radio station, started broadcasting as television channel 0/28. In1983, no one had a mobile phone or had heard of the internet, David Bowie was singing *Let's Dance* and Australian Crawl was singing *Reckless.*

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[42] Harris, 'The Terrible Life of a Playwright Hermit'.

Funding for the arts was reasonably healthy at the time. In his article on 1980s theatre in Australia, Geoffrey Milne comments that:

> following the election of a Labor Commonwealth Government, the Australia Council reaffirmed its support for professional regional theatre and introduced three new funding priorities: to increase the prevalence of 'art in working life' projects, of multicultural arts, and of youth performance of various kinds.[43]

Armfield describes the rehearsals for *The Blind Giant is Dancing* as having 'a sense of danger to them'.[44] Keen to keep the action as fluent and fluid as possible, actors were pushing heavy pieces of scenery, bits of machinery, metal and other pieces of industrial waste that made up the set. A revolve was used as a way of solving the demands of the text, which had 60 distinct scenes set in 23 designated locations and some unspecified ones. It is a play that needs to move quickly, as the heightened intensity of the dialogue can easily slip into melodrama if it assumes a naturalistic pace. According to Armfield, Jim Sharman was concerned that rehearsals were getting out of hand, becoming unsafe and too risky.[45] However, the cast and the director, committed to the play and to the playing style and perhaps embracing a kind of "rough theatre" ideal, persisted, despite these safety concerns.

The play opened in October 1983. Armfield recalls that Sewell was thrilled about this, referencing, as it did, the October Revolution. Class struggle was central to Sewell, and the play is written in memory of the socialist president of Chile, Salvadore Allende, who had been killed 10 years earlier in General Pinochet's CIA-backed coup. It was a short run—only two weeks—but its impact was significant. Sharman was a showman at heart and knew the importance of making a splash. His company was not going to work away in the backblocks. The company was determined to be one of significance, and this was reiterated in press releases and in correspondence. One publicity flyer for the play reads: 'The LIGHTHOUSE

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[43] Geoffrey Milne, 'Australian Theatre in the 1980s: Trends and Movements', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 64 (June 2014): 9–22.
[44] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.
[45] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.

premiere of THE BLIND GIANT IS DANCING is an event of great significance for Australian theatre'.[46] The play had yet to open.

Invitations were sent around the country, and people flew in from interstate to see *The Blind Giant is Dancing*. Katharine Brisbane and Philip Parsons, co-editors and founders of Currency Press, which was at the time the only play publishing company in Australia, saw it and offered a publishing contract, a copy of which sits in the archives of the State Theatre Company of South Australia

Richard Wherrett, director of the Sydney Theatre Company, also flew in, and Armfield reports that Wherrett was 'overwhelmed'[47] by the production. He asked Armfield to direct it for the Sydney Theatre Company the following year, but Armfield was unavailable and wanted Wherrett to wait until he was free. He cautioned Sewell to wait for him to become available because he felt the play was far from production-proof and would be let down by a director who did not understand its demands. However, the production went ahead in 1984. I was in the cast of this production and recall that it had nowhere near the impact that the Adelaide production had, missing the elusive playing style that Armfield had elicited along with his company and crossing as it did into naturalism. It was neither a box office nor critical success.

Maggie Watson's review of the 1983 Adelaide production in the *National Times* was two and a half columns long, detailed and ecstatic.[48] There is a longer six-page review in the archives with a short hand-written apology for the edits that were necessary for the published version.[49] Both begin:

> If Stephen Sewell never writes another word, his reputation as a great playwright is secured—*The Blind Giant is Dancing* is astonishing in its power, awesome in its

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[46] Press Release, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, Lighthouse at State Theatre Company of South Australia, 1983.
[47] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.
[48] Maggie Watson, 'Giant's Awesome Power' *National Times*, October 1983.
[49] Watson, 'Giant's Awesome Power',

> breadth and depth of perception. It is funny, savage, courageous. It condemns and challenges us all.[50]

Of Sewell's specific skill as a playwright, she writes:

> Sewell develops the action with dialogue peppered with one liners, brilliant, poignant as these people razor each other to pieces or seek to heal the wounds. And as the play swells to the rhythm for its magnificently sustained arguments we recognise the leitmotifs: Vietnam, genocide of Aborigines, American economic imperialism, environmental despoliation, patriarchy in the family, the blight of guilt in Christianity, the madness of nuclear armament.[51]

Another theme in the play referenced by Watson is that of women: 'rarely are the questions of self-determination for women so perceptively and sensitively handled. Louise is trapped, aware that in loving men, women destroy themselves and the value system women would overturn'.[52]

Interestingly, for a company lauded for its actors, no performance was singled out. The direction is noted as exemplary, but the play and the playwright are very much the stars. This is a tribute to the cohesiveness of this ensemble and their belief in the play that they were serving.

Sadly, the production can only live in memory; it is physically documented by a few sheets of black and white photographs. When I asked to see the archives, they were initially reported lost, but after some perseverance, two dusty boxes were unearthed from the State Theatre Company's workshop at Thebarton. At the bottom of one of the boxes were two old Beta VHS cassettes with Acts 1 and 2 recorded on them. I tried to find something to play these on, but nothing could be found. I asked if they could be digitised and offered to pay but the publicist did not want them to leave the premises. Back into the box they went, and there

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[50] Watson, 'Giant's Awesome Power',

[51] Watson, 'Giant's Awesome Power',

[52] Watson, '.Giant's Awesome Power',

they remain. Not much survives from the Lighthouse acting company either. The National Library has some programs, and the collection is described as follows:

> Lighthouse was the name of a youth theatre company which operated under the State Theatre Company of South Australia (South Australia's leading professional theatre company) which was established under Arts SA funding in 1997. It was originally named Magpie Theatre (1977–1997) and based in the Dunstan Playhouse at the Adelaide Festival Centre.[53]

All of that energy, work, commitment and creativity have been reduced to a few lines of misinformation. AusStage thankfully lists the company's productions on its database and we can be grateful to Geoffrey Milne for setting the record straight:

> The Lighthouse lasted only from 1982–83. And although its legacy still resonates through the culture—it's impossible not to look back and to see it as an opportunity lost, a possibility that briefly flared and died.[54]

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[53] Lighthouse (State Theatre Company of South Australia), programs and related material collected by the National Library of Australia, https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/3529237.
[54] Milne, 'Lighthouse', 42.

Chapter 5: *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1995)

Neil Armfield began his director's notes in the program for the 1995 production at Belvoir St Theatre as follows: 'The première of *The Blind Giant is Dancin*g which opened on 15th October 1983 was one of the highlights of my life'.[1] Describing the process of staging this first production, Armfield writes:

> Panting with exhaustion from the demands of this sprawling and unruly work, I saw the audience and watched it spread its power … this play spoke with an energy that we had glimpsed though our successive readings of various drafts and in the weeks of the final rehearsal period but had never felt in its entirety … That experience is really the reason that I work in theatre and the reason that Company B exists in the form it does at Belvoir Theatre.[2]

He describes how Stephen Sewell wrote the play 'much as Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* for a working company of actors', and how the play was able to harness the 'extraordinary collective imagination that had developed with that bunch of theatricals—where our dreams and our ability to express them had grown into a form that was ultimately greater than the sum of its parts'.[3] He finished by observing 'that people don't seem to fight over the same things now with the same kind of ideological certainty that they did back then'.[4] Speaking of the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, he commented that 'when that wall crumbled so too apparently did the struggle between left and right'.[5]

Sewell discussed his ideological struggles in an interview with Joyce Morgan in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1995. Remembering that first production of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* in 1983, he said:

[1] State Theatre Company South Australia, 'Remembering the Bright World: An Interview with Neil Armfield', *Behind the Curtain*, 13 September 2018, https://medium.com/behind-the-curtain/remembering-the-bright-world-775b02ca1fb3.
[2] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, 1995. Program.
[3] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.
[4] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.
[5] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.

> About six months after I finished, I felt something collapsed inside of me … I was no longer a Marxist … and it was related to Blind Giant (this play is like watching how a person bricks themselves in through an ideological world, that's what Marxism was.[6]

Abandoning Marxism and searching for meaning elsewhere, Sewell toyed with being a Catholic again. He was drawn to the rituals, as he had been as a child, but he ultimately thought that 'it doesn't matter what I do. I can't believe this stuff'.[7]

The period 1983–1995 was fruitful for Sewell. *The Blind Giant is Dancing* had two productions, one by the Sydney Theatre Company (1984), one in Canberra for Theatre ACT (1984) and another by the Western Australian Theatre Company in 1985. Armfield directed *Hate* for Belvoir St Theatre in 1988 and *Dreams in an Empty City* for South Australian Theatre Company in 1986. Simon Phillips directed *Dreams in an Empty City* in 1989 for Melbourne Theatre Company. By today's standards, this would be considered a relatively good run, but in 1995, Joyce Morgan wrote: 'Sewell has been one of the most distinctive voices in Australian theatre during the past two decades. Yet while the work is critically appreciated it has not been frequently performed and public recognition has eluded him'.[8] Sewell said of his career to date, 'You're in this f…ing business for twenty years and it has absolutely no effect on anyone. You start thinking about what am I actually doing with my life'.[9] In the same article, playwright Louis Nowra described meeting Sewell 20 years earlier, 'sitting in a corner as if he was part of a Leonard Cohen record'.[10] He described Sewell as an 'exceptionally important playwright' and suggested that he had not been staged as often as he should 'because in a recession, theatre companies wanted Australian plays to have smaller casts, be more optimistic, less brutal and less demonic. But Sewell is a demonic playwright. I think finally his plays are set in hell'.[11]

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[6] Joyce Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 1995.
[7] Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*.
[8] Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*.
[9] Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*.
[10] Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*.
[11] Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

In an interview in Adelaide in 1983, Sewell described himself to the journalist as being drunk all the time and living like a hermit,[12] in 1995 Sewell now spoke of the importance of investing in close, personal relationships. Seven years earlier he had married his partner of 20 years, Anna Russell. He also talked of a group of male friends that he jokingly labelled 'The Boys Club' ('not the spear-carrying kind'), who regularly met at a Chinese restaurant to support each other in their marriages.[13] His personal and political ideologies shifted considerably between 1983 and 1995; it was a different world to the company of players that had formed Lighthouse. In an essay included in the 1995 program, Wendy Bacon wrote:

