



## CURRENCY PRESS *A BRIEF HISTORY*

Currency Press is the oldest, independently-owned, active Australian publisher. It is a unique institution in Australia and a rare one in world publishing: a publishing house that subsists principally on the work of the local performing arts. As a specialist company the great bulk of its sales occur within Australia—and with a population of twenty-one million the existence of sufficient market to supply the needs of even a small commercial company may seem to outsiders remarkable.

Currency Press was incorporated in 1971 at a time of high nationalistic fervour. Just as the student revolution of the 1960s led to major social changes in Europe and North America, so it was in Australia. Here the conflict centred first on the Vietnam War, in which Australia participated as an ally of the United States. Until this time Australia had been used to thinking of herself as a junior partner, first of Britain who had colonised her, and later of the USA. In the 1950s the Suez crisis and its economic aftermath had broken the bonds of dependence on Britain. In the 1960s it was opposition to the war in Vietnam that led young white Australians to discard American imperialism and young black Australians to launch a civil rights movement.

In that new spirit Australia began to examine afresh its origins, its character, its language and accent and way of life. And from this derived an appetite for all things Australian—especially books which reinterpreted the past with a local perspective and gave voice to the rapidly-changing present. The young playwrights then emerging became leaders

in this movement. Their work, like the student revolution itself, was iconoclastic, bombastic and attention-seeking.

Along with the Vietnam moratorium marches in the late 1960s came radical changes of another kind, with young artists at the fore. These included a freeing-up of outdated censorship laws; the establishment of the Federal funding body, the Australian (now Australia) Council for the Arts; the rebirth of the film industry; anti-uranium mining, land rights for Aboriginal people and environmental movements; and the setting up of major regionally funded theatre companies. By 1971, the Australian playwright had a voice, a stage and a public for the first time since the days of the old purveyors of melodrama at the turn of the twentieth century.

Currency Press was launched in response to all these changes. At the time Dr Philip Parsons, was a drama academic at the University of New South Wales, Sydney; his wife Katharine Brisbane was national theatre critic of the Australian newspaper.

Events moved faster than they anticipated. The first play Currency Press published in 1971 was *Macquarie* by Alex Buzo. One of the first writers to call on them was David Williamson with three manuscripts: *The Coming of Stork*, *The Removalists* and *Don's Party*. *The Removalists*, after opening at La Mama (a tiny Melbourne experimental venue), was taken up in Sydney by the Nimrod Street Theatre (now the Stables Theatre) a theatre for new writers, and then transferred to a commercial house. This was the first play by the new generation to be bought by a commercial producer. In 1973 it went on to the Royal Court Theatre, in London, where it won for Williamson the Evening Standard Award for the most promising playwright of the year.

Currency Press published *The Removalists* in 1972. It was an immediate success, and for many years its best seller. Nearly 40 years later it still sells consistently well. It is a work which balances horror and humour, and is full of sharp observations about authority,

domestic confrontations and the somewhat ox-headed reputation of the Australian police. A timely play which shocked audiences into recognising—even celebrating—some of the uglier aspects of urban Australia, until then unfamiliar to the stage.

*Don's Party*, which captured Australia's changing politics, followed *The Removalists* into the commercial theatre in 1973. Since then Williamson has had an unbroken record of popularity on stage and on film. His other plays include *The Club*, *Travelling North*, *Emerald City*, *Money and Friends*, *Brilliant Lies*, *Dead White Males* and *Face to Face* to name a handful.

This background is important to the understanding of why Currency Press, a company begun with little capital and no publishing experience in the back room of a Sydney terrace, has become a major force in the performing arts in Australia. The task was not easy. For its first seven years the company was subsidised by the founders with salaries from other sources.

Early assistance came from Associated Book Publishers (then owners of the Methuen imprint) with whom Currency had a three-year partnership, spent creating a list of Australian titles which could be the basis of a study of Australian drama. Gradually, the plays began to creep into literature and other courses. By 1978 a market survey revealed that there was no tertiary institution in Australia which did not have one of Currency's books on a course somewhere.

