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JIM McNEIL'S *THE CHOCOLATE FROG* AND *THE OLD FAMILIAR JUICE*

by Paul Tribe and Bruce Hogg

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1. Introduction

Jim McNeil was one of the most unlikely playwrights to emerge during the flowering of Australian drama in the 1970s. A recidivist prisoner, he wrote his three best-known plays while still in gaol. Although his artistic career was only of short duration and his output small, his role in the development of Australian theatre is an important one. He wrote about life in the prison system in a country whose very origins lay in penal settlement, but more significantly, he was following in the footsteps of playwrights such as Peter Kenna and David Williamson in writing distinctly Australian plays employing the Australian vernacular.

Like Peter Kenna, McNeil's working-class Catholic background is evident in his plays. Despite the narrowness of his subject matter, his theatrical craftsmanship, the universality of his themes and his technical achievements with language combine to place his work in a position of real significance in contemporary Australian drama.

Jim McNeil's plays are not mere protests about conditions, nor are they sensational exposés of the violent and inhuman worlds that lie behind prison walls, which we often find in prison literature. Free of theatrical gimmickry, his plays capture realistically the daily situations and issues faced by the inmates of gaol cells. His is no sanitised view of life in gaol; it is a tough world, but a world which in its own way mirrors the one outside. The men who inhabit his plays exhibit all the vices and virtues of men in society at large.

Objectively and without self-pity, *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice* examine life in prison. There is hypocrisy, violence and bitterness, and also comradeship, humour and resilience. His plays are important social documents for their vivid presentation of institutional life with its rituals and disciplines, but they are more than mere period pieces or sociological studies. With an impressive craftsmanship, McNeil explores the need we all have for affection, for codes of conduct to live by, and above all the necessity to try to shape our own destiny. With wry humour and sparse dialogue, McNeil's plays rely very little on plot and provide minimal background information or explanation. Rather, his vivid characterisation and constructional skill demonstrate an innate understanding of the essence of drama. The authentic language in his plays at times reaches heights of lyrical and poetic beauty.

Beneath the humour, however, there is always an undercurrent of violence bred of boredom and frustration. Both *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice* display McNeil's craftsmanship as a playwright, but their central purpose remains to present prison as it really was in McNeil's time. *The Chocolate Frog* was his attempt 'to explain to the outside community that prison values are just faithful reflections of some of society's own attitudes and inclinations'— unpleasant as some of them may be.

All page references are for *Jim McNeil: Collected Plays* (published by Currency Press, 1987), featuring *The Chocolate Frog*, *Jack*, *The Old Familiar Juice* and *How Does Your Garden Grow*.

2. Jim McNeil

When Martin Esslin, the eminent critic and author, read Jim McNeil's play *How Does Your Garden Grow?*, he wrote to him saying: 'This work shows you to be a playwright of the first rank, not only in Australia but probably internationally as well'.

Strong praise for a man who wrote his best works in Parramatta Gaol while serving a seventeen-year prison sentence for armed robbery and wounding a police officer. McNeil, by his own admission, had 'never seen a play and… never been inside a theatre'. A recidivist prisoner, he had never given a thought to what he would do with his life until he was about 35 years old. 'Doing seventeen years,' he said, 'a time comes that you have to know what you want to do… The time came for me and I found out I wanted to be a playwright quite accidentally… which was a marvellous turning point in my life.'

There had been other, less marvellous turning points in the life of Jim McNeil. The first was the Second World War and the death of his father, the second his affair from the age of fourteen with the madam of a brothel, and the third and most significant in terms of his development as a dramatist was his involvement with the Resurgents Discussion and Debating Society in Parramatta Gaol.

Born in 1935 to a working-class Catholic family in Melbourne, he was the youngest of four children. Although poor, his was not a deprived childhood, and was by his own account 'very ordinary… very good'. He attended school from the age of four and was educated by nuns and later the Christian Brothers.

Frustrated with his schooling, he truanted frequently, claiming he used to go 'down the beach and crawl under a row boat and prop it up a little bit so I could get some light and just lay there and read all day'.

As well as the works of Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, one of his earliest influences was the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* whose lines he could still recite by heart as an adult. He read the classics avidly, progressing in his early teens to Nietzsche and other German philosophers whose influences he also retained in his later life. He left school for good when he was about thirteen, saying it 'didn't suit me at all'. He had a succession of jobs during his early teens but none ever lasted long. 'It didn't matter where I went to work,' he said, 'I just didn't like it… I felt out of place.' Living off his wits and verbal skills, he became expert at conning people. 'Wherever there was a quid I would try to get it without doing anything too awful.'