> It may be hard for those who are younger to accept that many of our generation believed not only that a fundamental social revolution was possible but that it was just around the corner … Our optimism seems ridiculous now. Some believed in state socialism, some anarchism. There were disputes but there were also alliances forged between socialist groups and between workers and students through actions. When feminism surfaced, it caused tension between left wing men and women but it was also seen as another pathway to socialism though sexual revolution and collectivity. The enemies were the State and Capitalism—conservative government and their big business friends.[14]

In 1995, the year that *The Blind Giant is Dancing* was restaged, the daughters of second-wave feminists were moving into adulthood. There was still a gender pay gap, but more women were in positions of power. In 1990, for example, Carmen Lawrence became Australia's first female premier in Western Australia; then, soon after, Joan Kirner was appointed as Victoria's first female premier. In 1991, Anita Hill testified before the US Senate Judiciary Committee that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her at work. This sparked an avalanche of sexual harassment complaints. The 1990s were also marked by the emergence of 'riot grrrl' groups, which were feminist punk bands

[12] Harris, Samela "The Terrible Life Of A Playwright Hermit," *Adelaide Advertiser,* October 1983
[13] Morgan, *Sydney Morning Herald*.
[14] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.

that protested against misogyny in the music scene. People were watching *Seinfeld* on television, Australian films like *Babe*, *Cos*i and *Shine* were doing well internationally, and people were listening to Duran Duran on Sony Walkmans and talking on cordless phones. The internet was in its infancy, and mobile phones were large, expensive and mainly owned by the wealthy or ostentatious. At the beginning of the new decade, Hawke was toppled by his treasurer, Paul Keating, who was elected prime minister in 1991. Keating, raised in a working-class Catholic family in Liverpool, had left school at the age of 14 and had risen though the ranks to become the leader of the right faction of the ALP. In the same year, Australia entered a recession, which Keating called 'the recession we had to have'.

In the early 1990s, unemployment was the highest it had been since the Great Depression. In 1992, Keating passed the *Native Title Act*, which recognised land rights for First Nations people. A firm believer that Australia needed to view itself as part of Asia rather than Europe, Keating pursued a multicultural policy, and newly arrived Vietnamese, Chinese, Islamic and other communities changed the social fabric of Australian society. Keating won the election in 1993 and was the first prime minister to develop a cultural policy with his release of Creative Nation, which promised $250 million in additional funding to cultural institutions. Keating lost to John Howard in 1996, and Creative Nation was abandoned by the incoming government.

In terms of theatre, the 1990s saw the rise of plays by Indigenous writers, the development of Asian–Australian writing and a greater focus on female playwrights. In *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*, editor Veronica Kelly cites the bicentennial year of 1988, 'with its plethora of plays critiquing or celebrating various versions of Australian nationalism' as a marker in Australian theatre which defined the 90s.[15] She comments:

> The challenge of Aboriginal land rights claims and the presence of a large migrant multicultural population, has rendered problematic, older versions of Australian

[15] Veronica Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).

> history. A renovated paradigm of nationhood has not re-established itself on major stages in any authoritative way, but rather lives a productive and proactive underground life.[16]

The decade was marked by growth in plays by Indigenous writers such as Wesley Enoch, Deborah Mailman, John Harding and Eva Johnson. Specialist script development was also a feature of the decade, with organisations such as Playworks in Sydney, which was dedicated to developing women's writing, and the long-established Australian National Playwrights' Centre. Kelly highlights the importance in the 1990s of 'the growing dichotomy between a more or less literary and text based mainstage and an excitingly innovative and hybrid physical theatre'. She writes that:

> there are hard economic and political reasons for the recent mainstage theatres turning away from public matters. The state theatre companies have been increasingly impelled by governmental policies to seek corporate sponsorship with resultant reining in of risk taking or critical plays attacking the social outcomes of public corporatism or presenting mainstream audiences' dystopian versions of Australian history.[17]

Kelly notes that the state companies had to turn to corporate sponsorship to fund themselves and were therefore 'forced to be more mainstream and less risk taking'.[18] She also observes that 'the annual seasons of major state companies must carry the burden of pursuing a cultural mission with a judicious mixture of commercial hits and decreasing classical revivals'.[19] Overall, the repertoire of the state theatre companies was increasingly influenced by a 'large, pre-sold, subscriber economic base'.[20]

This was the beginning of the theatre that we recognise today: under-resourced and battling to survive. Economic restraints meant that cast sizes were reduced. In a summary of the dwindling cast sizes of Louis Nowra's mainstage premieres, Kelly observes that in the

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[16] Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*.
[17] Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*.
[18] Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*.
[19] Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*.
[20] Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*.

1980s, 14 actors could be employed, but by the beginning of the 1990s this had decreased to 6–8 actors. State theatre companies no longer staged their own productions of a play because it was cheaper to share production costs across companies and tour one production. For Australian playwrights, this meant fewer productions of new works, fewer directors, fewer designers and fewer actors interpreting their work. After the explosion of new plays in the 1970s and 1980s, the repertoire had begun to shrink.

However, in 1984, the mood was jubilant, at least for those involved in the newly formed Belvoir St Theatre in Surry Hills, Sydney. A syndicate of 600 shareholders, comprising actors, designers, directors, writers, technicians, and their friends and family, had each paid $1,000 to save from demolition the converted tomato sauce factory in Surry Hills that Nimrod Theatre had recently vacated. This syndicate was Company A and was spearheaded by Christine Westwood and Sue Hill. Soon after the building was bought, a separate company, Company B, was formed to manage programming decisions. Its charter was to create:

> contemporary politically sharp hard edged Australian theatre, to develop new forms of theatrical expression; to create work by and about Aboriginal Australians; contemporary music theatre; work created by women; radical interpretations of the classic and work that is surprising, diverse and passionate.[21]

It soon became apparent that the democratic way of programming by committee that was favoured by Company B was chaotic and erratic, and money was running low. In 1986, the board met to discuss the divisive question of appointing an artistic director. A compromise was reached, and the role was termed 'artistic counsel'. Its function was to offer some leadership while retaining the democratic aims of the original syndicate. Neil Armfield was appointed as the first artistic counsel in 1986. Parity payment—whereby all employees were paid the same hourly rate—was retained, and the theatre survived. As it moved into the

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[21] Robert Cousins, ed., *25 Belvoir St* (Sydney: Belvoir St Theatre, 2011).

1990s, the company was in serious financial trouble. On the verge of collapse, it was saved by a sell-out production of *Hamlet* directed by Armfield in 1994. It was decided that the model of artistic counsel was not tenable, and in 1994, Armfield was appointed as Belvoir's first artistic director. With the formative days of Lighthouse still very much in his mind, one of Armfield's first moves was to announce an ensemble of actors. However, there was no money to support a permanent ensemble, so the idea was abandoned almost as soon as it was announced, and Armfield recast the ensemble as a 'family'.

In my interview with Armfield, I asked him why he chose to program *The Blind Giant is Dancing* for his first season as artistic director. I expected an answer about the political climate of the time, but his reason was surprisingly personal. He felt that Sydney had been robbed of seeing a 'proper production' of the play, as the 1984 production staged by the Sydney Theatre Company was, in his words, 'awful'.[22] He was not alone in his criticism. Reviewer Brian Hoad described it as 'much reviled and a box office disaster'.[23] For Armfield, the Lighthouse premiere was an important production—one in which he felt significant ownership. He described the edge to his relationship with Richard Wherrett, which harked back to a problematic production of *Hamlet* at the Sydney Theatre Company in 1981, which was directed by William Gaskill, and for which Armfield had been an assistant director. He was scant on details, but he intimated that he and Wherrett were friendly but divided, and Belvoir's relationship with the Sydney Theatre Company was competitive.[24] Further, Wherrett had not waited for Armfield to direct *The Blind Giant is Dancing* at the Sydney Theatre Company, and the show that was produced was a flop. Armfield was vindicated. Now, in his first season as artistic director, it was time for Sydney to see this epic and difficult play, revived and directed by him, with his artistic 'family' around him.

[22] Neil Armfield, interviewed by Foster .
[23] Brian Hoad, 'Let This Be a Warning Yet Again', *The Bulletin*, 29th August 1995.
[24] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.

Armfield cast three actors from the original cast in the 1995 production. Kerry Walker, now more age-appropriate, again played Eileen, Allen's mother, with Peter Carroll as her husband, Doug. Russell Kiefel, who originally played Bruce, Allen's younger brother, was Michael Wells, the middle-aged corrupt politician. Gillian Jones, the original Rose Draper, now played the relatively minor roles of Janice Lang and Jane. Cate Blanchett played Rose, Hugo Weaving replaced Geoffrey Rush as Allen, Catherine McClements was Louise (Allen's wife) and Catherine's partner, Jacek Koman, was Ramon. Russell, Gillian, Cate and Jacek, along with Keith Robinson, had all been in Armfield's recent and critically acclaimed productions of *Hamlet* in 1994 and *The Tempest* in 1991. There was an enhanced ease and familiarity between them because most of them had worked together before.[25]

Despite its warm and nurturing overtones, a theatrical 'family' does not have the power of an ensemble of actors who are employed on a permanent wage and therefore free from having to worry about their next job. In addition, in many ways, the days of the 1980s could not be recreated in the 1990s; unlike 1983, when most of the actors were aged under 30, most now had families of their own and careers and mortgages to juggle. Russell Kiefel had a young son and was expecting another; Gillian Jones's twins were now in high school, and as a sole parent it was often financially difficult for her; Hugo Weaving had a young family and a burgeoning film career, so his choice to appear in this play at this theatre with this director, and to earn a parity wage, added prestige to the production. Catherine McClements had a high-profile television career and a reputation as a strong stage actor. Cate Blanchett had not yet forged her international career but was much in demand as a young actor in Australia. As was his habit, Armfield was detailed in his direction. Russell Fewster[26]

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[25] Russell David Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing by Neil Armfield and the Company B Ensemble* (M Phil, University of Sydney, 2001).

[26] I am indebted to Russell Fewster's detailed account of the 1995 rehearsal period for *The Blind Giant is Dancing* that he wrote for his M Phil (University of Sydney) in 2001. It is work such as this that documents and leaves the important traces of actors, directors, designers, stage managers, plays and playwrights. These traces are sometimes all we have to serve as a memory of the development past productions.

described the democratic sense of contribution and 'play' that Neil encouraged, which was always undercut with a precision that included giving line readings to actors.[27] I know that Russell Kiefel, much as he loved the man and respected and admired Armfield's taste and vision, found this frustrating and controlling at times. He mentioned this frustration to Russell Fewster in a letter saying:

> I suppose the fact that I come across as a fairly stroppy hard- to-get- along -with – bastard is a measure of the frustration I have sometimes felt working with Neil. It seemed like he was continually holding me up like a rider reigning in a horse…. but then I have to admit a tendency in myself to generalise, an impatience to move forward through the piece and get a sense of the story, and Neil would (probably quite deliberately) slow me down to get some detail into the thing…It seems that Neil subscribes here to the view that if you get that right, the rest will follow from there.[28]

As with any 'family', tensions could simmer. Fewster quotes both Peter Carroll and Kerry Walker fondly calling Neil a 'benign dictator' and 'a democratic fascist'.[29] In this 'family', there was no question that Armfield was the patriarch.

