

The Missing Play

The NSW Premier's Literary Awards shortlist was announced last Wednesday with one notable exception – there was no shortlist for the Play Awards category. The action is up to the judges' discretion but could they not find a single play worthy of nomination in the last year?

In his Australian Literary Review blog, Stephen Romei commented, *'Now this strikes me as a sad state of affairs. Are we saying that in the 12 months to October 2009 no Australian wrote a play worth the ticket?'*

As a performing arts publisher we are curious about this. The eligible plays include *Poor Boy* by Matt Cameron and Tim Finn, *Pig Iron People* by John Doyle, *Realism* by Paul Galloway, *Concussion* by Ross Mueller, *Savage River* by Steve Rodgers and *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* by Alana Valentine. And they are just the ones we publish (or will).

Playwright Matt Cameron said the decision was, *'A disheartening day for Australian playwrights with not one play deemed worthy of this year's award. I hasten to add this is not about my own work but the bigger picture. Prizes in the arts always risk being akin to comparing sunsets – that is, somewhat impossible. And yet they do remind us of the value of celebrating at least one sunset a year. I thought I saw some rather glorious ones...'*

The NSW government did make it clear they intended to keep money reserved for playwrights. *'Rather than having the \$30 000 forfeited, it goes to literary pursuits in the field – a grant for playwriting to support Australian playwrights'*, said Premier Kristina Keneally. But isn't it a little odd that a prize for work done has turned into a grant?

Last year Currency Press founder Katharine Brisbane criticised the lack of dramatic literature included in the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature. In an article to Crikey she said, *'When we founded Currency Press in 1971 it was with the aim of building a 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.'*

Keneally said the awards were established to, *'Perpetuate a cultural legacy in our state; a legacy of ideas, imagination and history.'* Is this a legacy that, once again, calls into question the place of dramatic art?

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