

REVIEWS

REVIEW EDITOR: KATE DONELAN
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

David Williamson (2002)
THE JACK MANNING TRILOGY
(*Face To Face; A Conversation; Charitable Intent*)
Currency Press
ISBN 0 86819 657 6

Peter Robert
Yarra Valley Grammar School

When you consider the number of plays David Williamson has written and the subsequent position he finds himself as a voice for the middle-class Australian experience, it is no surprise that he now finds himself writing plays to order. In the Introduction to The Jack Manning Trilogy, Williamson mentions how David Moore and John Macdonald from Transformative Justice Australia contacted him and how the processes involved in community conferencing has great potential for dramatisation. What he doesn't mention is why these fellows contacted him. Were they keen for an easy way to explain the processes involved in community conferencing? For if so, Williamson is the right man for the job. His three plays give us three distinctly different, and yet understandably similar, accounts of the success of this interventionist process. They also add three more engaging plays to his sizeable canon.

Face To Face, the first in the trilogy, is the community conference called to help avoid sending a young man to jail after he is involved in deliberately smashing his boss' Mercedes, by forcing him and the other people he works with to confront his actions. The second play, *A Conversation*, is more harrowing, with the parents of a girl who has been raped and murdered sharing their grief with the family of the convicted murderer. And the third play, *Charitable Intent*, explores the simmering undercurrents of office politics as a newly appointed CEO finds her moving and shaking less impressive for those who she works with than for those in the board room. The character of Jack Manning is consistent through each play as the ever-patient and skilled facilitator of the community conference.

What captured me immediately about these plays was the rich potential for characterisation offered in each play. *Face to Face*, although the weakest play in many ways, is neatly contained with a range of character types easily recognised. It lends itself for realisation by students. There is typical Williamson wit in this one, which is welcome but does compromise the attempt at realism within the language. Tension is palpable in all three plays as one would expect, but *A Conversation* is probably the most powerful example of this. There are some excellent passages and small monologues which will provide senior drama classes with plenty of opportunities to explore pathos. *Charitable Intent* is a timely social morality tale. All three plays read easily and demonstrate Williamson's skill as a craftsman, although none will be regarded as Williamson at his best.

I will be using these plays at some stage in my teaching as I see them as useful texts to explore characters through dramatic techniques such as hot seating, thought tracking or role playing. I know *Face to Face* has been produced by school groups, and the role of theatre to explore community conferencing issues provides plenty of scope for students to explore cultural, political and social contexts. There is a challenge for the class to consider the staging beyond the closed set as described in the text. How might symbolism or physical theatre be applied?

Williamson has provided teachers and students with some terrific plays for study and performance and The Jack Manning Trilogy adds a more purpose-driven series to the list.

Meyrick, Julian (2002)
See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave
Currency Press
ISBN 0 868196517

Barry Tudor
 Head of Drama, St Leonards College Victoria

As a teacher of senior drama I find it fascinating to read material that puts into context Australian theatre and theatre companies. After all, this is how we come to understand the direction of current theatrical practice. Call it synergy or just strange luck but, within the space of two days, a load of old programs arrived on my desk from a helpful colleague as well as a review copy of *See How It Runs*. Imagine my surprise to find two mint condition programs from Nimrod in the collection — wonderful archival material, and this, in essence, is also the unique value of this book.

See How It Runs began life as a thesis and has made the transition into the published form with mixed success. I found the historical information fascinating and certainly useful — within the context of Australian theatre history, this was a missing chunk that needed filling. However, the book does not make for an easy read and I often had to re-read sections in order to make sense of some of the lengthier passages. Stick with it and it all falls into place but it does take a bit of work.

Why is an historical account of a theatre company so relevant? Well, it is through the past that we learn through mistakes and successes to inform what we do in the present. In this way, this is a very informative piece of writing as it places Nimrod's significance within the context of the development of Australian theatre. [Yes we do have a Theatre history, and one we should be damn proud of !]