Rehearsals were scheduled to begin in July 1995, but there was nowhere to rehearse because Belvoir had no dedicated rehearsal space. Both Walker and Armfield described the rehearsal period as starting in Surry Hills and then moving to a church hall in Kings Cross.[30] When Weight Watchers kicked them out at 5 pm every day and they moved to Marrickville, straight under the flight path, Kerry described it as being 'like gypsies'.[31] Both Walker and Armfield showed a degree of pleasure as they remembered shifting from place to place. Maybe it was because of the roughness of that time, the 'poor theatre' quality of it—a hint of the danger that Armfield recalled when he discussed the rehearsals in Adelaide back in 1983.

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[27] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.
[28] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of* The Blind Giant is Dancing*.*
[29] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of* The Blind Giant is Dancing*.*
[30] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.
[31] Kerry Walker, interviewed by Foster

In the first read-through of the play, Armfield pointed out to the company that 'this revival was both a way of creating theatre for a large stage and setting up a new relationship with the writer'.[32] He made it clear to everyone that Sewell could be present in rehearsal as much as he liked. Armfield then went on to contextualise the revival of the play: 'The central debate is not current now. The play is about our past from which we can understand Australia now'.[33] Sewell echoed these thoughts: 'The reality of financial crises and ecological disasters means that Australia is more unequal today. We have lost our morality and we don't know what to do'.[34] Armfield replied that: 'The play asks how do you live? How do you express your own sense of right and wrong? We will focus this debate through the fights in the play'.[35]

The play was read by the actors, and more discussion followed. According to Fewster, party politics was discussed, as well as the often-present challenge in Sewell's writing of finding a playing style. The playing style shifts from emblematic archetypes to closely observed characterisations that demand naturalism. However, it is essential to keep the heightened style and find a reality within it because the play does not lend itself to naturalism. Peter Fitzpatrick notes that, 'as a playwright whose art resists an explanatory formula, Sewell makes it hard to come up with an adjective that could usefully define a form of realism in his work'.[36] The family scenes in this play are particularly difficult from this perspective, and it is essential to pitch them at the right note for the play to work. On the first day, Armfield stated that, 'the playing style should include an inclusive panorama in which detail is as important as broad-brush strokes'.[37] Characterisation was also discussed—specifically the character of Rose, the journalist, secret service agent and Allen's lover, who

[32] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*
[33] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*
[34] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*
[35] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*
[36] Peter Fitzpatrick, *Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991).
[37] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*

commits suicide when Allen betrays her. Rose is a difficult character to play because she is more of a concept than a character. From a feminist perspective, her suicide is also problematic. Reading Fewster's description of rehearsals, it appears that this specific question was not raised and Armfield and Jones also could not recall it being an issue. I asked Jones how she approached Rose when she played the character in 1983. Jones described the character as having seen the worst of humanity as an international correspondent. She has to believe that Allen is good, so when his corruption is revealed, she can no longer go on living. She does not kill herself because of Allen but because of what he represents. I asked her if she discussed this with Cate Blanchett at the time, but she said she had no reason to.[38] It seems that discussions were open, freewheeling and inclusive, but Fewster observes that 'it would seem that the subject matter and the direction it took was essentially controlled and guided by Armfield'.[39]

As is common in the first week of rehearsals, the designer presented the model of the set for the play. Stephen Curtis talked of 'a space that things can happen in … that relates to the world of steel'.[40] He explained his rationale for the set by commenting on the Sydney Theatre Company's production, which he thought had mistakenly 'tried to create miniature worlds for each scene. Not only did it slow the action down, but by tying the emotional reality of the scene to too much mincy detail, we lost the big picture'.[41] A long table on wheels had replaced the revolve from the Lighthouse production, which would have been not only expensive but also impossible on the corner stage at Belvoir. The table was pushed around the stage by the actors. Rose jumped off it when she committed suicide, it served as the table for the family scenes, it was the bench on the factory floor, it was a train hurtling through space and it was the desk in Michael Wells's office, along which Russell Kiefel

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[38] Gillian Jones, interviewed by Foster

[39] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*

[40] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*

[41] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing.*

lightly walked his fingers crab-style (a piece of business he was particularly pleased with because he felt it defined his character). Kerry Walker remembers it being described as an operating table.[42]

The table also represented domesticity, which was important for this production. For the play to speak to a new audience, it needed to be defined not by specific, concrete historical events but by the more abstract themes of power and powerlessness, political power and personal power, and power in marriage and in family. Fewster describes Armfield asking Sewell if he wanted to change anything after hearing the first read-through, and Sewell expressed his concern that the ideology was swamping the play and that the human drama was being lost. He was no longer the angry Marxist, and with this revival he had an opportunity to make the play more human and less dogmatic. Sewell knew the importance of emphasising the human struggle over ideology, which can date very quickly. In the program notes for the production, he emphasised:

> It is not primarily a play about the Labor Party or the Labor victory, it is rather a look at the mechanisms and contradictions of certain forms of power and the effects these have on the psychology and relationships of people involved in its spider web of influence.
>
> That is, all of us. Power and powerlessness are two of the central experiences of human beings.[43]

Sewell was often present in the rehearsals, and cuts were discussed and made. Geraldine O'Brien in her article on the rehearsal process of the play reports that Sewell turned up on the first day 'with proposed line changes and cuts.' [44]She notes the actors commenting that Sewell 'is totally unthreatened by cuts or changes.' In the third week of rehearsal, she reports that "heavy cuts have been made" and observes an exchange on the rehearsal room floor. "Armfield through the cuts, the changes, the rewrites, reminds them that "we need to respect

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[42] Walker, interviewed by Foster.
[43] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.
[44] Geraldine O'Brien, 'Burning The Giant .'*Sydney Morning Herald* August 1995

the rhythm." "We need to respect the writer" says Walker. "Thank you darling!"[45] says the playwright.' The scene in which Louise confronts Rose and calls her a whore, which was mentioned earlier as being identified as offensive in the 1983 production, was eventually cut. However, it was not cut because it was considered problematic from a feminist perspective; rather, it appears that the scene was cut because it was deemed to be unbelievable. Jones suggested cutting the scenes between Louise and Jane because she thought they slowed the play down; however, Sewell thought they were structurally important because they offered 'a sort of stillness in the storm'.[46] Eventually, Sewell was persuaded to cut them. The play was republished in 1995 with these cuts included. Fewster also describes lines being cut and scenes being edited in the rehearsal room during rehearsal, as Armfield worked with Sewell to tweak and refocus the play for a new audience. The play opened in August 1995.

Pamela Payne called it 'a vast astonishing play: characters caught in the whirligig of modern time their private and public worlds spinning in chaos and collision'.[47] She concluded that:

> One of my most memorable nights in the theatre was in the downstairs space of this same building (then Nimrod) 1980 and Stephen Sewell's first professional production in Sydney, *Traitors* also directed by Neil Armfield. Some 15 years later and this revised *The Blind Giant is Dancing*—Sewell is an Australian playwright who continues to grow astound and create memorable theatre. Don't miss this for anything.[48]

In *The Bulletin*, Brian Hoad said: 'This brilliant cast turns it all into dance of death than seems more terrible than it did 12 years ago. But all a playwright can do is warn'.[49] James Waites wrote: 'This is a great play for now. It gives us a chance to look back on who we were in campuses … What have we become? And this is a brilliant production of a remarkable

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[45] Geraldine O'Brien, 'Burning The Giant.'
[46] Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing*.
[47] Pamela Payne, 'Sewell's Giant of a Play', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1995.
[48] Payne, 'Sewell's Giant of a Play'.
[49] Brian Hoad, 'Let This Be a Warning Yet Again'.

play'.[50] For Armfield, the wait was worth it. The show was sold out, and he described to Fewster the pleasure he took in seeing people queue for tickets.

It seemed like Armfield had once again brought together a 'family'. However, it was a curated family that had a certain prestige, and this was important for the revival to work because it signalled its significance as an important event. Armfield also understood the importance of the playing style for this play, and reading Fewster's detailed record of rehearsals and speaking to Russell Kiefel at the time, it is clear how much he controlled this. Finding the right style meant emphasising the ideas of the play over the events, which released the play from the period in which it had been written and allowed the human drama to reveal itself. Waites wrote: 'For all its political pungency and scope … the most powerful scene in this production is the family gathering, a barbecue'. He went on to say that the scene 'worked up to a level of hypnotic clarity by Armfield and his superb cast, caught the audience by surprise. It was then we knew we were witness to a remarkable theatrical event'.[51]

Family was Armfield's territory, and through careful casting and by building detail upon detail in rehearsal, he had found the right way to pitch these difficult scenes. The play was admittedly 'sprawling and unruly',[52] but its human intensity and ambition was remarkable, and this needed to dazzle the audience. If they had failed to do this, the revival would have been an airing of a museum piece—a curio and nothing more. With a theatre culture as small as Australia's, a revival of a play can kill it as easily as breathe life into it. One bad production can wipe a play from memory or relegate it to the shadow canon. The revived production has to reveal the play beyond the context in which it was written, otherwise there is nothing in it for an audience. Armfield had done this: he had created an event of significance—a show with his 'family', but also a prestigious production.

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[50] James Waites, 'The Way We Were in Hypnotic Clarity', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1995.
[51] Waites, 'The Way We Were in Hypnotic Clarity'.
[52] Company B, Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.

However, not everyone loved it. Tom Wright, literary associate at Belvoir, said the show 'lacked authenticity'[53] and felt manufactured. Gillian Jones told me that she did not understand why everyone jumped to their feet on opening night. She thought it was 'a habit audiences had gotten into at Belvoir. Jumping to their feet no matter what had been served up'.[54] She thought it was at that curtain call that she decided she did not want to be an actor anymore.[55] Two years later, she became a lecturer in acting at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA).

