



## REBECCA CLARKE

### *LOST PLAYS*

When I was asked by Currency Press to be a part of the recent launch of John Romeril's new collection, *Damage*—and the accompanying forum on the 'Lost Repertoire'—I was very excited to hear the topic, and by the range of knowledge of the other panellists—John McCallum and Sam Strong—and the context of the discussion, to be held in the newly reemerging Griffin. I'd written a bit of a rave about John McCallum's book *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century*, online, in June last year, and generally I feel a strong connection with the subject matter 'Lost Plays', particularly in relation to our Australian repertoire (or lack thereof, depending whether you're a glass half-full or half-empty kinda person). I found that the topic interested my inner emerging writer, of course, but drew equal enthusiasm from my inner researcher, my mad-keen collaborator and, what's more, it got a yelp of enthusiasm from my old Playworks arts administrator/archivist self. I set about reading, thinking and writing in preparation for the night, harnessing all of these 'selves' to come about with some definitive, wise or helpful statements for the evening.

Funnily enough, in a discussion about lost things, on the night I only managed to blurt out about three statements, none of which I'd really 'prepped' in any way, and I must admit that I walked away kicking myself a little over my lost voice and my lost opportunity. Then I wondered if maybe it was a perfect example of the fact that at any one time only an ounce of the whole picture is revealed, only a thread of a story is told. We are in a constant state of loss and recovery.

Currency suggested that I should write up what I didn't get to say (how gorgeous is that?) another example of one of the other really important factors in any discussion of lost things—the value of multiple resources. If a speaker wants to keep speaking there are always other forums, particularly in our information age.

So I thought I'd knock out some of the things I've read and heard and tangents I've explored around this topic under the following headings:

- o HOW DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES ALMOST GOT LOST
- o TELLING TALES OF AN EMERALD CITY
- o WHAT DO WOMEN WANT? NO, REALLY
- o FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH—HOW TO AVOID LOST PLAY SYNDROME

### **HOW DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES ALMOST GOT LOST**

Long, long ago...I worked for six and a half years as a TV Researcher for the major networks and some independent producers, qualitatively testing their local pilot programs and their ongoing content. One day my colleagues and I were called into my boss's office. Excited, he revealed a VHS tape from the Seven Network, a new US comedy-drama, and we all sat down to watch it. When the show was over he asked us for our opinions (as he was wont to do) and I expressed that it wasn't likely to be a success in the market. However, my boss and a few of my colleagues saw huge potential in it and when we went on to test it, it was a giant winner with the test audience and it went on to 'rate its arse off' when it was finally aired. The show was *Desperate Housewives* and I had been very wrong about it. Lucky for me, I'd learnt that my opinion was actually not important in the business of TV Research (the stats were king) and that, in the commercial TV reality, I represented a fairly niche view

of the world. Had I been the sole decision maker, *Desperate Housewives* would have been lost to our TV culture, and what a revenue disaster that would have been! Of course, none of this changed my personal opinion of the show, but it highlighted some things for me...

As much as my personal paradigm enriches me I, as an isolated individual, am limited by the reach of my knowledge and experience. Alone, there is no one to say ‘What about such and such?’ ‘Have you thought of this?’ There is no expansion of knowledge and there is, ultimately, no growth. I had great admiration for the Producers and Heads of Programming I worked with who kept ‘throwing the net out’, fishing for wisdom beyond their isolated knowledge. On any one day millions of decisions are being made and some of the cleverest amongst us are those who use and acknowledge the huge network that can create a single, timeless choice. This is no absolute guarantee against loss of any kind, (the rule is that something will always be overlooked, someone will go unheard), but what can be guaranteed is that individuals who consult and collaborate within a diverse base will learn more about themselves and each other. The polls have been bagged a bit recently and I would never advocate a ‘cart leading the horse’ scenario, but well-used research can be magic, highlighting the power of collective wisdom.

