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SUMNER LOCKE ELLIOT'S *RUSTY BUGLES*

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1. Introducing the play

After the heady period of the 1970s in Australian drama, it is interesting to return to an Australian play written in the 1940s to see what it offers present-day audiences and how it has stood the test of time. Not only have recent Australian plays created a new awareness of the dramatic potential of our vernacular and our characteristic behaviour, the theme of Australians at war has been revived in film, television and books. We are approaching something like a genre in representing Australians at war, in dramatic form. But unlike the men in *Gallipoli*, *1915* or *The Anzacs*, the soldiers in *Rusty Bugles* never see active service.

It is a platitude to say that the new dramatists like David Williamson, Alexander Buzo, Jack Hibberd and others are a hard act to follow, but it is especially testing to have written a play which is a prologue to the new wave, and stands beside plays like Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart*, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* as part of our emerging naturalistic tradition. Yet Doris Fitton, who directed the first production of *Rusty Bugles* at the Independent Theatre in Sydney in 1948, said of it in 1979, '(it) was the finest play yet written by an Australian—and thirty years has not made me change my mind' (p. xiii). Her challenging, assertive assessment of the play raises the curtain on a discussion of the play's dramatic and literary qualities, and its rightful place in Australian drama. We need to examine, then, what is intrinsically valid, credible, entertaining and moving about *Rusty Bugles*.

There are a number of distinguishing features in this play. At the time of its first production, the ribald language aroused a controversy which is well documented in the Currency Press edition. However, to a modern audience that language would seem mild and even dated. Sumner Locke Elliott pointed out at the time of the controversy that he had already toned down the soldiers' language, to avoid extreme reactions from the audience, and what remained was essential for dramatic purposes. While it is interesting to contemplate the kind of social pressures which created the uproar, it would be a pity if this aspect of the play's language were to overshadow other functions of language within it. The main force and tension of the play is created through the characters' dialogue, and there is more to this than merely the expression of aggression, frustration or disappointment. Relationships are formed and expressed through the language of hope, fear, friendship, fantasy and realism. These relationships are rarely deeply personal but they are appropriately structured for a context where group identity is perceived as important for the individual's survival. It sometimes requires an acute sensitivity to the subtext of the dialogue to recognise this, but analysis of the subtext does allow the more complex issues of the play to emerge.

Another distinguishing feature is that, in terms of dramatic changes in characters or surroundings, very little happens; yet the play manages to hold our interest. Essentially, the playwright is recreating the experience of men with nothing significant to do with their time and with little hope of a change in circumstances. There is a fine line between creating a dramatic situation in which boredom prevails, and making boring drama. Sumner Locke Elliott succeeds in sustaining dramatic interest by balancing the

tensions between the characters to give a sense of life continuing—of human resourcefulness overcoming frustration. It then becomes possible to feel empathy with the men without having to endure their ordeal. Not only do we then enjoy vicariously that frustrating inactivity and powerlessness, we are drawn into an implicit evaluation of what we see on stage. The wish to assess the causes and effects of the soldiers' situation keeps our speculative interest alive.

When Sumner Locke Elliott referred to *Rusty Bugles* as 'a documentary… Not strictly a play… it has no plot in the accepted sense' (author's preface) he could not have foreseen that shortly after this, the genre of the theatre of the absurd would establish as 'legitimate' a dramatic form where plot and the delineation of character are less important than the insight offered into the implicit drama of most human interactions. In a sense the playwright underestimates his own achievement. While *Rusty Bugles* is naturalistic, unlike the theatre of the absurd, its impact does depend on the actors' or readers' abilities to perceive the implicit and overt conflicts underlying behaviour in even apparently ordered contexts. In this play the 'ordinary' becomes 'extraordinary' because of the dramatic compression of time and events. The men's behaviour is extremely resourceful given the pressures towards despair, apathy and regression.

The issue of whether *Rusty Bugles* is a documentary or a naturalistic play where the characters are all drawn from real life is far less important than whether it works as drama. To achieve that it has to involve the audience in the concerns, motivations and events of the characters' lives. The characters must evoke our emotions and thoughts by their response to events so we identify with them and begin to see below the surface. As the audience or as readers, our perception of events can exceed that of the characters, theoretically. We can view the whole range of reactions between characters and profit from the three dimensional nature of drama. With skill and experience we can evaluate possible differing interpretations from the standpoint of the playwright, a director or actors. The interplay of our own private impressions from reading a script with the interpretations of others in a dramatic enactment can create a positive tension which enlivens the reading or viewing experience. Later, suggestions will be offered for engaging in that experience with or without the possibility of seeing a professional production.