Armfield's decision to program *The Blind Giant is Dancing* was undoubtedly multifaceted, but a degree of hubris can be detected. The programming decision was made for personal reasons but, as a result, *The Blind Giant is Dancing* did not die with a production that served it badly, as many other Australian plays have done. This revival meant that a playwright was able to rework a play to find new maturity and meaning; a director was able to present a play so that the ideas spoke to a new audience; a designer was able to reimagine a vision for a new space and evaluate what had worked before and what had not; actors were able to embody new and old characters and contribute their knowledge and skill to give meaning to a revival; and an academic such as Fewster was able to do the important work of documenting this significant play, which was staged by practitioners who at the time were significant players. Importantly, audiences were given an opportunity to connect this play with other plays like it in order to see where it came from and how it influenced others; as a result, our canon and repertoire were given a chance to mature and grow.

[53] Tom Wright, interviewed by Katrina Foster at Belvoir St Theatre, August 2020.
[54] Jones, interviewed by Foster.
[55] Jones, interviewed by Foster.

Chapter 6: *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (2016)

Hey Max, I'm writing in the Belvoir St rehearsal room on a hot day waiting for my turn while other actors do their thing. I figured that if you were here, we'd be talking about this play because it's basically about power, political power and capitalism and socialism and feminism, all pretty much as it existed in Sydney in 1983.[1]

I found this by chance in a notebook while looking for some paper to write down notes for this chapter. It is the beginning of an unfinished letter that Russell Kiefel wrote to his adult son who was studying political science in London. Russell was writing about rehearsals for the 2016 production of *The Blind Giant is Dancing*.

It was his third production of the play, and this time around he was playing Doug, Allen's father. Thirty-three years earlier he had played Bruce, Doug's younger son, and this would be his last full run of a play. He died on stage in Darwin eight months later. Russell had acted in more than 60 plays in his career, but he was most proud of *The Blind Giant is Dancing*. When he performed in the 1983 production, it was the first time he had been in a play that spoke directly to him about his politics—politics that believed theatre could affect social change and politics that believed in class warfare. The play is also a very "Sydney" play and Russell, a Brisbane boy, was fascinated by Sydney—particularly its underworld of power and corruption. This was the Sydney of Roger Rogerson, Neddy Smith and Sallie-Anne Huckstepp.[2] It was also Sydney before email, mobile phones, Google, social media and globalisation. It was Australia when it still had a manufacturing industry.

The Blind Giant is Dancing was the world of Russell's generation, but it was not the world or politics of his son, Max. They were on the same side of politics, but they had different ideas about how politics should be expressed. Max does not believe that the Labor Party recognises his experience. He is a millennial, whereas Allen and Louise in *The Blind Giant is Dancing* were baby boomers. From the perspective of millennials, baby boomers are

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[1] Letter, Russell Kiefel to Max Kiefel, February 2016.
[2] These were prominent figures in Sydney's underworld crime scene in the 1980s.

privileged, powerful and mostly misogynistic, and their actions have brought about economic and environmental destruction. Max's argument is not with the dying generation represented in the play by Allen's parents, Eileen and Doug, but with the generation represented by their offspring, the corrupted protagonist Allen and even the newly politicised Bruce.

Generational division marked the theatre of the late 1990s and 2000s, and it is worth noting this to give social and political context to the programming and rehearsal period of the 2016 production of *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, which I will discuss later in this chapter. Kathryn Kelly writes in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s* that 'the post millennial decade of Australian performance from 2000 to 2010 has been characterised by institutional reform, generational handover and the rise of contemporary performance'.[3]

Of course, generational divide is not new. Julian Meyrick wrote about the divide between generation X and baby boomers in *Trapped by the Past* (2005). Speaking of his personal experience, he wrote:

> In 1985, when I left university, I faced high unemployment, rising house prices, plummeting public services and political reaction from the New Right—very different prospects from those confronting graduates in the 1960s or 70s. The theatre I became associated with had to fight tooth and nail for resources, audiences and print-media coverage and was not particularly concerned about the professional differences that obsessed Anglo and New Wave practitioners. We were struggling for our working lives, and there was little room for extended in-fighting.[4]

Meyrick went on to describe the genial but intransigent attitude of baby boomers to the new generation of theatre makers who were attempting to create new work. In *Trapped in the Past*,[5] he makes the case that the preceding generation did not understand the scarcity of professional pathways that the post-millennial generation had to navigate. Kelly writes: 'The perception of generational fissure and exclusion became a powerful shaping force of new

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[3] Kathryn Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies: Changes Since 2000', in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s*, edited by Richard Fotheringham and James Smith (The Netherlands: Brill–Rodopi, 2013), 83.
[4] Julian Meyrick, *Trapped by the Past: Why Our Theatre is Facing Paralysis* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005).
[5] Meyrick, *Trapped by the Past*.

performance makers and theatre companies across the 1990s and during the post millennial decade'.[6] She quotes the founders of theatre company Stuck Pig Squealing: 'In Australia there is a definite sense that the mainstream belongs to the older generation'.[7]

It is important to observe how this generational divide has contributed to the major factors that continue to define programming and theatre in general. The generational divide was underlined by a decline in funding and support for the arts that marked the 1990s and 2000s. The long reign of the Howard Government (1996–2007) and its policies of neoliberal economics and paranoid nationalism meant that scarce resources continue to be a defining feature of Australian theatre. Figures show that Australian theatre companies (Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, State Theatre Company South Australia) went from producing 49 new productions in 1986 to 29.8 new productions in 2003.[8] A report commissioned by the Australia Council in 2003, called 'Don't Give Up Your Day Job',[9] revealed the stark decline in income for professional artists as a result of globalisation and the rise in technology. There was simply not enough work to go around. Actors, writers, directors and designers supported themselves in whatever ways they could and struggled to make and stage new work. This situation continues today. Working in independent theatre usually means working for nothing, and the slots in mainstage seasons were (and are) increasingly precious.

Scarcity also meant that there were competing interest groups and agitation from different sectors for recognition and inclusion. The 2016 census revealed that nearly half of all Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas, and Australian theatre did not adequately reflect this. The 2000s revealed two major fault lines in

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[6] Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies', 81.
[7] Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies'.
[8] Meyrick, *Trapped by the Past*.
[9] David Throsby and Virginia Hollister, *Don't Give Up Your Day Job: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*, June 2003, https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/dont-give-up-your-day-job/.

Australian theatre: gender disparity and a lack of cultural diversity. In his Platform Paper titled *What is an Australian play? Have We Failed Our Ethnic Writers?* Mead asks:

> Is there something particular about its subject, themes or characters? Does it define itself in terms of its relationship to the land? To distance? To history? To the suburbs? To class? To naturalism? can we generalise or define in this way anymore? Have the models shifted in the years since the New Wave trumpeted the new Australian play nearly forty years ago?[10]

He concludes that 'there is no doubt in my mind that those of us who work in text-based theatre have failed to engage systematically with the multiplicities of ethnicities that make up Australia'.[11] The other fault line—gender disparity—was thrown sharply into focus when Armfield's 2010 season, his last at Belvoir, included just one female director. This stirred outrage and prompted a national conversation that was recorded in blogs and articles and eventually resulted in the 2012 report by the Australia Council on gender disparity called 'Women in Theatre'. The report revealed shocking statistics: in each year from 2001 at the major performing arts companies, women had made up as little as 16 per cent of playwrights and as little as 14 per cent of directors.[12] Calls for parity resulted in more programming of female writers and directors on the mainstages.

Identity politics and a generational divide can be considered defining features of Australian theatre in the 2000s. In 2010, there was a general exodus of mainstage directors. Writing in 2013, Laura Ginters commented:

> It is a significant moment to be considering the work of Australian directors in the 2000s, as there has been, at the end of the decade, a major shift in the theatre landscape across the eastern seaboard. One after the other, the artistic directors of Company B at Belvoir Street Theatre (Sydney), Malthouse Theatre (Melbourne), Queensland Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company, and Griffin Theatre

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[10] Chris Mead, *What is an Australian Play? Have We Failed Our Ethnic Writers?* (Sydney: Currency House, 2008).
[11] Mead, *What is an Australian Play?*
[12] Associate Professor Elaine Lally in association with Professor Sarah Miller, *Women in Theatre: A Research Report and Action Plan for the Australia Council for the Arts*, April 2012, https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/research/women-in-theatre-april-2012-54325827577ea.pdf.

> Company (Sydney)—Neil Armfield, Michael Kantor, Michael Gow, Simon Phillips and Nick Marchand, respectively—announced their resignations.[13]

In a crucial change for Belvoir, after a 25-year association with Belvoir, in 2010 Armfield handed over the artistic directorship to Ralph Myers who, at the age of 32, was a highly regarded stage and costume designer but had no direct experience as a stage director. This was significant because it recognised both the demand for younger generations to be represented in leadership positions as well as the broadening of the role and function of the artistic director. Myers appointed Simon Stone as associate director, and they were determined to change the programming to speak to their generation. Myers publicly stated that Belvoir was moving away from the baby boomers, and the new era was marked by adaptations of European and American classics adapted, deconstructed and rewritten. Titles such as *The Wild Duck* by Simon Stone after Henrik Ibsen enraged some who felt that, as the adaptions were taking up the precious slots of programming, they were robbing writers of the opportunity to stage new work. While there were some major successes, *The Wild Duck* being one, subscribers (who were mostly older) were leaving in large numbers and by the time Myers resigned, Belvoir was in debt.

Eamon Flack was appointed as the new artistic director in 2016, and he programmed *The Blind Giant is Dancing* as the first play of his first season, just as Armfield had programmed it for his first official season in 1995. Tom Wright thought the reason for Flack's programming was partly as a call to the older audience members who had left Belvoir by saying 'see, we haven't abandoned the plays that you used to love. It was signalling old Belvoir'.[14] Flack said it was because he personally identified with the character of Allen,[15] and he expanded on this in his program notes:

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[13] Laura Ginters, 'Glimpsing the Hidden World: Australian Directors on Rehearsal', in *Catching Australia Theatre in the 2000s*, edited by Richard Fotheringham and James Smith (The Netherlands: Brill–Rodopi, 2013), 45.
[14] Tom Wright, interviewed by Katrina Foster at Belvoir St Theatre, August 2020.
[15] Eamon Flack, interviewed by Katrina Foster at Belvoir St Theatre, September 2020.