In theatre, audience research isn’t so much of a ‘king’, but we are lucky to work in a collaborative industry. People who spend any substantial amount of time working in the business may find that they are within six degrees or less of every local Artistic Director. It’s very likely that if a person really wants to back a play, a playwright or a major new idea, there will be a way to air it so that someone hears and sees it. There is real power in that sense of a tight community. I may not have felt as strongly before the internet became so entrenched in our communications, but now we are living in one of the most potent times for personal, networked expression. What’s more, broadly speaking, there are more festivals, more forums and a greater emphasis around shared communications and this idea of ‘consensus’. Recently I was at really dynamic forums with Ralph Myers, Wesley Enoch and Sam Strong, just three

people of many who represent a new guard in theatre management who seem to be coming from a place of open communication with community. As fairly newly appointed Artistic Directors they have a small window of time for asking questions now, before they get overwhelmed by just reacting to day to day demands. For this reason, I'd hope that every company has an inbuilt and regular system for team-discussion, community connection, research and resource building; an approach that combines online, hardcopy and people resources. All this considered, I'm not sure there could be a better time to refocus on our Australian repertoire, find lost plays and avoid 'lost play' syndrome and for putting concrete and regular systems in place from out of this incredible era of recreation and sharing.

### **TELLING TALES OF AN EMERALD CITY**

I am a part of a fantastic young playwrights' collective called Every Second Monday, who meet to self-educate, share and support. This quote was sent to me this week from one of my peers in the group, Tahli Corin:

'Why bother whether we have our own stories or not? My only answer to that is that we have a right to them. We are human beings with our own feelings, strengths and weaknesses, and we need to know what we are like and we need to know that we are important enough to have fictions written about us or we will always feel that real life happens somewhere else and is spoken in accents other than our own.'

David Williamson, *Emerald City*

Bizarrely enough my TV researcher self wants to get involved in this local content discussion as well... Here's what I learnt through my years of qualitative research: Quality local content is closest to people's hearts. It is the equivalent of the soul-giving home-cooked meal vs. thrilling foreign cuisine. We tested people's involvement, as opposed to ratings, and people were always most 'involved' in local news and a lot of ABC content; with a show like

Australian Story rating extremely highly within our methodology. The networks bought this ‘involvement’ data because it was valuable to them on lots of levels and it helped prove the innate value of local programming amongst themselves and, importantly, to advertisers. I had to leave TV research after a time because I wanted to head into a ‘slow-foods’ equivalent of entertainment, but here I am now working in our theatre industry where, in general terms, the production of local content is lower than what I witnessed in television. It makes you wonder about the validity of a local content quota system for our theatre industry.

I feel that this is a ‘let’s just f\*#king change it’ scenario, requiring a total shift in perspectives and priorities from some of our major players. There is no doubt in my mind that Australian stories, that’s stories from All Australians, are not prioritised and are lost as a result. A very personal passion project of mine is the ‘colloquial/bush poet/lyrical voice’ of Australia and in this way I yearn to see a director or directors become obsessed by Dorothy Hewitt’s cannon, for instance. (By the by, playwright Van Badham has suggested Mona Brand needs a revival. Sounds great to me!). In the meantime, I am writing my second play in a lyrical voice and with a kind of ‘rural vs urban Australia’ perspective, because it reflects my own background. This type of voice is always at risk of being marginalised as ‘a bit cringe-worthy’, but I love the marginal so it’s right up my alley. The truth is, we have an ongoing relationship with our Aussie bush larrikin identity, our small community Island identity, our indigenous identity, our multicultural identity, our Australasian identity, our ‘Stuff Oz, I’ll get what I need in the UK/Europe/America’ identity (and many other identities that I don’t have time to mention) and it needs to be discussed, because in the unearthing of it, there may a revelation of a potential pathway for moving beyond it to the next possibility of who we might be as a country.