His activities may not have progressed from petty confidence work, had it not been for a decisive meeting when he was about fourteen, and subsequent five-year affair with the madam of a brothel. 'I was completely dominated by this lady,' he later admitted. 'In that house was an entire lifestyle… and a whole set of people that was different from my family.' Although he did go away to sea for periods in the merchant navy, most of his teenage years were spent associated with both the brothel and the Melbourne waterfront, and the gangsters connected with them. Young and impressionable, he spent his adolescence trying to emulate these 'wonderful' people as he called them. Indeed, not until he was an adult did he realise that this period 'just about ruined my whole bloody life'.

Although he married in his early 20s and fathered six children, most of the following years were spent in criminal activities and subsequent gaol sentences. 'Once you become part of that way of life you don't know any other,' he later explained. Like many people in gaol, McNeil was convinced that 'events take over, they move by themselves, you've got no control over what's happening'. He did things without thinking until one day, 'I just found myself on the road with a policeman pointing a gun at me and I just happened to have one too, and nothing else to do but what I did. Or so it seemed at the time.'

He was sentenced to seventeen years' gaol in 1967 when he was thirty-two. In Parramatta Gaol he was introduced to 'a little bunch of battling crims who wanted to read literature… and do a bit of mental stuff'. Begun as an experiment in rehabilitation, the Resurgents Discussion and Debating Society involved prisoners in debating and learning public speaking from interested outsiders. 'A lot of the boys in the group wanted to debate', McNeil said, 'but they weren't good thinkers. They never had a wide reference for their thoughts… They couldn't quote any authority… any literature or sources for their statements.'

Here McNeil's background proved invaluable. He became what he called the 'phantom typewriter', teaching himself by writing other men's speeches for the debates. Without realising it McNeil was laying the groundwork for a future career, presenting the views of prisoners.

As his writing developed he became increasingly frustrated with what he called 'the authoritarians... who didn't really want to hear your side'. Gaining permission for what he termed a 'little sketch', McNeil wrote *The Last Cuppa* (later reworked as *The Old Familiar Juice*) which was performed by members of the Resurgents for prison authorities and a few select members of the public. Happy that at last he had been able to present the prisoners' views, McNeil was encouraged to write another play, *The Chocolate Frog*, and was genuinely surprised by the reception.

The Chocolate Frog was performed at Sydney's Q Theatre in July 1971, followed by *The Old Familiar Juice*, both to excellent reviews. 'I suddenly realised what I was doing,' McNeil said, 'what I wanted to do all my life. I'll just keep writing plays now as long as I live, I think.'

Encouraged by friends, McNeil completed his Higher School Certificate while still in gaol and commenced work on an Arts degree externally through the University of New England. Those who knew him during this period described him as a humane and caring man, helpful to other prisoners and an influence for good in the inhuman and antiquated New South Wales prison system. With the receipt of a Literature Board grant, McNeil became a media celebrity and public pressure helped secure his parole in 1974. A witty and charismatic figure, he lost no time in finding himself a wife. Three months after his release he married the actor Robyn Nevin, who had played the only female role in the Nimrod production of *How Does Your Garden Grow?*. The marriage lasted two years. His writing career reached its highest point in 1975 when the play won the Australian Writers' Guild award for the most outstanding script in any category.

However, the years after his release were not productive ones for the man known as the 'Prison Playwright'. He was encouraged to expand the one-act play, *Jack*, to a full-length play but no new plays were completed by him. Freedom and its attendant celebrity status made demands upon McNeil that his previous life had never done. Gaol had provided him with discipline and a reason to write: factors absent from his new lifestyle. Although obsessed with his release, he had thrived in the institutionalised security which gaol provided. Freedom had no such limitations. Fashionable, and without effective authority figures to limit his excesses, McNeil indulged himself in extreme amounts of alcohol and erratic behaviour. McNeil possessed a violent and destructive side to his nature which surfaced with alcohol. He became less and less able or willing to write, and alcohol alienated him from all but a few close friends. He became a derelict and embarked on what Peter Kenna termed a 'slow suicide by alcohol'. The last years of his life were marked by frequent bouts of hospitalisation and in sleeping on park benches. He died of alcoholic poisoning in St Vincent's Hospital on the 16th May 1982.

3. *The Chocolate Frog*

The content

The Chocolate Frog is unashamedly didactic. The play presents the arguments for and against the prison system. The opposing views are the expression of the two different worlds of the play: the inside and the outside. Kevin expresses the view that gaols are 'necessary evils' whereas Shirker and Tosser highlight the inadequacies and lack of humanity.