> I've wanted to do this play, somehow or other, for a long time. When I was at drama school, I wanted to play Allen Fitzgerald. Hs rage was something I knew well: the vicious desire to supercede your Catholic human shittiness, the guilty need to prove you still have a moral compass.[16]

It is interesting to note his awareness of the play from drama school. Flack was born in 1979, and 20 or so years later when he was a student at WAAPA, the play clearly had visibility. In his decision to program the play, there was also likely a degree of 'cutting his teeth' on this epic and complex play, which is, as mentioned in Chapter 3, one way that signifies 'a playwright has become a classic'.[17]

Whether the reasons for programming were commercial, political or personal, very few contemporary Australian plays have had this many prestigious productions, and the fourth mainstage production of the play confirmed *The Blind Giant is Dancing's* classic status, its place in our canon, and even as part of our small repertoire. Publicity for the play read:

> When it premiered in 1983, *The Blind Giant is Dancing* felt like a sharp slap in the face. And in an age of ICAC, Union credit cards, speculative housing bubbles, a pulverised working class, vapid leadership … it's definitely time for another look at this Australian classic.
>
> Artistic Director Eamon Flack begins his tenure with a company of eleven of the country's great actors and one of the country's great plays and winner of the 1985 New South Wales Premier's Literary Award.

Such publicity signalled that here was a 'state of the nation play'—an Australian play of significance and prestige that speaks to the past and to the present. There was no moving from place to place for this rehearsal. Through a public appeal and corporate sponsorship, as well as the profits from their hit production of *Keating! The Musical*, Belvoir had raised enough money in 2010 for a major renovation of the theatre. The offices, rather than being

[16] Belvoir St Theatre, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, 2020. Program.
[17] John McCallum, 'The Late, Crazy Plays', in *Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010).

housed in the eaves of the roof, were located in a building down the road, along with a dedicated rehearsal space. The cast consisted of Yael Stone, who played Louise, and her off-stage partner at the time, as well as her on-stage partner, Dan Spielman, who played Allen. Both Stone and Spielman had a strong theatre and film background, and Stone had a further level of prestige or celebrity status because she was well known for her ongoing role in the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. Zahra Newman, who played Rose Draper in the 2016 production, had worked with Flack once before, and Genevieve Lemon as Eileen and Geoff Morrell as Wells were well-established actors. Lemon, Kiefel and Morrell were the senior actors, but the rest of the cast and the director were at least 20 years removed from the generation they were representing on stage. This was the first time the play had been performed by a generation of actors with so little memory of the time and world in which this play had been conceived.

Sewell was present at the first read-though of the play, although neither Genevieve Lemon nor Zahra Newman could remember him sitting in on rehearsals. Newman thought there was not enough discussion about the politics in the play; instead, time was spent on the logistics of the set and how to manage the 26 scenes and the fast cuts between scenes, which Armfield had previously described as ‘one scene needing to wipe the next’.[18] Newman believed that design decisions had been made too early and that communication between actors and production crew was not ideal; she felt that the set ‘didn’t really help to tell the story. It was too complicated’.[19] Genevieve Lemon had similar memories and said her dominant memory of the time was getting the scene changes right and remembering what she had to strike and what she had to bring on. Lemon also remembered having many health and safety meetings about the set, which consisted of a large metal frame that had to collapse

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[18] State Theatre Company South Australia, ‘Remembering the Bright World: An Interview with Neil Armfield’, *Behind the Curtain*, 13 September 2018, https://medium.com/behind-the-curtain/remembering-the-bright-world-775b02ca1fb3.

[19] Zahra Newman, interviewed by Katrina Foster via phone, December 16 2020.

during Scene 20, the factory accident scene. No one could guarantee that the set was entirely safe for the actors who were constantly moving underneath it.[20] There were numerous meetings that Newman remembered as being 'quite political'.[21] In the end, the production manager was fired.

Newman also spoke about playing Rose Draper, a character she described as being an outsider. Originally from Jamaica, Newman has lived in Australia for 20 years and is often cast as 'the person who doesn't quite fit in. Who is just a little bit different'.[22] She intimates that there is perhaps an unconscious bias at work in casting a non-white person as the outsider; as examples, she cites three roles she performed in succession: Varya in *Cherry Orchard* (2013), Ana in *Ivanov* (2015) and Rose in *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (2016). Newman struggled with the character of Rose, and while admitting that this could have been her own personal limitations, she found it curious that Rose is someone 'who has lived an interesting life, travelled everywhere, reported from dangerous places and who has seen terrible things but really the bit we are left with is her sexuality'.[23] In general, Newman would have liked more conversation about the women in the play. Her feeling, as she described it to me, was 'that if you are going to replicate women without agency then there needs to be accountability'.[24] She emphasises that she is not saying we should excise these plays, but there has to be 'a general conversation, an agreement on why and how these women should be represented on stage'.[25]

[20] Genevieve Lemon, interviewed by Katrina Foster via phone, December 11 2020.
[21] Newman, interviewed by Foster.
[22] Newman, interviewed by Foster.
[23] Newman, interviewed by Foster.
[24] Newman, interviewed by Foster.
[25] Newman, interviewed by Foster.

In an interview in 2016 with Radio National,[26] journalist Fran Kelly asked Sewell if the play could still resonate today. Life had changed again for Sewell since the 1995 production: he was now head of the Master of Fine Arts program in Writing for Performance at NIDA, had remarried, moved back to his late father's house in Granville and now had two young children. However, his conviction was the same. He answered Fran Kelly: 'Absolutely. The play was written at a time that was the beginning of the era of neo conservatism that is drawing to a close now'. He describes the period in which he first wrote the play:

> as a period of international debt crisis … a time of radical conflict, left wing conflict and revolutionary hopes and it was the suppression of all those things and the destruction of the Australian manufacturing industry that gave us the economy we have today, which is a completely different economy. The politics we have today is a completely different politics. The status of women … the significant part of feminism at the time was an equal wage justice … a lot of these politics got transformed, as the new conservative forces undermined them and created the kind of world we have today. Increased economic polarization has been a short-term consequence of the recent Financial Crisis and a long-term consequence of manufacturing jobs being swept away by globalization.[27]

On Sewell's mention of feminism, Fran Kelly quotes Yael Stone, who had gone on record saying that 'it's not a happy and empowered ending for the women in the play'.[28] Sewell agreed the statement was true 'in the context of the play', before saying:

> as you remember, Fran, second wave feminism started in reaction to the male domination of the left agenda, the women got sick of handing out the tea and scones while the boys were in the front room making the political decisions. In the play, one of the things that is revealed or looked at anyhow, is the masculine model of power, or how men achieve power, and that this is actually destructive, or disempowering for women.[29]

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[26] Stephen Sewell, 'The Blind Giant is Dancing: Australian Play Revived by Belvoir St Theatre', interview by Fran Kelly, *Radio National*, 17 February 2016, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/australian-play-the-blind-giant-is-dancing/7175650.
[27] Sewell, interview by Fran Kelly.
[28] Sewell, interview by Fran Kelly.
[29] Sewell, interview by Fran Kelly.

He stated that this has not been resolved, and points to the character assassination of Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, as a revelation of 'the misogyny at the heart of Australia'.[30] For actors such as Newman and Stone, such a response is inadequate, and Newman calls for more accountability in the work itself:

> If we are going to put characters in front of an audience that is supposedly diverse, and because of the way the discourse has changed though technology and the ability to access information, we have a duty to investigate through an agreed positioning about why we are choosing to replicate women who are sidelined.[31]

In my interview with Eamon Flack, he suggested that Sewell has not come to terms with feminism, and this is a reason why the play is difficult today.[32] Certainly, the generational shift in feminism that characterised the actors' reaction to the play is indicative of a broader shift between generations. The fact that this was only perceived as an issue in 2016 is an indication of how the representation of women in today's theatre is analysed and critiqued. Actors like Newman and Stone reject the idea of women being seen as victims, regardless of the historical context, because it is the embodiment of women on stage that concerns them, how specific and multidimensional they are as characters and how they operate independently and autonomously from the male characters. The fact that the women in the play remained disempowered by the end of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* was more significant to the younger cast members in 2016 than the dialogue that spoke of feminism. It was an indication of a male writer's unresolved attitude towards women, and it troubled them. It also troubled Emma Jackson, who played the minor characters in the play, and who told Newman that she wondered what she was doing, 'perpetuating the stereotype of the woman in the background with no autonomy, no life of her own'.[33] I played the same roles in the Sydney Theatre Company's much-reviled production in 1984, and although I would describe myself as a

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[30] Sewell, interview by Fran Kelly.
[31] Newman, interviewed by Foster.
[32] Flack, interviewed by Foster.
[33] Newman, interviewed by Foster.

feminist, I recall having no such sensibility at the time. It is interesting, too, that in 1995, as described in the previous chapter, Gillian Jones kept her personal summation of Louise to herself. Newman also said she did not vocalise any misgivings because of 'the power in the room', but Yael Stone had 'star status', so she could, and did, raise some of these issues. The issues were addressed 'not in a fundamental way but more in how to solve a scene on the rehearsal room floor'.[34] Reviews were mixed. Jason Blake in *The Sydney Morning Herald* felt that although the references were dated, the essential themes of power and corruption still spoke to a contemporary audience:

> The nature, tone and subject of political debate has shifted profoundly since Stephen Sewell wrote *The Blind Giant is Dancing* and some elements of this 1983 drama have acquired a patina of nostalgia. Nevertheless, this blast from the past still resounds very powerfully.
>
> While some references have lost their pungency, Sewell's story of political apostasy and the corrupting effects of power remains essentially timeless. References to Kissinger and Nixon, to the economist Piero Sraffa, to Pinochet and CIA plots mark the play as one of its time, but don't limit our engagement, any more than swordfights and talk of magic hamper our ability to be enthralled by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.[35]

In his online blog, Kevin Jackson was less complimentary:[36] 'True the play is long and sadly actually came to feel longer', which he put down to the choice of playing style:

> The Directorial style was a consistently subjective/naturalistic focus instead of a disciplined objective/storytelling focus for the theatre … We experienced naturalism(realism) dominating the storytelling in this production where I believe Shakespearean epic could be, should be its reach, its tone. I thought after watching the production, even the title of the play in its choice of heightened poetry: THE BLIND GIANT IS DANCING is clue to the production scale.

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[34] Newman, interviewed by Foster.
[35] Jason Blake, 'The Blind Giant is Dancing Review: Tale of Corruption a House of Cards for the Stage', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 2016. https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/the-blind-giant-is-dancing-review-tale-of-corruption-a-house-of-cards-for-the-stage-20160218-gmxdhi.html.
[36] Kevin Jackson, 'The Blind Giant is Dancing', *Kevin Jackson's Theatre Diary*, 27 March 2016, http://www.kjtheatrediary.com/2016/03/the-blind-giant-is-dancing.html.