It is interesting, given the rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney, to read of the friction between the APG and Nimrod during the tour of *Hamlet* thirty years ago. It was a shame about the lack of changing rooms at the APG!. It describes with relish the soap opera of conflicting egos played out in the Nimrod boardroom.

At the same time, Nimrod was anxious to find its own voice, eager to move away from the anglocentric repertory model of previous theatre in Australia. Through the enthusiasm and talents of people associated with Nimrod we moved into an era where we are proud to use our unique Australian voice. *The Legend of King O'Malley* was certainly a turning point and, in the 70s, the metaphor 'all the world's a stage' had a special resonance as productions like *O'Malley* intersected with the political events of the day.

NJ, 26:2, 2002

Why did Nimrod fail? A number of factors point to its demise. There was the failure to pass the baton on successfully, no new blood to carry on ideas or push the established members into new territory, petty jealousy about somebody having a better space to perform in; the Seymour Centre was moved into and two months later the company folded.

Is it fair to say that Nimrod paved the way for companies such as Victoria's Playbox and we certainly have a lot to thank the company for? Did it thrive because of more radical times? Nimrod existed at a time that was right for the energy of Australian writing and identity to be expressed. I still remember seeing *The Venetian Twins* and being blown away by its energy and freshness. I wanted to work at the Nimrod or somewhere like it. Sadly the APG also ran its course. A book like this is a way of suggesting the future course for some of our current companies. If theatre companies always play safe, no development of our theatrical identity will take place but, if we take no heed of financial constraints, the company will sink. It seemed that in its early days Nimrod had a good balance; alongside its commercial success it still allowed experimentation and the opportunity to encourage new writing.

The book is neatly divided into themes of Repertoire, Battles and Statistics, so it is possible to dip into selected areas. I particularly found the 'Figuring Nimrod' section enlightening; Meyrick has collated the statistics of both financial and audience figures and this is further supported in the appendix. Chapters Three and Five look at the repertoire of Nimrod from 1970 – 1979 and the numbers of influential names here are fascinating.

Information like this is certainly valuable to a drama teacher as it places into perspective our unique Australian theatrical voice. Classroom drama, after all, springs from the art of theatre. Is this a worthwhile piece of work? In writing and researching a comprehensive history of Nimrod, Meyrick has achieved a great deal. In being easily readable, perhaps it falls a little short of the mark..

This is not a practical teaching text; it is an historical document, useful for both students and teachers in its accuracy and depth.

Kathleen Gallagher (2000)
(with a Foreword by Madeleine Grumet)
Drama Education in the Lives of Girls: Imagining Possibilities.
University of Toronto Press
ISBN 0-8020-8478-8

Richard Sallis
Melbourne University and Drama Victoria

In the Prologue to her book *Drama Education in the Lives of Girls: Imagining Possibilities* Kathleen Gallagher states that she has written it for teachers. As such, she sees it as having three main purposes: to add to the collective knowledge of girlhood, to give hope to teachers whom she says are currently having to battle with a disempowering period in education, and to add further evidence to drama's role in animating the process of learning. Written in 2000 it is based on her doctoral research into the drama education of girls.

Over an eighteen month period, Gallagher conducted a case study of her Year 10 Drama class in a single-sex Catholic girls' school in Canada. She videotaped the classes and interviewed nineteen of the students. Gallagher refers to drama as a 'feminine gendered subject' which, in many schools is still considered to be on the outer of the curriculum. She says that masculine gendered subjects such as maths and the sciences are core in most schools because they are considered 'hard for the mind'. In comparison, drama, like many of the arts subjects, utilises 'a student-centred and inquiry-based approach'.

The author states that she has, for many years, been 'actively engaged in the emancipation of girls and women'. When she embarked on her research, she wanted to 'better understand the particular qualities of drama education for girls in a single-sex environment'. She has subsequently found that drama structures can 'intervene in the spaces normally advantageous to boys'. The author who, at the time of the research, was a teacher in a single-sex girls' school, provides a detailed and personal account of her drama classes. She defines her standpoint in the research as a participant observer and a reflective practitioner. Concurrently she positioned herself and her students (whom she describes as 'inquisitors') as co-researchers in the setting.