McNeil draws a clear distinction between the inside and the outside worlds, and Shirker and Tosser's membership of the former excludes them from any chance of the latter. However, despite their obvious differences, McNeil's purpose in *The Chocolate Frog* was to show that the values and codes of conduct of both worlds are identical, and that prison morality and outside morality are one and the same; only the language is different. Both societies have their rules. If you break the rules of one they 'call you a criminal and they ostracise you and punish you'. If the other's rules are broken, 'according to the law of survival in gaol … you call him a dog'.

The play makes a clear distinction between morality and codes of conduct, and sets out to expose the immorality of both worlds. Shirker and Tosser ridicule the outside world's hypocrisy

throughout the play, and unwittingly reveal their own. Their interrogation and trial of Kevin imitates that of outside society's, and although Shirker does attempt to rise above unjust rules by declaring Kevin 'not guilty', he too is exposed for the hypocrite he is. McNeil was well aware of what he termed a 'great pretence of fraternity' amongst men in gaols, declaring that many would 'sell each other for a packet of cigarettes'.

Shirker and Tosser are the products of the judicial system. From childhood in boys' homes they have graduated to the prison hierarchy. They have never known life without an authority dictating their lives; the judicial system has taught them to believe in punishment for breaking society's rules, and to not question the rules. The 'eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth' system of justice is bred into them and they apply it to life within the gaol, proliferating a hierarchy of physical and intellectual power in imitation of the hierarchy of the prison system itself.

The pair never attempt to buck the system; they only use their wits and their muscles to evade it whenever they see the chance. And if they get caught they expect to be punished. But they don't really understand in personal terms what morality is, only in the need to 'keep sweet' with their fellow prisoners. Their self-centredness is made clear at the outset in the way Shirker hides the 'grouse' cigarettes from his mate and the way they turn on each other at the end when their self-esteem is threatened.

Although he argues society's views, Kevin's role lies somewhere between the two worlds, and it is through him that we see the falseness of both. Neither a real criminal nor a dog, he provokes discussion and provides the necessity for explanation of prison rules and values. His cigarettes, and later his comments, help reveal the lack of justice and genuine friendship of both Shirker and Tosser.

Despite the bleakness of their situation, Shirker and Tosser retain a wry sense of humour, which entertains while it relieves the seriousness and tension of their discussion. From their whimsical introduction to Kevin—

> TOSSER: Yer ain't Kevin from Heaven, are yer?
> KEVIN: [*still nervous*] No... I mean... I'm from Brisbane.
> SHIRKER: We won't blame yer for it. (p. 7)

—to the ironic laughter of the closing moments, Shirker and Tosser display an ability to laugh at themselves as well as the outside world. Their use of puns and colourful expressions, although serious in intent, reveal the fatalism of men resigned to their lot, and used to whiling away hours together in mordant conversation. Kevin's status as a 'chocolate frog' is alluded to as 'Fido', 'Towser' and 'Mr Barkingham'. Their prison humour emerges in such lines as Shirker's, 'Ah, assault 'n rob, yer mean... Christ, me and Tosser was startin' to think yer'd done somethin' bad!' (p. 9).

However, as the play progresses their humour is increasingly tinged with bitterness. The 'Terrible Choice' they faced at Gosford was 'whether yer'd insert the gherkin, or back on to it' (p. 18), and bitterness creeps in when the conversation turns to the more personal aspects of life in prison and their childhood memories. Humour is used both as a weapon and a defence with which to deal with the stresses of prison life.

The Chocolate Frog makes its strongest point when it pleads for an understanding of the forces which have made these men what they are. They are the products of their environment, and their laws are a reflection of that environment and their means of surviving in it. Their revelations about the boys' homes, and Shirker's impassioned speeches about the realities of life in a prison cell, are the most effective and moving in the play. The central and most disturbing point in the play is Shirker's realisation that their world is inside, and that outside has no place for the likes of him.

Kevin's departure, having demolished their system of justice and exposed the falseness of their friendship, comes as something of an anti-climax. The hollowness of the prison codes of mateship, which is demonstrated by Shirker and Tosser's mutual recriminations, leaves the audience with no illusions about these men. They have our sympathy, but we are aware that neither side emerges in the right. Having been 'educated', Kevin leaves with his cigarettes and his views intact, and Shirker and Tosser remain where they began, their mateship the myth it was revealed to be in the opening moments. McNeil has led us through both sides of the argument about the prison system, revealing a reality full of hypocrisy and injustice.

The characters and their language

As protagonists in a debate, the characters in *The Chocolate Frog* are presented as readily identifiable prison stereotypes. Shirker and Tosser are the long-serving inmates, experienced in the ways of the system, whose function it is to articulate the viewpoint of the prisoners. Kevin, the newcomer, is naive and arrogant and presents the views of the outside world.