Ben Neutze, in the *Daily Review*, recognised the significance, ambition and voice of the play:

> There's little doubt that Stephen Sewell's 1983 play *The Blind Giant is Dancing* is a work verging on the extraordinary. There are few writers who are able to explore the relationship between the personal and political—and public and private lives—with the complexity and insight which Sewell manages.

However, he did not think the play was "timeless":

> But this play was such a strong reaction to the time in which it was created; while much of the factional in-fighting it depicts still happens today, those scenes feel a little distant despite director Eamon Flack's best efforts to keep the stakes as high as possible …
>
> The biggest problem is that this production leaves you wishing Belvoir had commissioned a play from Sewell (or another writer grappling with similar subjects) tackling the meeting point between political and personal ideologies and political machinations as they exist today.

He concludes with a general statement about current playwrighting and, comparing new work with this play of 1983, he comments on the paucity of contemporary plays that have as bold a breadth of vison as *The Blind Giant is Dancing*:

> This production serves as a reminder that great plays which respond urgently to the state of the nation and our biggest and most immediate political questions are few and far between. Nakkiah Lui and Sisters Grimm might have written brilliant and fiercely political works about specific issues in last year's Belvoir season (Lui's *Kill the Messenger* on institutionalised racism and Sisters Grimm's *La Traviata* on the ethics of arts funding and corporate sponsorship during the Brandis era) but neither play connected political, social and personal threads to offer the staggeringly broad portrait of our society painted by Sewell in *Blind Giant.* Surely it's time for our theatre to ask these massive questions again.[37]

Such a comparison could only be made by seeing the revival of this play. By knowing what we have and by placing ourselves in relation to plays in the context of the time they were written and how they speak to us today, we can draw conclusions about where we are and where we want to be both socially and politically, and in terms of performance-making. There are quieter legacies, too. I asked Russell Kiefel at the time if he ever talked to Andrew

[37] Ben Neutze, 'The Blind Giant is Dancing Review (Belvoir, Sydney)', *Daily Review*, 18 February 2016.

Henry (who played Bruce in 2016) about playing the role, and he shrugged and told me how he helped Andrew to get the laugh on the line:

> Allen: I'll have to check my diary.
>
> Bruce: Diary? Jeez.[38]

Gillian Jones had more to say about this in my interview with her. She told me that when she saw the 2016 production, she watched Russell during the scene where Doug and his son, Bruce, fight (Scene 20), and she wondered why Russell, when he was playing the scene with such authenticity, suddenly turned out front and seemed almost declamatory:

> I didn't understand what he was doing and then I realised … he was doing it for the actor playing Bruce. He knew how hard it was for Bruce, so late in the play to suddenly change tack. He had to find a moment where he no longer believed in his father and if Russell as Doug was looking at him, playing the scene to him, he couldn't do it, so Russell turned away and played out front and this allowed Bruce to see his father as sort of hollow.[39]

Gillian thought it was more than an act of generosity; it also came from Russell's intimate knowledge of a play that he had literally grown up in since 1983. He knew what was required. This could only happen after appearing in so many of Sewell's plays, and specifically in this one. Gillian and I spoke about actors who have years of experience playing supporting roles in plays and so spend a lot of time observing during rehearsals and performance. 'He was such a resource', she said of Russell, 'Actors like that … I don't think people realise'. She suggested that rather than writing about 'why plays endure in this thesis, I should write about why actors are worthwhile'.[40] This example of a scene in action demonstrates the subtle ways in which legacy is imprinted through performance.

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[38] Sewell, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, Scene 8.
[39] Jones, interviewed by Foster.
[40] Jones, interviewed by Foster.

Ultimately, the 2016 production while far from being a critical failure, did not have the punch of its previous productions. It is a challenging play to produce both in its technical demands and in the density of its subject matter and the elusiveness of its playing style that treads between naturalism and melodrama. While this challenge was realised to a degree, the production did not quite have the requisite 'joy' to make it sing. There are many possible reasons for this. Perhaps because most of the cast and the director were a generation or two away from when it was written, and the play did not have the same level of personal investment that it had been given by previous generations for whom the subject matter was personal and urgent. Perhaps too because it was set in a time that was relatively recent historically but at the same time far away from most of the casts' and many of the audiences' collective personal experience. Perhaps the ensemble never found the detail in the playing style to make the play soar above the historical events in which the play is rooted. Perhaps because unlike the' 86 and '95 productions the writer was not present in rehearsals and did not rework the text, the play stayed rooted in the identity politics of its time, rather than addressing the whisperings of Me Too that were getting louder and needed to be heard. When I saw this production, it was a few years after the removal of Julia Gillard as Prime Minister and the tensions and leadership spills that characterised the Labor Party at the time. I was struck by how it predicted the machinations and factionalism of the 'faceless men' of the Labor Party. To me, the play seemed flawed but important and salutary. There seems little argument that despite its flaws and despite quibbles with the production, the play is significant and serves as a milestone in Australian theatre. Overwhelmingly, the fourth mainstage production of this play plants it in our cultural consciousness. How far it stays there remains to be seen

This case study has traced three Australian productions of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* over four decades of social and political change and through major shifts in arts policy and

funding: we see such changes reflected in programming choices. Personal and political shifts find their expression in our theatre. The decisions made around programming and the background, prestige and personal ambitions of the individuals who choose theatre seasons shape our repertoire. The lives of actors and theatre- makers that change over the decades, as well as the decisions they make, are shaped by the generation to which they belong and contribute to how a play is reinterpreted each time it is produced. The decisions made in rehearsal and on stage, together with the prestige and experience of those who make them, contribute to how a play makes it into history and how a legacy may be imprinted. How many plays have been lost because they were rejected by prestigious tastemakers? Or, if selected, how many have been abandoned because poor decisions that were made in rehearsal led to inadequate productions? How many have been lost because they do not speak to the current time, and so they fade into a shadow canon that dies with the generation that holds their memory? Through publication and, most importantly, programming, *The Blind Giant is Dancing* survived, but many other plays did not.

Having given detail to the production of the play in the case study, I would now like to return briefly to the criteria I established in Chapter 3 and test *The Blind Giant is Dancing* against these to determine its 'economy of prestige'.

The first criterion I established was that the text should be exemplary; this is, of course, a highly subjective criterion. When James Waites reviewed the 1995 production of *Blind Giant*, he wrote: 'A masterpiece in the theatre is not simply a good text, and the text for a potential masterpiece may be as unwieldy and structurally flawed as King Lear or Hamlet'. He goes on to say that *Blind Giant* is 'on the sprawling side but it needs to be, to embrace the enormous palette of ideas the writer takes on'.[41] As an example of this, Peter Fitzpatrick

[41] James Waites, 'The Way We Were in Hypnotic Clarity', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1995.

singles out an exchange between Allan and Louise that demonstrates the collision of the personal and political:

> Allen: What am I asking that is so impossible?
>
> Louise: You want my will!
>
> […]
>
> Louise: Why can't you live in this world?
>
> Allen: This madhouse? You fool. It can't be.
>
> Louise: I need you.
>
> Allen: No, no!
>
> (the lights change)

Fitzpatrick observes that the 'emotional temperature of these exchanges involves a language that out of context can sound dangerously close to *Days of Our Lives*', but that the writing has an 'intensity' that, although it may not be production-proof, is itself a partial control of any tendency to fruity melodrama. The other saving device is the very precise observation of domestic role-playing in the scenes.[42] These family scenes also afford the play that necessary vein of humanity and empathy that should be present for a play to endure.

Even with a flawed text, a play can still soar. McCallum calls the language in Patrick White's plays the 'language of excess' and notes his 'stylistic promiscuity'.[43] McCallum believes that this linguistic excess, which was once considered White's greatest weakness, is now his greatest strength.[44] McCallum proposes that White's heightened language is why his plays offer exciting theatrical opportunities to adventurous actors, writers, designers and producers. Similarly, it is Sewell's Strindberg-like emotional exchanges and heightened language that takes his plays to a level beyond, for example, the plays of Mona Brand, who as

[42] Peter Fitzpatrick, *Stephen Sewell: The Playwright as Revolutionary* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), 92.
[43] John McCallum, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009), 91.
[44] McCallum, *Belonging*, 91.

a political playwright of the 1960s and 1970s, could be said to be Sewell's antecedent. Whereas Brand stays with naturalism, Sewell's taut impassioned exchanges in *Blind Giant* have that element of 'excess', and this is perhaps one of the reasons that *Blind Giant* stands a chance at enduring, As Fitzpatrick notes, Sewell's plays are not production-proof, and finding the right playing style, as Armfield so meticulously exacted in the 1995 production, is crucial to releasing the poetry from the concrete events that anchor the play in its time. When this happens, the human drama can speak to a new generation even if the original debates in the play may no longer be as relevant.

Another criterion that affects a play's 'economy of prestige' is its position in shifting the dramaturgy of its time. Sewell emerged as a playwright at the end of the New Wave, and Denise Varney notes the importance of winning one of three writing fellowships at the APG to his development, because it was at the APG that he reworked and workshopped *Traitors*, and the culture of the APG profoundly affected him.[45] Sewell embraced the 'theatrical adventurism'[46] of the New Wave, but he went beyond its preoccupation with what it meant to be Australian and into a broader political analysis of Australia in the world—an approach that critics subsequently termed New Internationalism. McCallum writes that, 'from the first, Sewell and Nowra were markedly different from their New Wave predecessors. Their work was less focussed on Australianness, more political in its concerns and more cinematic in its dramaturgy'.[47] *Blind Giant* meets these criteria for a classic because of its important contribution to the development of both dramatic form and content in Australia.

In terms of prizes and prestige, *Blind Giant* won the 1985 New South Wales Premier's Literary Award and Sewell has won many other awards, including the 1989 New South Wales Premier's Literary Award for *Hate*, the 2004 Australian National Playwrights'

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[45] Denise Varney, *Radical Visions 1968–2008: The Impact of the Sixties on Australian Drama* (New York: Rodopi, 2011).
[46] McCallum, *Belonging*, 210.
[47] McCallum, *Belonging*, 210.

Centre Award for Significant Contribution to Australian Theatre; the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, again, for *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* in 2004; and the AWGIE Award and Victorian Premier's Literary Award Louis Esson Prize for Drama, both in 2004. Sewell's work has attracted many high-profile practitioners who have added to the prestige of his work. Over the decades, these have included the directors Neil Armfield, Jim Sharman and Richard Wherrett, and actors Geoffrey Rush, Hugo Weaving, Catherine McClements, Cate Blanchett and Yael Stone, all of whom, at one time or another, have had 'celebrity' status. Given the issues of the depiction of women in the play, it is doubtful that in a post–Me Too world, *Blind Giant* would attract practitioners of similar prestige in the future.