For Gallagher it is important that drama education does not 'transmit a particular ideology or . . . leave unchallenged the things we think we believe'. She sees part of her job as a drama educator is to 'challenge any assumptions that limit students' sense of themselves or others'. As one student told her, drama has helped her to 'see other people's points of view'.

Gallagher used a variety of drama conventions in her classroom practice and these are described in detail. This pedagogical information will no doubt be beneficial to those learning to teach drama and teachers new to the profession. Gallagher carefully plots her drama techniques, conventions and processes. For example, she describes in detail the role-plays, process dramas and forum theatre pieces she taught. She contends that 'collective negotiation' is, for her, one of the mainstays of drama. In a forum theatre piece she conducted she observed that the students demonstrated a 'collective commitment to try out, rehearse or replay different possibilities'. Here she observed that many voices were given the opportunity to be heard and that multiple meanings of the pretext were experienced.

Gallagher attests that an important aspect of learning in drama is personal development. She is an advocate of the emancipatory value of drama and this is evident in her teaching. In the way of Brecht and Boal, to whom she refers, she sees the potential of drama for change — social, emotional and political. It is a subject where personal viewpoints and ideologies can be questioned and, perhaps, re-shaped and re-formed. When students have the feeling that they can contribute freely, the 'pressure is off and the tensions of varying perspectives co-exist.' The teacher must be prepared to allow the students to find the 'role' in themselves, and to engage in their own lives and bring this to the drama class to share with others.

Stereotyping, she says, is an important consideration for drama teachers because stereotypes can 'have a powerful hold on the imaginations of teenagers'. Interestingly, in her drama classes she found this manifested itself more in relation to class and race

than in relation to gender. The fictional dramas in her classes helped students to make sense of and challenged their own worldview. Notably the students created the dramas in the presence of others. For Gallagher, the creation of character was interrelated to a development of the student as well.

From a research perspective, the author touches on a number of important considerations such as the positioning of the researcher, the ethics of research with young school-aged people, choosing the appropriate setting for educational research, and the reflective practice of the teacher researching her own school. She goes into some considerable detail about the methodology of her research and, in particular, the stance she took as a classroom-based arts teacher-researcher. She also makes some valuable comments and observations about the position of drama at the dawn of a new century. She argues that drama and other arts educators have to contend with teaching in an education system [in her own country] where quantifiable and testable outcomes are *de rigueur*. She makes reference to the Ontario school system but the examples she cites are far from exclusive. The difficulty of some drama educators to embrace outcomes-based assessment is not confined to Canada alone. According to the author, many curriculum documents constructed by government authorities for school-based education do not pay enough attention to artistic expression and the aesthetic experience.

In a section of the book entitled 'Research in the Classroom', Gallagher recounts the key questions she asked her students during the research. When she asked how the students saw themselves in drama compared to other classes at the same school, a number of girls stated that they saw the drama classroom as a place where they could be themselves. They added that they often brought aspects of their own reality to the characters they created. They also acknowledged that drama was one subject that affirmed their cultural background.

While the author suggests that single-sex [girls'] education is a 'viable and important alternative' to co-education, ironically what is lacking from this text is enough *specific* reference to girls and drama. Gallagher cites numerous instances from her own classes, however her examples are often too general and could pertain to drama in any school setting. What seems to be missing is any detailed discussion of femininity as a construct, particularly in relation to the construct of masculinity. The book does not perhaps go far enough in elucidating what it is *in particular* that makes her curriculum especially advantageous for girls in a single-sex school. I am currently completing research into the drama education of boys in a single-sex setting. I have found that boys working exclusively with other boys makes for a very special kind of drama classroom environment — one that is different from a co-educational environment. Gallagher all too rarely makes this kind of distinction, i.e., between what she identifies as being aspects of a drama curriculum specifically designed for an all-girl drama class in comparison with drama classes where gender is not such a key consideration in the planning of the curriculum. Arguably, many of the activities she cites could work for girls and boys in co-educational settings as well, yet this is not clarified.