Currency and Methuen parted in 1976 after a restructuring of the larger firm, and the Parsons, together with their long-standing associate Jean Cooney, began again to build the company. Cambridge University Press in Australia became Currency's distributor in 1977 and remained so until 2001, when a transfer was made to NewSouth Books (formerly UNIREPS) an arm of UNSW Press. Today there are over 400 plays in print together with reference texts, cultural histories, biographies, audition manuals, film scripts and sheet music. Currency exports books abroad for courses in the USA, the UK and Europe. The sale of publishing and

translation rights are increasing. There is particular interest abroad in the work of Aboriginal authors like the late Jack Davis (1917–2000) whose work has gained a high profile, aided by the rise of a generation of fine indigenous actors. Currency has also taken on the distribution of two like-minded UK publishers, Nick Hern Books and Oberon Books.

The pace at which this has happened is probably what distinguishes Currency from drama publishers in other countries whose basic income is derived from a much longer history of world drama. Currency Press, in contrast, relies heavily on a rapidly expanding list of contemporary Australian writers, although it does publish some genre plays of the colonial period and a handful of works from the first half of the twentieth century written for amateur performance in a theatrical climate overwhelmingly dominated by the American and British commercial theatre. The contemporary playwright is seen as worthy of study, not because of the weight of received opinion but because the author has something to say, to this generation at least, about what it means to be Australian.

In the theatre since the 1960s there has been a phase of aggressive works full of colourful vernacular by writers like Jack Hibberd, Alex Buzo and John Romeril; then a period of domestic examination which saw the rise of Williamson and more mature works like Peter Kenna's *A Hard God*; then a freer, more poetic look at the roots of our psyche, including the works of Dorothy Hewett, Louis Nowra and Stephen Sewell, and the return to the stage of Patrick White. Most recently has been a strengthening of the place of women writers with the work of Joanna Murray-Smith, Hannie Rayson, Jill Shearer and Katherine Thomson, and a strong resurgence of non Anglo-Celtic authors: the children of eastern European, Jewish and southern European immigrants, reinterpreting Australia as a multicultural society. A new generation of writers such as Angela Betzien, Brendan Cowell, Ben Ellis, Tom Holloway, Kate Mulvany and Tommy Murphy have also made their mark. In music and dance today the strongest new influences are Aboriginal and Asian.

Except in the Current Theatre Series (of which more later), plays are not accepted for publication until they have been refined by at least one professional stage production. While popular success in the theatre and sale of film rights are the best promotion for a published play, there may also be a market for a play with a more modest record. So the first questions that are asked of a manuscript are: Does it perform well in the theatre? Does it have something to say to the reader today? Does it have five years of life in it?

Currency's biggest and most reliable market is in education courses. 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. Among bestselling titles in recent years are Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance*, in which race, gender and generation all play a key role in the succession of a rural property; Louis Nowra's *Cosi*, set in a mental institution; Jane Harrison's *Stolen* about the Stolen Generation of Indigenous Australians; Matt Cameron's *Ruby Moon* which takes an absurdist look at the dead heart of suburbia; Mary Morris' adaptation of *Two Weeks with the Queen*, about a young boy coming to terms with death; and John Misto's *The Shoehorn Sonata*, about two survivors of a Japanese women's prisoner-of-war camp. Currency's overriding purpose in promoting work of this kind is to demonstrate that the creative writer is not only an entertainer but also a keen social observer and critic.

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 public examinations 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. Some of Currency's titles have been reprinted almost every year since publication.

An example of the process is *Away*, the third play by Sydney writer Michael Gow. *Away* is about three families on summer holiday and has parallels with the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was first performed in 1986 in a small Sydney theatre where its instant appeal earned it productions in other cities and a more glamorous revival at home. In 1989 it was set on the New South Wales Higher School Certificate English course and sold 10,000 copies. Since then it has continued to be reprinted annually and sales today now exceed 180,000. Few education systems in the world would place its seal of approval upon an author so rapidly.