Certainly, by measuring *Blind Giant* against these criteria, the play is undoubtedly prestigious and worthy of being part of our canon. Although dramaturgical innovation, prizes and high-profile collaborators mark *Blind Giant* as significant, these have only come because the play has been consistently programmed and revived, to generally good critical and box office response, over the decades.

But does *Blind Giant* still have relevance, and could it be done again? Will it live in our repertoire? It has certainly been tested by production so does it stand up? Is it a classic play?

Armfield still considers it a 'thrilling work' and 'extraordinarily eloquent',[48] and he compared Sewell with Patrick White in the way in which the text matched the ambition of the ideas. He also cited the detailed observations of family that, mixed with the political thriller genre, gives the play a unique form. He believes that the text has stayed alive because it offers great roles in Allen, Louise and Rose.[49] Four years after his own production, Flack

[48] Neil Armfield, interviewed by Katrina Foster via phone, August 20 2020.
[49] Armfield, interviewed by Foster.

believes that the play could not be staged again because of the problematic gender politics that are at its heart, which he thinks results from Sewell's unresolved struggle with feminism. He also thinks that plays about class are not relevant to younger generations. I wondered if this reflected his own political views, and we talked briefly about the recent deaths of fast food delivery drivers, who were not protected by a union, as being a current issue about class. He agreed that questions of class interest him, but not his audience. Plays from the past interest him too. For instance, he loves Chekhov and would love to direct more Chekhov, but he felt that this is not the time.[50] Nonetheless, despite his hesitations, Flack finished by saying that if a play 'with a voice as big and bold and ambitious as *Blind Giant* came across my desk, I would stage it in a minute'.[51] Tom Wright thought 'that it would be laughable to do a play about Marxism today. The economic model of family represented in the play is no longer the family today'.[52] He also thought that the older white working class that the play foregrounds is no longer relevant or interesting to a younger generation: 'The question today is not what is being said but who is saying it, who is being privileged. Who is on stage? Whose voice is it?' He cited gender and diversity as being the major drivers for decisions around programming, saying that we are currently in 'a moment of solipsism' in that everyone wants their own interests and only their own interests represented: 'Shakespeare for instance is increasingly not being programmed here because younger audiences ask why they are watching it'. He thought the problem with staging plays from the past is that they often raise questions of 'othering' and cultural authority. He gave the example of John Romeril's *Floating World*, which includes a Japanese character. As the character was written by a white man, this would be considered 'othering' and would not be countenanced. He thought that these arguments are often reductive but that they were necessary and that this time would

[50] Since this interview Belvoir has programmed *The Cherry Orchard* for its 2021 season
[51] Flack, interviewed by Foster.
[52] Flack, interviewed by Foster.

pass. He suggested that various plays by Shakespeare have fallen in and out of fashion, for whatever reason, while still remaining in the canon.[53]

When I began this thesis in early 2016, I thought I would be writing about the making of a classic play—that *Blind Giant* having had so many revivals had ensured its place in our repertoire. Now I am not so sure. In 2017, a year after the last production, two social movements—Me Too and Black Lives Matter—came to prominence. These movements have had a profound effect on our society, politics and consequently our theatre. Having begun in the arts industry, the Me Too movement has been particularly influential in programming, conversations around casting, choices made in production and theatre in general. Cancel culture has also made its presence felt. Conversations that were beginning to be voiced by the actors in rehearsal for *Blind Giant* became louder and are being validated by broader public opinion. These conversations have radically changed our views on gender, the depiction of women, the representation of marginal groups in the arts and the power dynamic in the workplace. As a result and picking up on the views of some of the women in the cast to whom I spoke, I think a production of *Blind Giant* would not be possible in the next few years, and so I wonder about its future. While I agree that the female characters are problematic, I do think it is an important and significant play.

Imagine the year is 2033, 50 years since the first production of *Blind Giant* in 1983. Currency Press created an app for *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* to mark its fiftieth anniversary. Will we do anything for *Blind Giant*? Could it still be staged? With time, could the sexual politics and lack of autonomy of the female characters be viewed in the context of when it was written? Perhaps when this current necessary conversation about gender and diversity has found the coolness of distance, the current generation might be able to examine a play like *Blind Giant* and find that the identity politics are representative of a time and place

[53] Wright, interviewed by Foster.

and, while no longer valid, the play's themes of personal power and political power still resonate. If there were to be another production of the play how it could be held accountable for its representation of women? Will the play be given its place with other plays in similar genres, and will its dramaturgical influence therefore be noted? It is unlikely today that the play would be taught in schools, but will it be taught in 50 years? As for universities, who knows whether Australian drama and Australian literature departments will even exist? In letters to Russell Fewster written in 2000, five years after they had both appeared in their second production of the play, both Kerry Walker and Russell Kiefel who respectively even then, had many theatre credits to their names, noted the play's significance. Russell Kiefel wrote "I have always regarded it as one of our great plays."[54] Kerry Walker wrote "I think it is one of the most important plays written in Australia- ever!"[55] Five years after its last production in 2016, has the play's importance now diminished and in 2033 will it have faded completely? Will the play be dismissed as a curio, or will it serve as a measure of what we were like 50 years ago and what mattered to us and what we struggled to understand? None of these outcomes will eventuate if, like so many of the plays that existed in the 1960s and earlier, this play joins our shadow canon—a vague mention here and there by a few who may remember, but largely forgotten. It is possible, and I am hopeful that its multiple productions give it some chance of survival in our repertoire and visibility in our canon. After all, Flack knew of the play when he was at drama school, and he staged it when he was in a position to do so. When the time is right, perhaps a new director will do the same, and the play will stay alive in our repertoire.

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[54] Russell David Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing by Neil Armfield and the Company B Ensemble* (M Phil, University of Sydney, 2001).
[55] Russell David Fewster, *A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of The Blind Giant is Dancing*

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate how plays endure. I have argued that in Australia, although we may have a canon, we do not have a repertoire, or if we do, it is a small one. I defined the dramatic canon as being a list of plays that have been published and, through various means, have achieved a level of prestige, and I defined repertoire as a list of plays that, due to regular reprogramming on our main stages, have remained in our cultural memory. I identified publishing, programming and prize-giving as the main drivers of canon formation and how they may or may not lead to a play being added to the dramatic canon. In Chapter 3, taking Lawler's play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* as an example of an established 'classic', I identified a set of criteria that can be used to examine the economy of theatrical prestige in Australia, and I used these criteria to test the classic status of Patrick White's play, *The Season of Sarsaparill*a. Next, I turned to Stephen Sewell's *The Blind Giant is Dancing* as a case study. I traced the social and political contexts of staging it in three different decades, as well as the circumstances of its programming, production and reception.

Each production brought with it the humanity and boldness of the writer, the personalities, experience and depth of enquiry from the actors, the insight and ambition of the directors, the vision of the designers, the mission of the theatre company programming it and the specific universe of the generations of the audience watching it. To summarise the three productions of the play in the case study:

1. In 1983 the play burst onto the stage with an ensemble of young practitioners determined to wipe away the old guard and replace it with a revolution that reflected their non-mainstream social and political views.
2. In 1995 the play was revived by a 'family' of actors that brought with it a reflection of the notion of practitioners as culture bearers from the first production to reflect on the

past as a mirror to the present and to showcase this significant Australian play in a production the director was determined that Sydney should see.

3. In 2016 the play was programmed as an Australian classic with a cast who were mostly generations away from the original production. It encountered significant and problematic issues of gender and class inherent in the play.

I did not think when I began this case study that given the current political climate, the 2016 production could perhaps be the last production possible for this play in its current form. It brought home to me the impossibility of calling a play "universal" or "timeless". However, this does not mean that we should stop examining the plays that we have in our past and find ways to approach them as starting points to build our repertoire.

It is clear that when examining canon and repertoire in Australia, and when tracing a play's survival, visibility in our canon and endurance in our repertoire comes with production. Theatre is transient, and the conventional wisdom is that plays are impermanent—that when they're done, they're done, or at least put aside for another time. However, because we rarely restage plays in Australia, they do not lie dormant but disappear. In his essay 'Trapped by the Past' Julian Meyrick traces the history of this 'forgetting'. Speaking of our cultural amnesia, Meyrick writes, 'the result is stunted growth: a theatre culture which repeats itself, because it doesn't know how to manage its inheritance'.[1]

Commenting on Meyrick's essay and developing its theme, Kathryn Kelly notes:

> It is a dramaturgy of Australian theatre, a history in motion that continues to perpetuate a tabula rasa. Each new generation forgets and disregards the prior generations preoccupations, instead taking on a self-conscious obsession with the new.[2]

Such thoughts are not new. In the 1950s, playwright Henrietta Drake Brockman wrote: 'It's all very well being a pioneer but one gets fed up with hearing *The Doll* being spoken about as

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[1] Julian Meyrick, *Trapped by the Past: Why Our Theatre is Facing Paralysis* (Sydney: Currency House, 2005).

[2] Kathryn Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies: Changes Since 2000', in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s*, edited by Richard Fotheringham and James Smith (The Netherlands: Brill–Rodopi, 2013).

if it were Athena sprung fully formed from the head of Jove'.[3] Twenty years later, speaking of the New Wave playwrights, Mona Brand wrote:

> It could be as important for playwrights to recognise their theatrical antecedents as it is for individuals to know something of their personal ancestry. From views expressed by APG writers and their supporters one could be forgiven for getting the impression that they were the originators of radical theatre in Australia—or that radical theatre sprang fully grown if not out of Jupiter's head, at least out of La Mama's.[4]

In 1995 at the Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture, Jim Sharman said:

> Theatre practitioners are like a lost tribe with only an oral tradition handed down erratically form person to person, usually as gossip. Without access to history, the growth of our theatre is in inhibited. For while an absence of tradition is liberating, it can also be wasteful as each new generation earnestly sets about reinventing the wheel.[5]

For Lewis, a theatre-maker from a more recent generation, the lack of a canon is, in fact, an opportunity, as I quoted in the Introduction: 'I think that's one of Australia's strengths; that we're in the process of building a canon, as opposed to being subject to one. I think the oppression of a canon can actually stop the development of new ideas'.[6] I contend that we, in fact, do have a canon of sorts; the plays exist, and some are regularly remounted. There exists the semblance of a repertoire that includes Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and plays on the school syllabus such as Michael Gow's *Away*, Lally Katz's *Neighbourhood Watch* and David Williamson's *The Removalists*. However, before *The Doll*, the ledger is clear, and it remains the foundational text for Australian drama. If recent plays are not to meet the fate of those written and produced before *The Doll*, we need to make our canon visible through a repertoire of plays that are regularly performed around the country. Without

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[3] Michelle Arrow, *Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002).
[4] Mona Brand, "The Missing Steps" *Overland* , 68 1977 , p. 48
[5] Rex Cramphorn, 'In the Realm of the Imagination', 1995, http://www.jimsharman.com.au/the-present/in-the-realm-of-the-imagination/.
[6] Richard Watts, 'Should We Fire the Theatrical Canon?', *ArtsHub*, 8 July 2014, https://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/performing-arts/richard-watts/should-we-fire-the-theatrical-canon-244634.

this, the canon will stagnate and even collapse, ensuring that the writers of today will be forgotten, just as the playwrights of 60 or even 20 years ago are forgotten.

