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Does the Theatre Have Any Direct Effect on How We Live?

By Hannie Rayson

As a child I worried about the poor. I thought about them almost as much as I thought about how much I wanted to own a horse. And that was a lot. My mother said that the measure of poverty was when children came to school without shoes. She said I was to keep my eyes open for bare feet in the playground, but in the meantime I should stop worrying. Because as well as being a classless society we were a prosperous society, and that was because of Mr Menzies and our innate decency as a people. In my heart, I knew my mother was wrong, but I was hard pressed to collect evidence. There just didn't seem to be that many barefoot children at primary school in Brighton.

I spent my childhood in Middle Brighton. Which my husband points out is insulated from the rest of the world, by all the other types of Brighton. He seems to think he is much more a man of the people, having grown up in Malvern.

Later, at Melbourne Uni I sat in Carlton coffee shops and ate ravioli and worried away at injustice and poverty. And then I decamped to kitchen tables in shared houses in Fitzroy and ate lentils and worried away at racism, class inequality and sexism. And then, for some strange reason I went on to train as an actor. Why would someone of my predilection — with a burning ambition to make the world different — fairer, more just — choose a career in the make-believe world of the theatre?

I have niggled away at this conundrum — for most of my working life. I have spent twenty-five years of sustained engagement with the question of how to write a good play. And on plenty of occasions it has occurred to me to ask — what were you thinking? Would it not have been better to have taken the other fork in the road and to have been the social worker or psychologist I was training to be? Because really, you have to ask — does the theatre have any direct effect on how we live? Or am I still behaving like an earnest undergraduate, staging Jean Genet and Ionesco in the fervent belief that it will bring about the collapse of western capitalism?

And the answer is yes.

And no.

I believe that great writing allows us to see the world through eyes other than our own. This is theatre's great act of subversion. It engenders a capacity for empathy. There you are sitting in the dark transported into a parallel world. And if the magic of the theatre is working, as an audience member you are seduced into letting go of ego and fear and your own agenda to look at things as they are, on that stage. Not as you want them to be, not as you need them to be, just what they are, up there. And you let that affront you and confront you.

You are lured, for example, to feel the bitterness of a drought-stricken farmer as he boils with rage at smart — talking city people squandering water on their suburban flower beds. You become consumed with the injustices which burn in the hearts of a teenager, or the pain of the bereaved soldier's wife, or the profoundly disappointed mother who has sacrificed her career to raise horrible children, or the mean-spirited and judgemental church-goer resentful of other people's affluence.

You know these people.

You have pushed past them as you dash through Myers at lunch-time to take advantage of the 25% off everything sale.

But who are they, these people? What do they feel? How do they put together their world view? Do we ever imagine that such ordinary folk could lead extraordinary lives?

This play of empathy — this clandestine entry into other people's worlds — liberates the untold story. It articulates the

voices we never hear. Not just the voices of the oppressed or the overlooked — not just David Hicks, Willy Loman, asylum seekers or the maids in Genet. But also the inner voices of the powerful — Lady Macbeth, Oedipus and all those venal and vigorous businessmen in David Williamson plays.

I am not arguing here that the play is a vehicle for a political ideology. A play is bigger than ideology. It attempts to represent the world in more complex ways. As a playwright you often find you are giving your best lines to your villains … and that they … in all their villainy challenge you because they have the most searing and merciless insights.

In my play *Inheritance*, one of the characters — a brash, struggling farmer's wife morphs into a replicant of Pauline Hanson when she decides to run for Parliament. To me "Maureen Delaney" is a classic theatre grotesque. But the artistic director of the Melbourne Theatre Company got a rave letter from someone who saw the play, thanking him effusively for letting Pauline Hanson's voice be heard.

That's why the theatre is not just subversive. It's also dangerous. Because ultimately you can't control it. Often it leaves your own politics standing flat-footed in the dust while it roars away to an unmapped destination.

For me story is everything. Story and language. But primarily story. Because if it's good, if it's well plotted, if it's laced with insight and meaning, if it's funny, if it tears at your heart — you will be lost in it. You will lose touch with your own ideological certainties and you will think, "Oh my god it could have been me that decided to train with Al Quaida and now find myself tied up like an animal in Gauntanamo Bay." Or equally, "Oh migod— it could have been me that tortured those people in Abu Ghraib."

But great writing also tests the limits of empathy. Intellectually and morally it pushes us to articulate our values more precisely. To know the point when we are going to hurl the window open and shout "I'm not going to take it any more!"

But what difference is Australian writing making?

In the mid-70s when I was at university, there was no Australian text on the university English syllabus. The upshot of this was that generations of Australians grew up to believe that art has no bearing on the way we live in this country and that the way we live is not valid subject matter for art.

This is why I feel deeply indebted to Helen Garner and David Williamson and David Malouf and the stable of writers published by McPhee Gribble in the 70s, and the collective of playwrights who honed their craft at The Pram Factory and La Mama and The Nimrod in Sydney. It was through them that I discovered that profundity and beauty and all the mysteries of the human condition could occur in an Australian lounge room and were not merely the preserve of Russians hovering around the samovar or Norwegians in the drawing room. It was a validation of my life and my culture told in a language that was distinctively ours.

And I continue to be nourished by reading writers like Dorothy Porter and Alex Miller and Barry Jones. Each in their distinctive ways have a facility to link an intense inwardness with the great questions of our age.

Perhaps the more pertinent question is to ask what is un-Australian writing. There is a war against ideas out there — a terrible anxiety that the left-wingers are making the running; an assumption that there is only ever two sides to a discussion and whenever anyone speaks publicly on our national broadcaster we must immediately call for balance and seek comment from the Liberal Party.

To be a critical and thoughtful voice in Australia at the moment is to be unpatriotic. It is to be a taxpayer-funded Howard hater. To be purveyors of what Keith Windschuttle calls "the adversary culture": "People who hate Australia … obsessed with demonising the Howard government."

The group responsible for this so called "adversary culture", according to Windschuttle, dominate our film and theatre industry, our arts and literature, public broadcasting, the Fairfax press and the humanities and social science departments of our 38 universities.

Finally, I believe a truly vital theatre is one which engages with the national conversation. If this ambition is silenced then we will lose the very thing about theatre which most distinguishes it and makes it most valuable.

The really engaged writer, in my view, is the one who enters into a full and frank conversation with their moment in history.

Hannie Rayson

Hannie Rayson is the author of eleven plays including *Hotel Sorrento*, *Falling From Grace*, *Life After George* and *Inheritance*. Her plays have been performed throughout Australia and internationally. Hotel Sorrento, which won several prizes, was adapted as a feature film. She has won the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award and the Victorian and NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Hannie also writes for newspapers, film and television.