It is true there is very little personal development of characters in the play. This is partly because of the nature of their situation. Only internal resources or outside intervention can deal with a potentially intolerable situation. In a sense then, the fact that the men do survive the relentless boredom is a credit to their fortitude. But this in turn raises the question of the futility of their situation, the waste of effort in maintaining a status quo which serves only the interests of a bureaucracy. It is not that the characters lack conviction or exist merely as stereotypes, rather that attention is directed to the subtle details of language and behaviour which create the characters as types and individuals.

The subtext

It is the subtext of the dialogue in *Rusty Bugles* which reveals the men's motivations, frustrations and subliminal emotions. In other kinds of drama a soliloquy can explicate the character's inner thoughts and feelings; but such public, or even private revelations would be out of place in this setting. Emotion needs to be suppressed in a collective group like this, dependent for its functioning upon order and the denial of individuality. But if we look below the surface of many exchanges for insight into the characters in such well-constructed dialogue, the evidence is available. There are many exchanges in the play which reveal the personality and feeling behind the suppression, through humour and laconic understatement. At the end of the play, Ot's resigned comment sums up the poignancy of the men's plight: 'Oh, I don't want to go much. I reckon I'll stay on in the old place… You get used to it after a while' (p. 83).

In the relationships between the men in the play, rules are implicit about the degree of familiarity and feeling deemed appropriate to the group. At the beginning of the play the appearance of the new man, Rod, in the camp poses a threat to the group's solidarity. He recognises that, intuitively, and responds with the correct measure of submission to the group's

norms, not even expressing indignation when his shaving cup is deliberately broken. Newcomers invite trouble if they try to assert themselves too soon, or even if they try to win acceptance too obviously within the group.

In the exchange between Andy, Rod and Gig Ape (p. 9) where Andy introduces Gig Ape as 'the greatest Gig Ape in the territory', it is important for us to know whether Andy is being insulting, serious, provocative, hostile, affectionate or a mixture of all these. It may require several readings of the play to gain sufficient understanding of the relationship between Andy and Gig Ape to get the subtext right. It is apparent early in the play that Gig Ape has the serious function in the camp of playing the fool. Andy mocks Gig Ape further, explaining that he 'Gets out of bed at reveille and goes off to shave with his spoon and fork' (p. 9). In part, Gig Ape accepts the mocking and calls Andy 'You dirty little sawn-off troppo runt', creating an exchange which bonds the two men in a brotherhood of insulting affection. We know they are mates because they abuse and wrestle each other; but a newcomer like Rod would be well advised not to join in the insults. He recognises them as part of the tacit code of language and behaviour which defines the roles of the men in the group. When there is no escape from the group and little possibility of changing its established dynamics, the characters in the play, and the audience, have to read the subtext correctly. Often this is done at an intuitive level.

Humour

Much of the underlying subtext of the play and its conflict is contained within the humour. At its simplest level humour provides relief from the reality of a situation which is recognisably grim and unrelenting. It is an effective defence mechanism. At the beginning of the play the humour of insult serves to convey to newcomers, and the audience, the established norms of the group. Gradually, the provocative function becomes apparent. Mac warns Rod, 'Jeez... Wait until you've done a Wet, mate. Just wait. I done four.' Andy's retort, 'Yeah, and you had one whole Wet away having twins' (p. 12) serves as a more sinister reminder of both the external threat they face from seasonal changes, and the internal threat Mac represents as the manipulator in the group. Having experienced a Wet confers status on the men and newcomers are expected to acknowledge that.

Similarly, Andy's comment about the white ants, 'Eat anything. Ate right through the leg of my bed one night. Collapsed. Stand too long in one place and they'll eat you up to the knees' (p. 13) suggests the unconscious fears of the men that external forces like the white ants and the Wet will eventually undermine them. Here Andy's humorous exaggeration is dramatically revealing of the men's projections and unexpressed fears. In part it is external forces which pose the greatest threat to the men's comfort; the weather, the white ants, the distance from civilisation, the lack of entertainment. As a group they function quite effectively, never seriously undermining each other but, rather, projecting onto the bureaucracy or natural forces their anger and frustration. They need each other to retain a sense of self in a stressful situation which allows no catharsis.