I look to the John Romerils, David Williamsons and Dorothy Hewetts (to name just three) of my country in order to gather pieces for my own aesthetic, my collage, my story about the land and people who have shaped me. There is so much forgetting in our nation’s

history, carelessly or purposely, so as an artist it would be a real crime to pretend that I am not enriched, challenged, dismayed and overjoyed by what it is that I've come from. This also means that it's my responsibility to go seeking some more knowledge of it and to never give up on that search. To go back to my first point though, one individual's story of Australia is bound to be very specifically reflective of their experience and research; so many, many voices must be encouraged in this telling. This is where the work, knowledge and processes of alternative and community theatre really come to the fore; some of our best local storytelling happens in these sectors. My great fear is that alternative and community arts have been too long without time and resources for 'history-making' and without properly laid down conversation networks/sharing systems into major performing arts bodies. It's about time that it happened.

In looking at theatre history there seems to have been strong cycles of nationalism at different points in time and my instinct is that we are poised to enter another strong phase of this...Stay tuned, watch the stages and, if you're a programmer, get ahead of the bloody curve mate!!! Australians love Australian stories. I'm so excited by the playwrights I see as I look around me today. When it comes to the Australian repertoire, my glass is half-full, not half-empty.

### **WHAT DO WOMEN WANT? NO, REALLY**

I feel that 'female' plays don't have to only be written by women; sometimes they're just about women or are enhanced by women's perspectives. Very often they are and should be written by women, but as a case in point, the thing that more recently reminded me of the potency of exploring the female archetype was watching Tim's Burton's version of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Among other things, the story is a timeless exploration of a major stage of identity crisis in a woman's life. It uncovers the complex reality of the types

of question that every woman may have to face, questions like: What's my soul's purpose? What do my ovaries want? What does my society want? Are all of those factors aligned and what the hell happens when they're not? Where does a woman turn? For reasons that no-one has been able to fully articulate and address, not even with a lot of introspection during the 60's, 70's and 80's, the feminine perspective is still soft-core in terms of priorities and is often overlooked and placed left of centre.

Women are fairly used to being lost from versions of history but women also have a great tradition of creating their own histories, summaries and provocative visions for the future. One clear example of this is Michelle Arrow's *Upstaged: Australian women dramatists in the limelight at last* that looks at the period before the macho New Wave of the 60's and 70's and points to the pivotal work being created by females in the radio industry and out of the New Theatre's political and community theatre tradition.

I've always felt that female histories are important, but I only really valued this in a personal way when I was doing some recent research and re-looked at a Playworks resource *Playing with Time* (which should be available in the National Library's archives, along with all of the Playworks plays and resources that were archived there in 2007). This book looks at research from 1985-1995 examining women playwrights; collecting stats and harnessing statements about their common experience. Aspects of my approach and practice that I had taken for granted leapt out of the pages of that book (and a few others) and suddenly I could see the impact of my female paradigm and what that meant to my own work. Some broad aspects and commonalities that resonated with me were around stated preferences for collaboration, writing from place or landscape, experimenting with form and cross-arts practice, struggles with pay parity and art/life obligations, difficulties projecting perceptible confidence (leading to visibility issues) and a passion for working with marginal voices and in community. Seeing oneself through this collective mirror is so important in terms of understanding my strengths, anticipating my external and internal barriers and naming

and celebrating my uniquely female point of view. In a time when there were more working structures for support for women in the arts (through mandates and programs through the Australia Council, Playworks and other organisations) reading research from the time is, well, downright depressing. Not because of the negativity of the work, but rather because so many people at the time seemed so optimistic about the support and change to come. If we're to get very honest and rigorous about it though, nothing much has changed and, in fact, many support structures have been dissolved but the disparity hasn't. I think this 1995 quote, a fifteen year old quote, says it all: 'The Playworks survey does show that all companies think seriously about the issues of developing new Australian work, and work by women writers. There is awareness about their responsibilities to encourage the building up of an Australian repertoire. The companies responding to our survey present a number of ideas to develop a performing arts culture and in which woman played a significant part...' So that's fifteen years of thinking and awareness, and probably a fair bit more before it, but where's the action, where are the outcomes, where's the change?