Shirker

Shirker is the more intelligent, articulate and reasonable of the two old hands. Initially he is as abusive and judgemental as Tosser. He calls Kevin a 'rotten, weak unprincipled little bludger' (p. 10) and is quite prepared to use physical violence. Like Tosser, he easily slips into the role of interrogator, and finally, judge. Shirker's main weapon, however, is his wit. He is more sarcastic than Tosser and his comments are more often intentionally ironic.

Once the charge of being a 'chocolate frog' has been levelled at Kevin, it is Shirker who suggests the trial, rather than mere physical assault which Tosser would prefer. Despite its serious intention of exposing the lack of justice in our judicial system, there is much humour in this scene. Shirker's 'One simply must have half a sheep on one's crumpet' and 'Now let's crucify I mean try the case', highlight the pomposity and absurdity of the courtroom. Shirker's comment 'You'll spoil the whole appearance of justice' (p. 13) and his later, 'sentences ain't never over with' (p. 15) sum up succinctly the prisoners' complaints against a system that is both unfair and vengeful.

Shirker plays a continual cat-and-mouse game with Kevin, encouraging him to speak his views which he then uses against him. As the prison philosopher and 'old hand', it is his role to spell things out for both Kevin and the audience. He explains the prison jargon when it is not understood, and clarifies the prison rules and codes of behaviour. Flawed as he is, Shirker nevertheless emerges as the most sympathetic and likeable of the three characters. His debate with Kevin, although somewhat artificially contrived in order to allow McNeil to present opposing views, reveals him to be an intelligent man. His revelation that he 'used ter stand on me cupboard, lookin' out of the winder every night'(p. 28), brings the debate back down to more personal concerns. It is left to Shirker to articulate the major theme of the play as a result. The debate is ultimately a futile one he tells Kevin, as he has 'only ever experienced one side' (p. 28). 'Out there, that's their world... 'N this is my world' (p. 29). This futility is realised in the final moments of the play as Kevin leaves them alone again, to endure their lot.

Tosser

Tosser presents us with a more conventional view of a prisoner. His language, like that of Shirker, is the jargon of an inmate with all its underlying frustration and hostility. He speaks of 'grouse ciggas', 'mugs' and 'chocolate frogs', but the most noticeable feature of his language is its aggression. 'Maybe you'd like a trial over a couple of rounds,' he asks Kevin (p. 12). Threatening and abusive, Tosser is less reasonable than the other two. He wants to settle arguments with his fists and when frustrated, resorts to obscenities. Beneath the game he and Shirker play with Kevin to while away the hours, there is an undercurrent of intimidation and violence. Enraged by Kevin's views, Tosser threatens him with both physical and sexual violence. Lacking the self-control of Shirker he screams, 'I'm gonna rip your dog's head orf, you shitmouth bastard!' (p. 31), but it is the threat of rape implied in his statements such as, 'Don't worry, I never make love while the lights are on' (p. 20) that tend to unnerve Kevin the most. Both Shirker and Tosser refer openly to homosexuality as a fact of life in both prison and children's homes; mainly to threaten and intimidate Kevin, but also as another means of exposing the hypocrisy and harshness of their upbringing.

A product of the system, Tosser possesses all its prejudices and speaks its language. It is their 'peter' (p. 21) and Kevin is a 'gig' (p. 23), and mostly their concerns are very basic and concrete. 'Terbaccer' and 'tucker' are Tosser's main concerns, along with remaining faithful to the prison code of not being a 'lagger' (p. 6). Distinctly Australian, he refers to Kevin as a 'dill' (p. 21) and a 'mug lair ' (p. 22); tells him to shut his 'gob' (p. 22) and frequently uses rhyming slang such as 'jack 'n jill' (p. 21) as part of his normal speech.

Kevin

Kevin is the only character for whom we are given any background information. He speaks the language of the outside world. At first hesitant and unsure, he is unfamiliar with prison jargon and consequently ill at ease. It is when he begins to settle into his new environment that he reveals himself for the self-assured, rather arrogant, university-educated newcomer he is. Just as Tosser articulates the simplistic prison mentality, Kevin's role is to mouth the platitudes and clichés of the outside world. He speaks in abstract terms of 'necessary evils' and 'wrongdoers' (p. 27) and argues that prisons exist to protect society and to deter criminals from repeating their offences.

In the trial scene Shirker and Tosser effectively ridicule Kevin as a representative of outside justice, only to have him in turn question, and finally demolish, their arguments and motives. As a newcomer to the cell, Kevin's behaviour is hard enough to accept; however, the discussion he initiates reveals McNeil's tendency in this play to preach at the expense of dramatic acceptability. Abandoned by Tosser, Kevin debates prison morality with Shirker, revealing his naivety and insensitivity. Like the outside world, he knows nothing of the system which has produced these men and under which they must still live, and he is too ready to pass comment and condemn.