Humour is a productive way to relieve stress and induct a newcomer into the group. Revealing the group's history is part of that induction process: Ollie reminds Gig, 'You wasn't here when the dunny blew up' (p. 15). Sardonic humour enables the men to make the best of it while reminding them that there is little opportunity for escapism here. Things are tough but humour can acknowledge that and make it tolerable.

Humour also functions to establish and maintain the right pecking order. When Mac resents being called to work on Sunday, it is suggested that he's been 'spine-bashing' all week. By articulating their irritation with each other through teasing, insults or anecdotes, the men use humour effectively to assert a group solidarity and restore order.

What is more difficult to accommodate within the group is the behaviour of Ken Falcon who remains silent and withdrawn throughout. Rod remarks that he's never heard him speak. Ot blandly replies that he heard him speak, once. Taken in by this disclosure, Rod asks, 'What did he say?'; Ot replies, 'Pass the jam' (p. 27). This sardonic, undercutting response serves to counterpoint the seriousness of a situation the men are unable to deal with or confront: a member of the group who does not follow the

rules. For once, Ot's wit fails to function as a corrective to the group dynamics, rather it points to the very limited nature of the men's behaviour. By his withdrawal, Ken makes the others feel guilty because there is no established protocol for dealing with a self-made outcast. His behaviour is silently confronting and embarrassing. When he is eventually taken to a psychiatric ward, Gig asks, 'Is he nuts?'; Keghead replies, 'Not any more than most of us' (p. 69). The others recognise some truth in this and express compassion for the man who couldn't get things off his chest; 'There must have been a lot on his mind' (p. 70). One of Ken's problems was his inability to use the group for the essential purpose of defining himself within its structure. To some extent the other men were able to do this, even if it meant being cast as a fool or a manipulator. At least these roles offered some possibility to test out a personality and retain an identity.

Even within the limitations of the ordnance camp life, the men developed resources of tolerance and humour to deal with army routines, the bureaucracy and each other's foibles. Psychologically and socially the group behaviour we see in the play resonates with our own understanding of group dynamics, and yet at the end of the play when the Wet arrives, we are left marvelling that the men have developed the fortitude to deal with such relentless boredom and disappointment.

The sardonic, laconic use of humour as a mechanism to preserve solidarity and individual identity within the group is recognisably a norm for Australian male society. The violent insults exchanged between the men do not provoke violent responses, as might be expected were they to be taken at face value, rather they are recognised as the only acceptable way to express feelings of frustration and affection. In some ways this kind of humour is extremely effective because it is never challenged by men aspiring to be part of the group. Maleness is bestowed with admission to the group and the admission fee is paid with a tacit collusion to adhere to the group's norms; to suppress any displays of fear, sadness, tenderness or embarrassing sentimentality. The greatest unspoken fear among the men is to go 'troppo'. This is alluded to throughout the play, and like 'the Wet' is a symbolic and real threat which even group solidarity might be powerless to defeat.

After a revival of the play in performance in 1964, one critic suggested

> Perhaps because time and event have receded into remoteness, the comedy proves far more endurable than the pathos. (quoted p. xxviii)

It seems to me that the humour often highlights the pathos in a remarkably poignant way. For example, when Ot reads in the *Army News* about the offensive in Italy, he barely responds. But when he reads of the scratching from a race of a horse he once rode he is pleased and excited. At one level this response is amusing, but it also reveals the men's realistic sense of isolation from the war. These men have had little opportunity to define their roles as soldiers and are blighted with a sense of their own futility as such.

As a 'forgotten army' they respond to the events of the war with detachment, yet they are required to maintain an illusion of involvement. It is this humorous juxtaposition of supposedly important and trivial events, that draws the author's point of view to the attention of the audience. Our perspective is enlarged by the interplay between our empathetic responses to the men and our awareness of the wider world context of which they are a part.

The kind of black humour which surfaces in repressed contexts such as this ordnance camp is markedly Australian: stoic and defensive. Indeed that humour functions most effectively in alleviating boredom and tension while the men confront the realities of camp life. They are likely to be disadvantaged in their careers after the war, and their personal life is constantly threatened by their absence from home. They cannot even claim to be fighting for the liberty of their loved ones. They are forgotten by the authorities and unremarkable in their achievements. It is this undercurrent of shared sense of failure which informs much of their group behaviour and their basic acceptance of the status quo.