The look of the book is defined very much by what Currency conceives the market to be. With a complex format like a play, which involves a variety of type forms, special care is taken with the look of the play on the page. The idea of reading a play is intimidating to some readers, especially those new to it; and the aim is to make the books as friendly as possible.

The most adventurous list is the Current Theatre Series. These are simple format theatre programmes in which the whole text of the play is published; and they are produced for any theatre with an Australian play prepared to buy at cost between 500 and 1,000 copies. The book becomes part of the theatre's promotion and their programme information is included in it. The author may revise the text up to three weeks before opening night. The whole print run is available to the theatre for the length of the run and what is not sold is then supplied to bookshops. This way the theatre shares the risk of publishing a new work and receives continuing recognition through publication. If at the end of the print run the play has demonstrated a continuing life, then the definitive text is published in a standard Currency Press edition. *Away* was an example of this kind of publishing.

Today the time has come to consolidate more than three decades of publishing. In 1998 Currency began to assemble key plays of the past into its Modern Drama series of anthologies. Eight volumes of plays from the 1950s to the 1970s have so far been published and they

record the steady development of a vibrant national theatre. Other thematic anthologies include Aboriginal, feminist and gay and lesbian plays.

Currency publishes books in fields other than drama. Screenplays like *Strictly Ballroom*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Chopper* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* have made a sound contribution to Currency's list. The music list (including sheet music, mostly for single instruments) under the editorship of Richard Vella, places strong emphasis on new approaches to making music. Vella's own book, *Musical Environments* is a ground-breaking guide. Another innovation has been Russell Gilmour's ingenious ensemble kit which provides classroom performance for any combination of instruments. Currency's music distributor is Encore Music.

Currency also has a large list of critical studies and manuals, from resource booklets to historical studies of popular music and opera. We have published feminist analyses of popular culture, critical studies of Australian film; and practical guides on acting, learning dialects, creating drama with young people, and preparing for auditions in theatre, film and television. But drama remains the backbone of the list and the flow of incoming manuscripts never slows.

The list grows but Currency remains—and will always remain, given the nature of its brief—a small business. For ten years Currency was run from the Parsons' house at 87 Jersey Road, Woollahra. In 1982, after a brief period of extension to 89 Jersey Road, a legacy enabled the purchase of a three-storey former draper's premises at 330 Oxford Street, in nearby Paddington. In 1998 the company moved to larger premises at 201 Cleveland Street, Redfern, with the aim of creating a centre in which writers, musicians, filmmakers and designers could work together. In 2001 Katharine Brisbane retired from Currency Press, and turned her energies to a non-profit association called Currency House incorporated with the aim of providing a network among workers in the arts, encouraging research and raising the

standard of informed debate in public policy-making.

1993 brought a personal grief with the death of Philip Parsons on 20 June. To the end he was giving his attention and energies to the completion of his *A Companion to Theatre in Australia*. In the last week of his life, following a submission from writers and theatre practitioners from around Australia, he and Katharine were awarded the AM in the Queen's Birthday Honours for the work of Currency Press. A further blow came at the end of 1995 with the untimely death of the company's executive director, Sandra Gorman. Today the company is jointly managed by Deborah Franco (Sales/Marketing) and Victoria Chance (Publisher). Another long-standing staff member is Financial Administrator, Sian Jenkins.

The existence of Currency Press has in itself become an incentive to aspiring playwrights. The income is still not high for most of these writers, but to have a play in print is a confirmation of their achievement and encourages further productions. The rising status of playwrights was reflected at the end of the 1990s with the choice of Alma De Groen, author of *The Rivers of China*, *The Girl Who Saw Everything* and *The Woman in the Window*, for the Patrick White Award for literature; the first time a playwright has been recognised as pre-eminent in the company of poets and novelists, and in 2001 when Hannie Rayson's *Life After George* became the first play to be short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award. In 2008 John Romeril, a pivotal and prolific writer since the dawn of the New Wave, was the second playwright to be given the Patrick White award.