Whilst Shirker and Tosser use the prison jargon and colourful slang of less-educated Australians, Kevin's language clearly establishes him as someone who is evidently not of their world. Attempting to inject reason into, what is for them, a very emotional discussion, Kevin's speech lacks the explosive power of their outbursts as well as their humour. To them he is a 'nit' who 'lobs in this can' and causes 'awful hackems' (pp. 21–22), while he accuses them of being 'wrongdoers' (p. 27) and 'plaster saints, canonised by each other' (p. 31). University-educated, he uses language which is more formal and is grammatically correct such as, 'What if you were forever judged by what you did wrongly as a kid' (p. 21), compared with their colourful and ungrammatical 'Whaffor' (p. 8) and 'I reckon yer falsin', china...' (p. 26).

Kevin's character serves to articulate the arguments for the prison system, but the skill of the playwright draws our sympathy to the less articulate but passionate characters who resent and oppose the system which so completely controls their lives.

4. *The Old Familiar Juice*

The content

A reworking of his first play, *The Last Cuppa*, *The Old Familiar Juice* is more complex and has a superior dramatic quality when compared to *The Chocolate Frog*. The play examines the relationships between three men enclosed in a cell for sixteen hours a day. McNeil displays a masterful understanding of the power struggles which govern the politics of confinement as he explores one man's attempts to physically and psychologically possess another. It is Bulla's struggle to possess Stanley which provides the central theme of the play. McNeil explained the recurrent theme of homosexuality in his plays during an ABC interview in 1977:

> They're the only sort of relationships that society has left them. (Gaol) throws them ... away from their wives or girlfriends ... You can check your money in at the gate, you check everything in at the gate but you can't check your sex drive in at the gate. I don't know where people think a man is going to put his sex drive. You can't put it in with your property, you can't hide it under your bed. You're left with it for years and years... I've seen blokes resist and I've watched them break down and turn to a homosexual relationship because they're so bloody desperate and so lonely and so miserable. They have some very gentle and beautiful relationships in gaol.

From the outset the monumental despair of Bulla is evident, as is the inevitability of Stanley's seduction. However, it is on Bulla's desperate need for human affection that the play concentrates. He is forced to pursue a relationship which is unnatural and would normally be abhorrent to him. His emotional and sexual deprivation has pushed him to a point where he is willing to force his desires upon the unwilling and rather child-like Stanley. The play contains a shocking, but not sensational view of prison life, which unashamedly depicts the reality inside our gaols. Despite his manipulations, we remain sympathetic to Bulla throughout the play. Victim of an inhuman

system, he makes others his victim; providing as his justification the devastating last line of the play. The relationship between Bulla and Stanley provides the main action of the play, alternating between conflict and humour, whilst moving inexorably to its conclusion.

As in his other plays, McNeil here uses the Australian vernacular to extend the expressive boundaries of seemingly inarticulate characters. Stanley is the least articulate of the three, being limited by his naivety and ignorance. Dadda is able to effectively express his arguments, and provide the impotent voice of reason within the play. Bulla is by far the most expressive and articulate character. His wit and colourful language give welcome relief to the intense conflict, and provide an effective justification for his actions, for example:

> DADDA: Yer tryin' ter make him somethin' he's not.
> BULLA: That'll make two of us then, won't it?
> DADDA: Why be what yer not, then?
> BULLA: Why be nothing at all? (p. 51)

Despite the bleakness of their situation, McNeil's characters maintain their sense of humour, providing a counterbalance to the dramatic intensity as well as demonstrating the resilience of these men. Their 'party pieces' and stories provide light relief while highlighting the fatalism of prison humour. These are men resigned to their roles in life and the knowledge that to struggle, as Stanley does, is ultimately futile.

The characters

Bulla

The play is dominated throughout by the emblematically named Bulla. Bulla is torn between a desire for sexual release and self-contempt. This conflict is expressed in his alternate bitterness and affection. He is the stereotypical 'hardhead'— a long-serving prisoner in middle age. Bulla is not naturally homosexual and seeks to justify his advances by referring to Stanley's effeminacy ('It's a sheila for yer life', p. 52). Even when it is clear that Stanley is far from desirous of such a relationship, Bulla persists—his need for affection and sexual relief is greater than reason.

The seemingly extraneous 'Harlot's Lament' (p. 87) offers much insight into the character of Bulla. There is a parallel between Bulla and the Harlot, who are both sexually deprived, emotionally isolated and socially ostracised. We hear him sing:

> You see me degraded and sorry,
> Depending on Lust for a crust;
> Ruined and wretched, in fact most dejected,
> And I'm at it for a ten-bob touch. (p. 69)

The lament is intended to temper our view of Bulla with a measure of compassion, consolidating the idea of him as a tragic figure.