While a theatre audience rarely has time to analyse its responses during a performance, spontaneous reactions of laughter, sadness or stillness in poignant moments are usually instructive and are drawn not only by the dialogue but also by body language, tone of voice, proximity of characters and the subliminal

messages which flesh out the communication between the characters. Without these complex messages, much of the tension and feeling can be lost. In fact, *Rusty Bugles* may not seem very funny or dramatic read dry from the text, but on stage the pacing of scenes like Ot's washing scene or the presence of the shadowy figure of Ken give an important further dimension to the script.

Conflict

There is a tendency for readers or audiences to expect drama to be large-scale, obvious and externalised. Television soap operas capitalise on this expectation even though audience plausibility is often stretched to the limit. However, whenever a group of humans live and work together there is inevitably a measure of conflict as individuals define the boundaries of the group's behaviour and seek their needs within the group. In this ordnance camp the lives of the men are narrowed down to bare subsistence level. While there is no real threat to physical survival with the basic needs met of food, shelter and safety, higher order needs for stimulation, variety, entertainment, close personal relationships or any kind of development are lacking. Life revolves around routine duties and fruitless repetitive tasks. Fantasy and escapism centre on sexual exploits and the hope of leave or a change in orders. But as there is little chance of fulfilling these fantasies, even in part, indulging in them tends to increase tension rather than reduce it.

There is so little scope for change in the camp either materially or psychologically, that it becomes increasingly difficult to retain a sense of balance about reality. There is no known time limit to the experience; it lacks a target. To be in the army but not on active service, waiting for something to happen when the odds are heavily against it, taking guard duty when there is nothing worth guarding and to be ignored by the bureaucracy until some petty transgression comes to light is conducive to a free-floating anxiety and destructive apathy which can be difficult for outsiders to perceive. The apparently good-humoured teasing and provocation cannot be taken at face value. It must be seen as part of an elaborate coping mechanism accurately perceived by the men as crucial to their mental stability. The men are aware of the personal undercurrents, and aware of their own impotence to do anything constructive about them except to develop stoic tolerance. Attempts to organise entertainments such as a cricket match, a picnic, or two-up games simply highlight the lack of options within camp life. To go along with these attempts is to give tacit support to a denial of the harsh realities of the camp. The more realistically aware men cannot go along with inessential game-playing.

It is at the insidious level where conflict cannot be openly acknowledged that regressive behaviour surfaces, such as the breaking of Rod's cup to express annoyance at a change imposed upon the group. Conflicts surface over petty issues such as the apparent theft of a Violet Crumble bar or the poaching of space on the washing line. While such conflicts are irrational and childish, realistically they are just the kind of incident which provokes anger in a tightly knit group which has no focus for its energies. For some, keeping the rules of the game and upholding camp spirit becomes a moral imperative. Bill criticises Mac:

> I got no time for them that don't uphold the camp spirit. What I say is, no matter where you are yous can still behave like a sport. (p. 4)

This simplistic attitude to conflict can only prevail when the game is short and prizes are awarded for team spirit. When the game goes on too long, when the team leaders have forgotten they ever asked you to play, and where there are no winners, that ethic becomes spurious. There are no medals for heroism for those who spent the war fighting boredom and depression.

Mac becomes the focus for the men's ambivalent feelings about group solidarity and individual needs. He openly acknowledges his desire to get out of the camp and tries to induce dermatitis as a means to that end. Ironically, he contracts it only after his leave is granted and the leave is cancelled. The men are not too sure whether to feel sorry for him or self-righteous. When Mac receives a letter from his daughter revealing his wife's infidelity and pregnancy, his dramatic outburst of anger is cut short by the dinner bell. Ritual takes second place to no one. In these primitive conditions of existence, ritual, order and hierarchies help keep at bay the more passionate emotions which are perceived as

potentially destructive to the group. Life has to be kept simple and controlled. Mac's behaviour challenges the men because he is openly manipulative, emotional, and at the end of the play, apparently successful against all odds.

One of the most moving scenes in the play arises when the well-ordered defensiveness between the men is broken down: Rod attempts to understand the friction which has developed between himself and Vic (Act 1 Scene 5, pp . 46 ff) by drawing Vic into conversation with him. Vic calls this attempt 'fraternisation', a choice of word which serves to distance and formalise what is only a sensitive attempt at ordinary friendship. Vic is suspicious of Rod's overture and threatened by it. He admits, defensively, 'I don't particularly care to make friends with anyone here. I get on with them all right, but as for friends…'His bitterness is founded on his feeling that the army's 'a racket… The whole war's a racket… same as anything else'. At heart he envies Rod his education and the chances he's had. But in spite of himself Vic does confide in Rod and his bitterness is tempered by its expression. In some respects Vic is a victim of his own grip on reality. He cannot even pretend to himself that things will be any better after the war. While the scene is poignant and disturbing, in some ways it is a relief to discover that two of the men at least are able to overcome their sense of isolation by the exchange of confidences and a shared acknowledgment of their hopeless situation.