This book is a strong advocacy document for drama education. Gender diversity is an important consideration in the planning of a drama curriculum. It seems a lost opportunity, therefore, that the author did not elaborate more on what *particular* techniques are useful in the education of girls in a single-sex learning environment.

BLAK INSIDE: Six Indigenous Plays from Victoria (2002)*Enuff* by John Harding*I Don't Wanna Play House* by Tammy Anderson*Belonging* by Tracey Rigney*Casting Doubts* by Maryanne Sam*Crowfire* by Jadah Milroy*Conversations with the Dead* by Richard J Frankland

Currency Press

ISBN 0 86819 662 2

Christine Olsen (2002)

Rabbit-proof Fence – The Screenplay

Currency Press

ISBN 0 86819 655 X

Peter Robert

Yarra Valley Grammar

Reading these two recent publications from Currency Press back-to-back provides a rare opportunity to hear a range of indigenous Australian voices articulate issues about media image, child abuse, responsibility, retribution, pain and guilt. Shaped and presented in creative dramatic contexts, both books tell stories of the social and cultural politics of urban and rural Australia. They contribute collectively to a better understanding of the complex issues surrounding Aboriginal reconciliation.

Blak Inside presents six short works by Victorian indigenous writers. They cover a range of styles and themes which ensure that this collection is both accessible and engaging. All the plays make their point clearly and strongly, although they are not necessarily all intense and certainly not without humour.

Probably the most immediately accessible for the classroom is Tracey Rigney's play *Belonging*, which explores the perennial situation of peer group pressures and teenage rebellion. The stereotypes in this scenario are turned around and the added pressures on the aboriginal teenager are made clearly apparent.

Casting Doubts by Maryanne Sam is another of the plays that should enjoy student treatment, indeed it began life as a student work in a performing arts course in a Melbourne secondary school. Like *Belonging*, the play looks at stereotypes but adds indigenous cultural elements which broaden the ideas and make clearer many of the ironies in the images presented by the media.

Tammy Anderson's *I Don't Wanna Play House* is a powerful one-woman play with many moments in this text which beg to be performed in class.

Crowfire by Jadah Milroy explores the loss of spirituality for both the indigenous and the colonial Australian and provides some creative staging challenges.

John Harding's *Enuff* and Richard Frankland's *Conversations With The Dead* top and tail the collection and are both very angry, tough works but where *Enuff* uses humour to create a frightening cautionary tale, *Conversations With The Dead* is much more tragic and despairing.

In all these plays, the language is often very raw and many of the scenes and situations presented may be confronting. This should not put off the study or exploration of these works but it certainly requires caution given the sensitivities of some school communities.

All these plays use contemporary settings in which to explore the themes of alienation and prejudice, the world of the bureaucrat, the politician, the casting agent, the housewife the school yard and the army. By presenting these issues in play form they are given voices and situations which can be explored and experienced in the classroom and on the stage again and again.

Perhaps providing an historical anchor to much of the angst in the plays of *Blak Inside*, is the screenplay of *Rabbit-proof Fence* that chronicles one woman's personal experience of the impact of government policies toward Aboriginal Australians. The screenplay of the Phillip Noyce film *Rabbit-proof Fence*, written by Christine Olsen, is based upon the novel by Doris Pilkington Garimara. It is a terrific read. I'm not sure what role it can play in the drama class except as an interesting screenplay to read. However, studied in conjunction with the *Blak Inside* scripts, there is an obvious symmetry. It takes the screenplay to help put some of the urban plays into context.

These two recent publications from Currency are important and moving new Australian works and, as a secondary school teacher, I am relieved to think that there are some new indigenous plays which speak to the crucial and enduring Aboriginal issues with a voice that is youthful and passionate — and accessible to my white middle-class student audience.