Stanley

Stanley is the stereotypical 'young mug'. He knows nothing of prison life and is so naive it is difficult to imagine why he could justifiably be put in gaol. At twenty-two, he is more like a boy than a man. Stanley is easily manipulated by Bulla and, to a lesser extent, Dadda.

Stanley complies to some extent with the role Bulla assigns him. From the outset he falls into a domestic role—cleaning up and making tea:

> STANLEY: Just look at the mess this joint's in. I don't know where to start.
> BULLA: A woman's work is never done... (p. 41)

He is dominated and unsettled by Bulla. However, he does not capitulate easily. Rather, at the end of the play he is still defending himself against the advances from Bulla and succumbs only in a semi-conscious state when all avenues of escape have been exhausted.

The play centres on Bulla's seduction of Stanley. Bulla delineates the role he wishes Stanley to take, and constantly refers to him as 'she' and encourages him to fall into a domestic role. At one stage, almost as a marriage proposal, he tells Stanley:

> It's all a caser catch 'n kill your own in this joint... or else yer can attach yerself, like, to someone who'll do all the battlin' and bring home the goodies ter yer. (p. 53)

Expressions used by Bulla to describe Stanley include 'Stannie', 'beautiful creature', 'a white carnation' and more. This form of manipulation is combined with challenges to Stanley's masculinity. Touching Stanley's hair, Bulla tells him he has 'lovely hair' but, 'None on yer chest, though, is there?' (p. 51).

Verbal challenges are often combined with physical ones. On several occasions Bulla strokes Stanley's hair, puts his arm around him, and threatens physical violence. Such specific attacks

are combined with more subtle ploys. Bulla uses a pretence of mateship—emotional blackmail—to elicit a measure of compliance. By giving Stanley cigarettes and other support Bulla is pushing him into a position of obligation, where he is, like a housewife, materially dependant. He also destabilises and confuses Stanley. When Stanley wants to hear 'what's goin' on in the world' on the radio, Bulla responds:

> I got news for you!... This is the world, right here. Sooner you wake up to it the better. (p. 48)

He wants Stanley to enter his world, to break away from outside influences, and to accept the necessity of his participation in it. Constant inferences and sexual innuendo in Bulla's speech are designed to shock Stanley into submission. For example:

> STANLEY: I don't catch on too quick.
> BULLA: I'll wait. (p. 60)

The success of Bulla's attempts to confuse Stanley are evident later in the play:

> BULLA: Now, yer not AIF are yer? [*seeing* STANLEY'S *confusion*] Yer not deaf... or dumb... are yer? Yer not a cripple... are yer?
> STANLEY: [*in a hardly articulate whisper*] No.
> BULLA: [*intensely*] Well, what are yer then?
> STANLEY: [*still whispering*] I... I dunno. (p. 73)

Dadda

Dadda is a classic 'drunken bum'. He lives from bottle to bottle, escaping into war-stories of dubious accuracy. Dadda views Stanley as like himself at the same age, and tries to set him on the 'right' path. He attempts to entice Stanley into a father-son relationship but cannot compete with the conflicting demands of Bulla. His role is of great importance in the exposition of the play's themes. He constantly challenges Bulla's attempts to physically and psychologically possess Stanley. His is the voice of reason in the play although he does not have the physical or mental strength to overpower Bulla and can only delay the inevitable. Dadda's impotence is seen in the argument over Kahlil Gibran. He is intellectually outwitted and belittled in this scene and is thus ineffectual.

Dadda confronts Bulla on numerous occasions, usually over Bulla's attempts to bring Stanley into his world—a world where prison is the sole reality, and where Bulla is in control. However, Dadda is increasingly ineffectual as the debate continues. He is outwitted by Bulla's sharp responses and undermined by Stanley's naivety and compliance. When Bulla resorts to physical intimidation after the dancing episode it is clear that Dadda's attempts to get Stanley safely to bed will be to no avail. The argument over Kahlil Gibran signals the total impotence of Dadda. Bulla mercilessly attacks Dadda over his war record, his philosophy and his credibility, limiting Dadda's control over the situation. Thus, when Bulla offers the 'right' interpretation of Gibran, and further attacks Dadda, he is on the verge of defeat:

> BULLA:... What's er matter? Wodder yer starin' for?
> DADDA: You... you're the matter... what you're sayin'.
> [*He is lost for words.*]
> BULLA: Arr, go ter bed, yer wet-brained old pie-eater. (p. 89)

Bulla consummates the defeat with physical intimidation. He helps Dadda onto his bed and forces him to drink. Dadda 'allows' this. Helpless, he lays back and can only question, 'Wodder you doin'?'. To Bulla's response, 'Fifteen years', he has no argument (p. 92).