Humour and conflict are interwoven in the mock-serious scene where the men try to make phone calls home. At a humorous level the frustration of bad telephone lines raises an easy laugh, but in this situation the frustration is especially poignant, all the more so when we witness the banality of the conversations when the connections are made. While the banality is partly explained by the further constraint that the men have no privacy for their calls, it is also common for such calls to end in frustration no matter what. Often they serve only to remind the speakers of their isolation from each other and the futility of attempting to achieve any intimacy. Keghead asks his wife if she sent up his hair restorer—a comic reminder of the length of time spent in the camp and a sad reminder of the men's dependency upon outsiders for any comforts. The parallels with prison life are all too obvious. When Keghead's wife then mistakes his message about leave as a request to be sent apples, we have another example of the kind of black humour which victimises its participants, almost unendurably. At a symbolic level and in reality the men can only achieve very minimal levels of communication with others while they are in the camp. External circumstances conspire to thwart the men's endeavours so their resources are directed to maintaining a tolerable status quo. When humour, conflict, and poignancy are melded in a dramatic way, we experience a heightening of everyday living. This is why *Rusty Bugles* is much more than a documentary or a simple collection of character sketches. The unifying symbolism of 'the Wet', the idiosyncrasies of a mindless bureaucracy, and the fear of mental disintegration pervade the men's everyday existence as a more insidious threat than an attack from the enemy army. You cannot shoot the enemy within or the relentless forces of nature. Endurance is the only option.

As the audience, we are spared much of the reality of the men's existence; that is suggested to us through language, atmosphere, events, the reduced time scale and the dramatist's choice of revealing encounters between characters. We never really experience long gaps in conversations or the tedious rhythms of camp life, though we can imagine them. In *Rusty Bugles* we see little of the men's inner life, and little of the processes which influence changes in them. We hear that Ken Maitland is removed to a psychiatric ward but we are only partly aware of the reasons for his breakdown. His demise is not analysed or dramatically presented, simply recounted as another incident in camp life.

At the end of the play we are left with the memory of the 'lonely roaring sound of falling water' as the Wet begins. Much has been presented to us but little has been resolved. We do not know whether the men have in reserve the resources to endure the relentless boredom of their existence. Perhaps it is just as well that the pointlessness of their life in camp is never confronted or rebelled against. They are caught up in world events beyond their understanding and endure because they have simple routines and group interactions which keep life functioning.

Rusty Bugles works dramatically partly because these undemanding, stoical, unacknowledged 'heroes' are not asked to bear the weight of any particular philosophy or world view. They are simply asked to exist in a context where roles are clearly fixed by hierarchies, and personal attributes and group behaviour blend to form a group all too well adapted to the environment. In such circumstances human beings do not develop much because survival becomes more important than risk-taking. When the men supposed to be going on leave return unceremoniously to camp for the duration of the war, they are faced with a predicament in which rage and disappointment must be suppressed in the interests of group morale. Nobility, heroism or courage never surface because the flat routines of a pointless, unproductive life don't call for them. And yet, the resources needed to deal with emotional impotence, boredom and disappointment— stoicism and fortitude, a sense of humour and goodwill— are equally enduring qualities; and they finally trap the men into roles as living victims of the war.

In a sense these 'victims' are the forgotten, unknown heroes of the war. There is something attractive about the characters. Their energetic language, their unstated optimism in spite of their constant boredom, and the overriding impression that they will endure yet another Wet and even more disappointments is particularly appealing to an Australian audience with its ready applause for 'the battler', the quiet, medal-less hero, exemplifying those precious qualities of mateship and good humour.

As surely as later dramatists have shown us modern Australian relationships between educated, city-living men and women, Sumner Locke Elliott shows us in *Rusty Bugles* Australian men in a harsh, repressive environment which, ironically, produces qualities of forbearance which have justifiably become part of our national folk-hero history. Unlike the later 'ocker' figure these men are not self-dramatising, or self-seeking. Nor are they moral paragons. Just ordinary men who become extraordinarily interesting when you look below the surface.