There is a paradox in Australia that results from an under-resourced and ill-defined theatre industry: new work is always competing with older work that is begging to be restaged. Programming, as can be seen in the case study of *Blind Giant,* is often based on one person's reaction to a play, and so programming choices are often quite arbitrary–driven by personal taste and by theatre's ever-present commercial concerns, such as the need to get 'bums on seats'. New work is of course vital in responding to who we are as a nation now, and the work of new writers needs to be contextualised within the work of older writers in a lineage of theatrical tradition. Are we, as Lewis suggests, building a canon of new ideas or are we just grabbing the new, discarding it and looking for the next hit? Kathryn Kelly writes about this paradox of old and new:

> The consequences of this disremembering are paradoxical. The unleashing of new energies, the exploration of new horizons, invocation of artistic challenge—all this goes hand in glove with an agenda that can erase history, dispossess the artistry of past generations and traditions and disguise ongoing and intractable inequity.[7]

So, what to do? Meyrick has called for a National Theatre—that is, a theatre without a building, based on the model of the National Theatre of Scotland.[8] There have also been calls to restructure the model of company leadership centred on an artistic director.[9] Kelly suggests that funding bodies should be lobbied to rethink funding so that mainstage companies and independent companies have more institutionalised funding models to develop new work.[10] Of course, all of this was before COVID-19 and the possible obliteration of many theatre companies. We are at a critical time right now, with the arts being ideologically attacked,

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[7] Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies'.
[8] Julian Meyrick, *The Retreat of Our National Drama* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2014).
[9] Robert Reid, *Uninstall/Reboot: Rethinking Australian Arts*, 29 September 2017, https://witnessperformance.com/uninstallreboot/
[10] Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies'.

theatre and performance departments at universities being permanently shut down, and the cost of studying the humanities increasing by 113 per cent.[11] Julian Meyrick speaks of the degradation of performing arts course in higher education stating, 'if creative arts teaching struggles to survive, then the creative arts will struggle to survive. To damage one is to the cripple the other.'[12]

Without people and places to do the research and study, mere survival trumps any talk of canon. In these times, our past is even closer to being perilously eroded. However, it is important to end on a note of hope, and Kelly writes beautifully about a cause for celebration when she recalls:

> how the dramaturgy of Australian performance circles back to critical questions that haunt the canon; identity, landscape and memory … Patrick White's landscape of heightened suburban naturalism in Sarsaparilla becomes Benedict Andrews glass-fronted, hyper-real, television-set Australian backyard. Australian voice and vernacular authenticity become an Australian body as the language of Jack Davis is transformed into the white face of *Black Medea,* the passionate attack of Oriel Gray's pro Jewish refugees in post war Australia is echoed down the generations by the compelling outrage of Ros Horin's *Through The Wire*.[13]

As Kelly suggests, our theatrical legacy is imprinted in so many ways, and memory lives in our cultural DNA. A canon inventories our past and a repertoire brings it alive. Plays are things of beauty that remind us of who we were, who we are and even how we could be.

Perhaps one way to refresh our repertoire is through adaptation. There are many Australian plays (most of them by women) that could be rewritten and adapted by contemporary Australian writers. I am thinking here of plays by Mona Brand, Dorothy Hewett, Dorothy Blewett, George Landon Dann, Kevin Gilbert, Katherine Susannah Prichard and many more; plays that were written in the 1920s–1950s, and plays written about still contemporary concerns, such as racism, feminism, colonialism, land rights and mining. These

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[11] Lisa Visentin and Anna Patty, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 11, 2021

[12] Julian Meyrick, 'Drama in Hell,' *The Monthly* October 2021

[13] Kelly, 'Post-Millennial Australian Dramaturgies'.

plays were written when there was no Australian professional theatre to write for; many were issue plays, and many sit outside our current understanding of genre. They can seem dusty to contemporary theatre-goers or literary managers due to their lengthy stage directions and sometimes creaky dialogue, and they can read much as Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* might read if one read an old translation from the 1940s and not Simon Stone's powerful recent adaptation. If we can adapt plays in the European and American canon, why not adapt our own? The major problem with many of these plays, such as Prichard's *Brumby Innes*, is that they deal with Indigenous themes but are written by non-Indigenous playwrights, thereby making them impossible to responsibly stage or even possibly study.

I would like to see some of these older plays adapted by our contemporary playwrights. I would pair Kate Mulvaney with Dorothy Blewett's *The First Joanna*, Nakkiah Lui with Susannah Prichard's *Brumby Innes*, and Michelle Law with Mona Brand's *Strangers in The Land*. Through collaboration and adaptation by diverse theatre-makers, these plays might find new life, new meaning, enter the repertoire and become visible in our canon.

For the sake of our audiences and for the sake of those who make their living from the theatre, we need to examine what we already have—all of those plays that have won awards and developments and that may be sitting on a database somewhere—so we can keep moving forward and make a case that our theatre and our stories matter—that they are an 'essential service' that continues to contribute to our cultural wealth. We will never have a visible canon unless we can own our past. We have stories about people capable of unspeakable violence and cruelty, as well stories of people who are flawed but are trying to understand what it means to be alive at a certain point in history. By adapting these plays, we might be able to remember the voices of those who spoke of this—those voices that we have dismissed and intentionally or unintentionally forgotten. This is one way our plays might endure.

APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGY

Interviews form the basis of my case study covered in Chapters 3-6. The case study follows three productions of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* by Stephen Sewell . Austage records six full productions of the play and of these I chose to cover three: the premiere season performed at The Playhouse in South Australia by the Lighthouse Acting Company in 1983; the third revival of the play in 1995 at Belvoir St Theatre and the most recent production at Belvoir in 2016. These productions were chosen mainly because some of the cast and the director were involved in two or more of the productions and I was curious to hear their reflections about how the play had fared over successive decades and I was hopeful that their responses might inform my investigation into why some plays endure. The interviewees were chosen because of their relationship to each production. I was interested in the shifts of social and political change over the decades and if and how the play reflected these to new audiences. I was particularly interested in the changing view of the female characters in the play over the decades and so I wanted to talk to actors who had played the same role in different productions or who had been involved in more than one production. I wanted to know how the play spoke to different generations of actors.

At the time of interviewing Australia was in lockdown due to COVID so most interviews were conducted by either phone or video call (zoom) with only two conducted in person.

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Neil Armfield directed the 1983 and 1996 production (phone interview 20th August 2020)

Lee-Anne Donnolly stage manager for Lighthouse acting company 1982- 1983

(Spoke in person 12thFebruary 2020)

Eamon Flack directed the 2016 production (met in person on Tuesday 15th September 2020 at Belvoir St Theatre)

Emma Jackson played Janice Lang and Robin (email exchange 24th and 25th February 2020)

Gillian Jones played Rose Draper in 1983 and Janice Lang and Robin in 1996 (phone interview 8th December 2020)

Genevieve Lemon played Eileen Fitzgerald in 2016 production (phone interview 11th December 2020)

Zahra Newman played Rose Draper in the 2016 production (phone interview 16th December 2020)

Stephen Sewell : Playwright (Zoom interview 25th August 2020)

Kerry Walker played Eileen Fitzgerald in 1983 and 1995 . (Phone interview 23rd February 2020)

Tom Wright is the associate director at Belvoir and was the literary manager2016 when Blind Giant was performed at Belvoir (met in person on 23rd August 2020)

QUESTIONS

Below are the questions I drafted for the interviews.

For the playwright:

- Do you think the play is prophetic?
- Do you write for the times or for posterity?

- Did you rewrite?
- How did the rewrites change for each production?
- Were any of the rewrites done on the basis of having seen the play in production previously?
- If you could go back, knowing the Labor party as it is now what would you write?
- Were you trying to anticipate the death of the working class in Australia?
- How has the reception of the play changed over the decades?
- How has the design of the play changed?
- If you had to place this play in a genre , what would it be?
- Do predecessors of this genre influence you?
- What are the differences in perception over the three decades the play has been performed?
- How important is for you that your plays have more lives?
- What prompts you to want to revisit a play?
- What is your perception of the females in the play?
- Has this changed over time?

For the actors:

- What production were you in?
- Do you remember what was happening at the time? In your life? In the world? In the company?
- To what extent do you think being part of a company of actors had on the 84 production?
- What was your experience as an actor doing this play?
- What was the audience's general response?
- Did you want to be in the play because of its content?

- Because it was a gig?
- Because of the director or the company?
- What is your opinion of the role of women in the play?
- Would you ask different question of and about the play were you in it now?
- How has the character of Rose changed?
- Louise?
- Alan?
- In the 80s and 90s were there questions asked about the roles of women in the play?
- And in 2016?
- Post # me too do you think different questions would be asked about the play?

For the directors:

- Why was this play programmed?
- Was it a response to what was happening politically?
- Did you have particular actors in mind before you programmed it?
- Why this particular play by Stephen Sewell?
- What sort of future life do you envisage for this play?
- Do you think we have a canon?
- Do you think we need a canon?
- What plays would you out on it?
- Did you want rewrites?
- Why?
- What is your perception of the women in the play?
- Would you do it again?
- How has the pay changed from each production?
- Did you have issues with its content?

- Is it a production that stays in your memory as particularly significant?

OTHER INTERVIEWS

I also spoke to two playwrights/ theatre makers who were not associated with The Blind Giant is Dancing: S**ally Alrich Smythe,** a recent graduate of NIDA's MFA Writing for Performance degree. (Zoom interview Monday 30th August 2020) and to **Chika Ikogwe** actor/writer (Zoom interview September 11th, 2020). I was curious to know how important Australian theatre history is to younger emerging playwrights I asked them if they thought it matters if Australia has a canon and/or dramatic traditions as references. I also interviewed them about what they wanted to write about and who they wanted to see represented on our stages.

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