Following this defeat of Dadda, Stanley has nowhere to turn. Bulla challenges Stanley directly, demanding: 'Yer gonna smack it again... or not?'. Left with the option of violent struggle or passive acceptance, Stanley chooses the latter as he drifts into a semi-conscious drunken state. Having succumbed to the prison brew, Stanley gives in to its metaphorical equivalent—human passion. As the yeast stolen from the prison kitchen has risen to produce the old familiar juice, so too had its parallel on a human level: desire. Stanley's attempts to resist the reality of life inside the prison are abandoned, joining both Bulla and Dadda in the roles the system has assigned to them.

5. Topics for discussion

1. 'He's the only natural playwright I've met who knows instinctively how the dramatic mode works,' Katharine Brisbane, theatre critic, said of McNeil. How is this instinctive understanding of drama evident in both plays?

2. McNeil has been accused by some critics of producing mere period pieces which capture life as it was in NSW gaols before the reforms of the late 1970s. Do you agree with this assessment or do you think his plays are timeless in their relevance?
3. Both *The Chocolate Frog* and *The Old Familiar Juice* are regarded by many as being fine examples of theatrical craftsmanship, whereas to others they are merely a series of vignettes. What is your view?
4. McNeil himself was unapologetic about the didactic nature of his work. Do you think they are too didactic and that this mars the quality of the drama?
5. 'McNeil's work is limited in its subject matter, language and appeal.' Do you agree?
6. 'McNeil uses humour not as a balm, but as a reason against the madness', said Malcolm Robertson, director of McNeil's first play. What is the function of humour is his plays and is it effective?
7. What in your opinion is McNeil's role in the development of drama in Australia. Is it a significant one?

The Chocolate Frog

1. Like many writers' first works, *The Chocolate Frog* is regarded by many critics as a play which allows the author to get his feelings out of his system. What is your assessment of the play?
2. Do you find any of the characters engage our sympathy or are they merely ugly and violent without any redeeming features?
3. What are the views about the functions of prisons presented by the characters? Which, in your opinion, is the right one?
4. Are the characters merely prison stereotypes, lacking in depth, development and relevance?
5. Are the characters, and in particular Kevin, lacking in credibility, being simply the mouthpieces for views about the prison system?
6. 'Far from being a corrective service, the prison system is simply an inhuman and unjust means of exacting vengeance.' Is this the view presented in *The Chocolate Frog*?
7. '*The Chocolate Frog* is most effective when the characters cease the debate and talk in human terms of their past and the loneliness of prison life.' Do you agree?

The Old Familiar Juice

1. The use of prison jargon and colloquial Australian language detracts from the play, making the characters inarticulate and, at times, incomprehensible. Discuss.
2. To what extent is the play a compassionate presentation of the realities of prison life?
3. What arguments does Bulla present to justify his manipulation and seduction of Stanley? What is your reaction?
4. Is Bulla a tragic figure? Does he elicit sympathy or condemnation?
5. 'Stanley plays Bulla's game: he takes on a feminine role, is compliant and understands what Bulla intends. Hence he is responsible for his own fate.' Do you agree?
6. What arguments does Dadda present against Bulla's manipulation and why are they ineffectual?
7. '*The Old Familiar Juice* is a play which challenges its audience's view of prison, prisoners and homosexuality.' Discuss.
8. What does the play say about the nature of power and manipulation?

6. Reviews and notes

Katharine Brisbane, *Australian*, 11 August 1972

The author was not in the audience on Monday when the Melbourne Theatre Company presented his two pieces of evidence, a timely comment on the Pentridge inquiry.

Jim McNeil is in Parramatta Gaol serving the last two years of a sentence for shooting a policeman.

Presenting a prisoner's eye view to the general public is not that easy from inside Parramatta and McNeil has found a way by becoming a playwright. He has written two

plays, *The Chocolate Frog*, first performed outside gaol by the Q Theatre in Sydney, and *The Old Familiar Juice*. Both plays have been introduced to Melbourne audiences at the MTC by the director Malcolm Robertson, who discovered McNeil in a prison drama class.

It is odd, and perhaps a tribute to the truth-telling of the new emergent plays, that McNeil has been able, with such apparent ease, to have his name joined with the new stream of writing while not only cut off from his fellow artists but from the very world to which his work is a communiqué.

The setting for the two plays is a three-bed prison cell. In the first the arrival of a young first-offender gives two old lags the chance to explain the stern Old Testament view of justice, the system of honour among thieves and the strong sense of belonging to the prison.