2. Approaches to studying the text

It is important to recognise that a drama script is a blueprint to action. The dramatist expects that the script will be enacted by actors speaking the lines to each other in an appropriate setting. To make the lines come alive, full use needs to be made of tone of voice, pausing, facial expression, action and the physical proximity between characters. These expressive features arise naturally when the actors understand the motivations of the character they are playing and the relationships between characters. Reading 'between the lines' to understand the subtext and adopting something of the standpoint of an actor or director can help the reader to respond to the literary and dramatic qualities of the script. The following activities are designed to help the reader experience some of these qualities:

Activities

1. Sketch a plan for each scene in the play, drawing rough stick figures for each character in that scene. Label the figure with a suitable initial. Add symbols to indicate where the scene takes place, for example, trees for outdoors, furniture for indoors. Small directional arrows can be added over the head of each character to indicate whether he comes on and/or goes off during the scene.

   If a separate sketch is made for each scene, these can then be placed in chronological sequence to give a visual outline of the action of the play. Initially the sketches might be very rough, simply serving as a guide to reading the script, later they might be redone with attention paid to the movement and placing of the figures in relation to each other. Symbols can be added to indicate the lighting effects needed for each scene (a partly shaded circle can indicate the degree of light/darkness), prop lists can be included and costume details. Not only does this exercise create the sense of a drama script as intended for performance, it focuses attention on the language of the script and its interactional nature. It places the reader in the role of director and leads to discussions

of the audience's perspective on the play. The exercise can be done individually or in groups. It is recommended for any reader undertaking study of the script. It can be done as an aid to an initial reading then developed as familiarity with the script increases.

This exercise can also be developed into a fully detailed 'performance book' with a careful outline of the visual appearance of each scene, prop lists, costume details and lighting and scene changes noted. Key quotations can be listed to indicate the main theme(s) of each scene.

2. In a group, try reading the subtext of part of a scene. To do this, each reader in the group takes it in turn to read aloud one piece of dialogue as it is in the script. Then the reader puts the line/s just read into his/her own words, but in the first person, as the character. This will involve reading between the lines and expressing the feelings and motivations which gave rise to the original. The next reader then says the next lines in the script, adding his/her paraphrase or reading of the subtext. It is important that each reader gives his/her subtext reading in the first person, as if he/she is the character. To increase spontaneity and reduce hesitation, readers should not be asked to justify their interpretation.

   For example, Act One, Scene Three (p. 30 ff):

   [*Ken Falcon comes into the hut. He looks at the others unsmilingly, then sits on his bed*]

   OT: [*gaily*] Good day, Dean Maitland. The good old silent Dean, eh?
   Aren't you going to be part of the group?... Won't you speak to us? Your silence is an affront to us... Come on, we don't like outsiders.

   GIG: Chatty, ain't he?
   Can't do anything with him... he's different... won't play the game. Draws attention to himself by keeping his distance... I don't like him... I could get nasty with him.

   [*Ot lies prostrate on his bed, wiggling his toes*]

   OT: Hey, Gig.
   Let's ignore him (Falcon)... I can't deal with him.

   GIG: Yeah.
   I'm with you... We have to leave him out.

   OT: How's the bloody war goin'?
   Might as well think of external events... What are we here for anyway?... We're meant to be part of the war but it doesn't even seem real.

   GIG: [*tossing him the* Army News] You can read it.
   I don't know... I've lost interest in finding out... Nothing's going to change here anyway.

   OT: [*picking it up, reading laboriously and without interest*] Eighth Army starts big offensive in Italy. [*Then excitedly*] Hey listen, Gig, Evergreen's been scratched for the Maiden Handicap. [*Nostalgically*] I rode that bastard in his first race. I used to work for his trainer.
   Eighth Army doesn't mean anything to me... Italy's too far away to matter... Hang on... here's something really important to me... Here's something where there's action... I used to be part of that scene... I wish I still could be.

   When the subtext exercise is thoroughly worked through, the readers/actors should be able to say the original lines of the script with greater insight into their function in the drama.

3. With a partner(s), try a parallel improvisation of part of a scene. This involves working out a situation similar to that in the play, adopting the role of the characters and acting out the situation. For example, the exchange between Brooks and Rod at the end of Act One Scene One (p. 17) is a fairly typical minor clash with authority. A parallel situation might be between a teacher and a student who isn't moving on quickly enough to the next lesson, or between a bus conductor and a passenger who won't get off the bus even though he is the last on and the bus is carrying too many people. The conflict between the characters is not very serious but each feels he has a right to some consideration from the other.