It may also serve all of us if women writers, directors, designers, creatives, stage-managers, producers and programmers (i.e. everyone!) understood and articulated their unique 'female' perspective very consciously, and I feel that this will happen a lot more, particularly in the light of recent conversations and the forming of new collectives such as the Australian Women Directors Alliance. In the meantime, it's great to tune into the discussion through blogs and online forums. I'm a personal fan of the work of Augusta Supple, Alison Croggon, Jo Erskine and Arts Radar. Sisters are doing it for themselves.

PS: I'm also interested in the fact that our radio and TV Industries utilise a lot of female writing talent and have always wondered why there isn't more sharing (knowledge, processes, contacts, resources) between those forms, for the good of local stories and of female storytelling.

## FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

This is the really personal bit from the writer me, well the writer/producer me...where I try and pass on knowledge, knowing full well that it's just stuff I've heard and some of it I haven't quite put into practice yet (and this from a person who could only blurt out three statements on a panel) BUT...Here it is: **HOW TO AVOID LOST PLAY SYNDROME? THOUGHTS FOR WRITERS**

I could be glib here and say 'Write a really good play' but we all know that that is deceptively simple, in concept and in execution. So:

- o Don't be the person who loses the play: it's partly the writer's responsibility to keep a play alive. If it dies, it dies partly because the writer gives up on it. But remember that sometimes it's okay to let dying things die! That said, it's fairly important to treat most things you create as part of the process towards expression. I know a lot of writers who have a 'SHIT WRITING' folder. You don't know what might serve you at a later point. As every good horder knows—Keep mostly everything and vaguely know where stuff is...Clear as mud? Good!

- o Knock on the obvious and the unusual doors: repeatedly, if needed. Come back months or years later and knock again. Maybe you will have learnt a trick or two and maybe the 'bouncers' will have changed or will have broadened their views through consultation, research or personal evolution. ;)

Know thyself: what is your unique point of view of the world? What do you love, relate to; what culture, music, books, films, art, philosophies, religions, politics? Because if you know yourself you can then...

- o Know your world and your place in it: what are the current themes running beneath everything? What does the world 'feel' like right now? How do you write in relation to that?

This helps keep a person relevant and gives them a language and point of view in some of our most important discussions.

o Know your art form and your history: the responsibility of the playwright is to not only write, but read plays, read play and theatre analysis, see plays, discuss plays with others who know more than you and share what you learn. People have said this to me my whole life and honestly, I've only started to take the advice somewhat seriously in the past few years and definitely have only started the process of recalling and coalescing my learning very recently through undertaking a Masters degree and joining up with collectives of writers, in practice and in productions.

o Protect, seek out and articulate your development processes: the writer is the one person with the power to develop, expose and make a case for their work. Learn to do it in an articulate and timely way and you are giving your story its best chance to not be lost.

o Be confident: I've learnt that my confidence comes from the depth of my personal passion, my connections into the network and my ability to adapt and improve my craft. Confidence doesn't need to be flashy, false or loud; some of the best writers I know are internal, studious, persistent but above all, generous and open to experience.

o Recognise the value of publishing: treat your work as literature. Sometimes look at your career as if you were someone viewing it from outside and assess where you're at and where you're headed – In the broadest sense, think about your own potential historical impact. Where and how will you be remembered? Be specific about the resources that will retain the record of your work. It's vital in a live and transitory industry.

o A lot of what I've described above happens subconsciously, so really I've just suggested that a conscious awareness be brought to these things, and a language, particularly to anyone who feels anxious or unsure about their place in things – which is most of us at different points in time. Knowing things like this is also helpful when you're talking to potential

fundere, publishers or producers. But, of course, there's no guarantee in anything we do, and if we were seeking a hole-proof guarantee we wouldn't be working in theatre. What we do is a kind of alchemy.