The aspect most splendid about McNeil's writing is its so sane, balanced assessment of the world he knows. He does not rail against the prison system. He merely points out the absurdities of depending for justice and mercy upon innocent nuns, crusty old-fashioned magistrates, and illiterate, underpaid and bullying officers; and in confining convicted criminals to their own company. 'While we are inside training to rob', says Shirker in *The Chocolate Frog*. And Bulla in *The Old Familiar Juice* describes the Second World War as servicemen 'out there fighting for our prison system'.

It is forceful but not bitter writing and it will have the more influence for that. The gift of making people laugh at fear has always had a more lasting effect than tirades of despair.

The Old Familiar Juice is about the way an ill-suited trio rub along together, a talkative unhappy bully, a resigned wino and a youngster.

The pointless routine of their day is brightened by the chance to steal yeast from the bakery, which, mixed with sugar and water in a slops bucket and allowed to ferment for a few hours, makes a fiery and acceptable booze.

I first saw this play inside Parramatta, performed in a confined space by members of the Resurgents Debating Society. Seeing it and the other play on a larger stage and in less emotive surroundings makes one aware of some thinness in the writing, of much that is left unsaid. This is inevitable in the circumstances and what is there leaves one in no doubt that McNeil is a natural dramatist of great wit and charm.

The Old Familiar Juice is, technically, an advance on his first play; but his full capacities will be seen only when he has the same freedom to work as other writers. May that day be hastened.

Peter Coleman, *Bulletin*, 28 August 1971

The final performance of the prison play *The Chocolate Frog* took place on Friday night as the curtain-raiser to a discussion on prison reform.

The discussion was started by a chirpy young man who introduced himself as 'Keith William Clarke. I'm the one who got the ball rolling on Bathurst—397 is me number.' He was the first to make a statutory declaration alleging bashings by warders last October. Mr Clarke told the packed Nimrod Theatre that *The Chocolate Frog* was an authentic play, and that he had seen in prison 'trials' of informers of the kind portrayed in the play. ('What was the punishment?', someone asked. 'A few dongs on the head.')

The psychologist, Mr L. H. Evers, drew a different lesson from the play. He said the lesson of the play is the need to bust prison morality which is evil. The average prisoner is the man next door, but they are controlled by the 'heavies', the stand-over bullies and torturers of the kind portrayed in the play. He did not blame the men, but the institution.

Miss Wendy Bacon disagreed. Generalising from her week in Silverwater Women's Prison (which appears from her published description to be on the whole akin to a rather strict girls' boarding-school), she said prison morality was no worse than that of the outside world.

I offered my opinion that the problem of recidivist prisons has emerged in its current form because we have all concentrated over recent years on the rehabilitation of the 'man next door' type of prisoner. Policy has been to do everything possible to stop sending people into prison. There are now far more people on probation than inside prison—a reversal of the ratios of a few years ago. We also have work-release prisons where they go to work in the ordinary way each day, and a short-term target of having ten per cent of the penal population

in work-release centres. The Maddison Administration has also brought in periodic (that is, weekend) detention.

But the result of all these reforms is that since the maximum number of people are being kept out of conventional prisons these are now populated by the 'hardcore' to whom reformers have given very little thought and still give little thought. I do not know what the answer is, but one lesson of the play seemed to be that any inquiry of the kind now being called for must be doomed since any prisoner who is inclined to give evidence openly that does not suit the 'heavies' and torturers knows he would be extremely lucky to escape with his life.

Mr George Peterson, the Labor MLA, said the trouble with prisons was that there had not been enough political prisoners. Yes, Mr Maddison was tinkering with the problem: he was putting more sewerage into the prisons and more classrooms, and he was paying the warders better. Mr Maddison is a humane man, yes, probably the best justice Minister New South Wales has ever had, but he is a victim of the system which treats prison as a deterrent. We will always have these problems while we believe it is necessary to keep a hell-on-earth such as Grafton.

Prisons mirror our authoritarian society and we always have these problems until prisons become unnecessary. He did not say when this would be, but he thought it would help if prisoners were given the vote.

His colleague, Mr Frank Walker, MLA, said we had to have many more psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists working on the problem. Everyone knew, he said, we won't have an inquiry, because if we did the warders would strike or resign and the system would collapse. It was the system that was at fault, so what could Mr Maddison do—even though, Mr Walker agreed, he was the best justice Minister ever.

These concessions to Mr Maddison were dramatic, but as performances they lacked the conviction of *The Chocolate Frog*.

Notes

See also Peter Kenna's introduction in *Jim McNeil: Collected Plays* (Currency Press, 1987) and various newspaper and magazine interviews and reviews which appeared between 1971 and 1986, particularly in *The Bulletin*, *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Many of the quotes from Jim McNeil in this study guide are from an ABC Radio interview broadcast in 1975.