   Having done the parallel improvisation, return to the script and analyse the differences and similarities between your improvisation and the script. Try acting out the script now (with book in hand if necessary). Sometimes this exercise points out the dramatist's skill in encapsulating a conflict with an economy of language. You can play around with varying degrees of aggression between the characters until you find the right measure. This usually entails

looking at other parts of the play where those characters appear.

Other scenes which lend themselves to this kind of treatment could be:

- The scene between Vic and Rod, Act One Scene Five (p. 46ff) and the later exchange between them at the end of Act Two Scene One (p. 59): These two scenes give us insight into the men's capacity for feeling and need for relationships even though they have to keep much of their humanity in close check. Vic's line, 'Yeah, All the loneliness in the world... and a million years old', is particularly revealing and poignant.
- The telephone scene, Act Two Scene Two: A frustrating telephone conversation is easy to improvise but when you return to the script, note the blend of comedy, farce and pathos in this scene. In this particular context the failure of the conversation is particularly moving.
- Andy's distribution of the mail, Act One Scene Three (p. 31): This scene also takes on significance because Ken Falcon is disappointed. Later in the play, when he's been removed to a psychiatric ward, his letter turns up.

4. Imagine you are going to direct this play. Write a letter to an actor asking him to play one of the parts in a performance you will direct. Outline your impressions of the play and the importance of the part he will play. Indicate your feelings about the play in performance and the major themes you wish to emerge.
5. You are one of the characters in the play. Write a letter home outlining your daily routine and your feelings about camp life. Imagine in the letter that you can say all the things about your companions and the bureaucracy that you can't say in the camp. (Forget about any censors.)
6. Write an imaginary biography for one of the characters—for example, Mac. Outline how and where he might have lived before the war and try to imagine the kind of life he would have after the war. Include details about his work, how he'd spend his weekends, his family life and the friends he'd have. Although the biography is largely imaginary, can you recount incidents or dialogue in the play which create a sense of Mac as an individual?
7. You are a journalist investigating life in an ordnance camp. You spend two weeks in the camp just before 'the Wet' breaks. Write your impressions of the camp and the men in it. You could write your report from a sympathetic or unsympathetic point of view.

3. Questions for discussion

1. The first comment below, by Terry Sturm, is from his chapter on drama in a recent history of Australian literature. Leslie Rees' remarks are part of a letter of protest published at the time of the first production of *Rusty Bugles*.

   Terry Sturm, 'Drama' in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, L. Kramer, ed., Melbourne 1981 (pp. 230-31):

   > Long before David Williamson's drama, *Rusty Bugles* made considerable comic play out of the tendency of Australian men to express affection and group solidarity through extravagant rituals of derogatory or allusive language. Deeply felt frustrations or aggressions, by contrast, are masked in silence, or expressed through impulsive and apparently irrational actions. Both the theme of the play—of apathy and fatalism—and its ritual presentation, were to receive new emphasis in much of the 'new wave' Australian drama of the late 1960s and 1970s.

   Leslie Rees, Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 October, 1948:

   > It is a serious contribution to the observance of Australian character and idiom... Looking more deeply, the play is a document of anti-war, a strongly felt expression of the author's utter abhorrence of the demoralising boredom, frustration and wastage of human effort and time that are one of war's gifts to young men.

   What are the issues raised in these assessments? It is worth noting the

consistency of the evaluations of two critics, one writing more than twenty years after the other.

2. 'This is a documentary. It is not strictly a play. It has no plot in the accepted sense. Its characters are drawn from life—they all existed, and I knew and loved them well.' (author's preface). Does this comment sum up the play's achievement and do justice to its dramatic qualities?

3. '... a number of earlier plays... Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles* among them, tend to confirm that the image of man in Australian drama is also collective and social rather than individual.' (Margaret Williams, in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, ed. Peter Holloway, p. 209). How far is this comment relevant to *Rusty Bugles*?

4. Sumner Locke Elliott told Doris Fitton he had written the play 'as a protest against bureaucracy: in memory of hundreds of men up there rotting in an ordnance depot who had wanted to be on active service to their country' (p. xii). Is the play more or less a protest against bureaucracy? How do the men in the play react to the bureaucracy? Are any of them successful in protesting against it? Where do your sympathies lie?

5. Lindsay Brown, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 October 1948, the night after the play opened in Sydney, wrote in praise of the production and the comedy in it: 'And yet the performance was not so heavily loaded with laughter as to disguise the essential ugliness of the lives these soldiers were forced to lead' (p. xvi). Discuss the place of comedy in the play. How do the characters use humour and wit as a way of coping with their situation?

6. The issue of the censorship of the play, outlined in the introduction, raises questions about the power of language and about audience expectations of art and theatre. Although the language of the play would hardly raise an outcry today, the issue of censorship is not dead. How do you account for adverse reactions to language which, although realistic, is said to disgust, shock, upset or influence? Is there more to the language of *Rusty Bugles* than its realism?

7. 'The important thing about *Rusty Bugles* is its robust, warm delineation of character—without caricature—and its dramatic picture of this forgotten outpost. Without a theatrical plot, Locke Elliott has contrived to make fine theatre from the grousing homesickness, bitterness, lovesickness and plain boredom on the post... In *Rusty Bugles*, Sumner Locke Elliott has given the Australian stage a play native in its truth and individual in its great talent.' (unsigned review, quoted, p. xxi) Is this a comprehensive assessment of the play?

8. In 1979 a review of the New Theatre revival of the play said: 'Its demonstrations—of the comic possibilities of the vernacular and the dramatic possibilities in the revaluation and reorientation of Australian nationalism and its traditions—made it a persisting stimulus to our playwrights.' (H.G. Kippax in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, quoted, p. xxx).

   What is intrinsically Australian about this play? Can you see any parallels in the social group behaviour of these men and those in later Australian plays such as David Williamson's *The Club* or Alexander Buzo's *The Front Room Boys*?

9. No matter how profound a play's themes are, nor how significant its message for the audience, it must have the capacity to hold an audience's attention and engage its responses in laughter, despair, identification or hope. What is it about this play which could make it successful on the stage?

10. Although there are no women in the play, and only references made to the men's wives, girlfriends or pin-ups, in many ways the women in their absence still influence the men's lives. Discuss whether this is so.

11. There are a number of poignant moments in the play where we can identify with the boredom, frustration and loneliness of the men. Can you identify these moments and discuss how they work dramatically to engage our sympathies?

12. Mac is memorable in the play because he is a typical 'bludger' or 'scrounger'. How do the men deal with him and how does he manage to appear to be a winner even when he is losing? Is he an individual in the play or merely a stereotype?

13. H.G. Kippax said of *Rusty Bugles* in 1979: 'In place of contrivance, we have themes, stated, developed and recapitulated, as in *The Three Sisters* or *Waiting For Godot*, masterpieces in which, notoriously, nothing much happens' (p. xxx). What are the themes which emerge in the play and how are they presented?

14. Australian men at war have gained world-wide recognition. Although the men in *Rusty Bugles* never see active service, what qualities do they exhibit to deserve commendation?

All references are to the Currency Press edition of *Rusty Bugles*, Sydney, 1980.

4. Further reading

On Sumner Locke Elliott and *Rusty Bugles*

Dutton, Geoffrey (ed.), *The Literature of Australia*, Penguin, Melbourne 1976 (see particularly the section on drama by Katharine Brisbane)

Fitzpatrick, Peter, *After* The Doll*: Australian Drama Since 1955*, Edward Arnold, Melbourne 1979

Holloway, Peter (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Drama: Perspectives Since 1955*, Currency Press, Sydney 1981

Rees, Leslie, *A History of Australian Drama*, 2 vols., Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1978

Sturm, Terry, 'Drama' in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (Leonie Kramer, ed.), O.U.P., Melbourne 1981

West, John, *Theatre in Australia*, Cassell, Sydney 1978

Novels and plays by Sumner Locke Elliott

Buy Me Blue Ribbons (play), New York 1952 (Acting edition, Fisher Library, University of Sydney)

Careful, He Might Hear You, Gollancz, London 1963

Edens Lost, London 1970 and Sun Books, Melbourne 1980

Going, Macmillan, Melbourne 1975

Interval (play), Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1942 and 1947

The Man Who Got Away, Michael Joseph, London 1972

Signs of Life, Penguin, Melbourne 1981

Some Doves and Pythons, Gollancz, London 1966

Water Under the Bridge, New York 1977, Sun Books, Melbourne 1980