# AN EVER-CHANGING IDIOM

by ALANA VALENTINE

A response to:
*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*
by Ray Lawler

Currency Press

# Currency Press

THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

&

COPYRIGHTAGENCY CULTURAL FUND

# AN EVER-CHANGING IDIOM

by ALANA VALENTINE

A response to:

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*

by Ray Lawler

## Copyright Details

First published in 2014
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia
enquiries@currency.com.au
www.currency.com.au



ePub ISBN: 9781921429279
mobi ISBN: 9781921429286

Series Editor: Toby Leon
Cover design: Miranda Costa

Publication of this title was assisted by the Copyright Agency Limited’s Cultural Fund.

## Author's Biography

ALANA VALENTINE's writing has been nominated for, and won, numerous national and international awards. Alana is well known for her rigorous use of research within the community she is writing about. This is evident in her popular 2004 play *Run Rabbit Run* about South Sydney League's Club's fight for survival and 2007's sell-out season of *Parramatta Girls* at Belvoir Street Theatre about the infamous Girls Training School, Parramatta.

Her other stage plays include: *Student Body*, *Head Full of Love*, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, *Ratticus and Reidar*, *Eyes to the Floor*, *Singing the Lonely Heart*, *Love Potions*, *Covenant*, *The Prospectors*, *Savage Grace*, *The Conjurers*, *Ozone* and *Swimming the Globe.*

Alana has also made three short films—*Mother Love* (1994), *The Witnesses* (1995), and *Reef Dreaming* (1997)—and is the author and producer of fifteen original works for radio broadcast, four of which have received AWGIE nominations. Her multi-media work includes an installation at the Museum of Sydney and a water screen installation in Sydney's Darling Harbor. Alana has also received a Centenary Medal for her work on the Centenary of Federation.

Most recently, Alana won the International STAGE Competition in 2012 for her play, *Ear to the Edge of Time*. In 2013, her play *Grounded* won the AWGIE Award for most outstanding script. She also won the inaugural David Williamson prize, recognising excellence in playwriting.

# AN EVER-CHANGING IDIOM

When asking students to respond to the published text of a play it is, of course, firstly important to recognise that it is not built for the two dimensions of the page but rather for realisation in the three dimensions of the public stage and so includes a consciousness of what the flesh and breath of actors will bring to it. In being asked to respond to *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, which I have never seen in performance, I bring to it my imagination, my own stagecraft, my respect for its illustrious history and my peculiar and very particular interests as a playwright. But like many of the students who will study the play, I also need to tear back the curtain of time and try to relate the play as vividly as possible to my own experience and perceptions about life. Because I want to have both an emotional and intellectual response to the play, I want to be roused by both its content and its form, and I want to be caught in the world of the play, both submitting to its spell and calibrating its craft. For this reason, the response that follows tries to wrestle to the page the cocktail of personal feelings, ideas and questions that the play provoked in me. I have not, as an academic might, chosen one aspect of the play to interrogate, but rather I have tried to swallow the entirety of experience that the play might generate on a stage—the aspects of both the form and the content that have moved me and then the provocations about the current culture of Australian theatre, both nationally and internationally, that intrigue me.

Like Olive in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* I had a lot of mostly-absent boyfriends when I was a teenager. They lived in Gosford, they lived in Newcastle, they lived in Como and, although we rarely saw each other, when we did it was all fireworks and fancy times. The rest of the time I could just wear them, as a kind of essential adolescent badge, a proof that I was popular enough to be 'taken', an excuse not to respond to any of the advances of my more proximate adolescent peers, and an assurance to myself that the persistent naggings of my sexual identity could be ignored until when, and if, I got together with these geographically distant boys. I say 'a lot' not boastfully but

because it really was more of a pattern than an exception—I would hook up with a young man whose chief appeal was his potential absence, he would get tired of me being all keen on the phone but cool in the flesh, and I would be boyfriendless until another likely regional Romeo would present himself. It was all about proving to my female school friends that I could 'pull' good-looking lads, without actually wanting to spend any time with them.

Now, I am not going to try to run the line that Olive is in fact bisexual, or that her chief interest in Roo is the certainty of his regular absence and the Mardi Gras like atmosphere that he brought to town when he came. I'm tempted, just because I haven't seen anyone else put this proposition forward and, frankly, because when confronted with an esteemed classic the seductions of making wild and outrageous conjectures is always present. Why? Well, because it can be exciting to see the familiar through a new lens, even one that at first seems fanciful and a little outrageous. In doing so I am striving to be utterly respectful to Ray Lawler's genius in observing the truth and particularity of human nature, even to the point where his characters might have a life and interpretation beyond the one even he imagined. Like the person who reads *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and sees not the gothic melodrama but all the behaviours and patterns of alcoholic addiction, as a playwright I cherish the hope that I am observing and recording truths in my own work that are now subject to the conditions of my times, but might be seen very differently by the perceptions of the future. For the fashionista who disdains the idea of any form of respectfulness as certain hagiography, let me observe that it is possible to be simultaneously respectful and robustly interrogative.

In truth, I think the case I would try to make regarding the intimate choices of Olive and Roo and Barney and Pearl and Nancy would require an audience who were aboard a notion of sexuality which argued a spectrum of preference for kinds of sexual encounters rather than corralled sexual identity to the dichotomies of straight and gay. What I mean, of course, is that sexual identity and sexual preference is not just about male or female. We know that there are women who

prefer the casual frequency of sex in a way that is stereotyped as gay male, or that there are gay men who prefer the romance of long-term marriage in a way that is stereotyped as inherently female. We all know and have observed such persons—women who occasionally casually sleep with men but don't move in with them and call themselves lesbians, or men who can be married to women and also enjoy encounters with other men. It's a radical notion of sexuality that I'm conjuring and one that doesn't simply problematise a choice between straight and gay as a lack of courage, and I am inspired to posit it precisely because Lawler also invites us to look beyond narrow definitions of interpersonal relationships. Through Olive, especially, he refutes the idea that all women have a predictable and definite desired outcome in their encounters with men. When Roo clumsily suggests marriage, it is genuinely thrilling for me to watch Olive howl at this betrayal, this utter misunderstanding of what she thought Roo knew existed between them. I reject the idea that she can't 'grow up' and face the 'real' world. Rather, she is asserting the right to find happiness in a way that others, not so inclined, tend to see as 'diminished'. For my part, I was thrilled by Lawler's dramatisation of both a female and male sexuality which preferenced the excitement of reunions and lingering goodbyes over the proximity of domestic bliss.

But we live in a world of labels and there is no label I can give to what I am trying to articulate about Olive, who obviously enjoys lusty heterosexual encounters for five months of the year. The usual notion of 'gay' is a preference for the same sex but it is more a kind of 'old-fashioned' notion of 'gay' I am reaching for here—a carefree and showy love of the spontaneously and passionately romantic. A definition unencumbered by a negative connotation of fecklessness but rather celebrating the value of the instant over the enduring, the intensely immediate rather than the delights of endurance. Because it's not the object of her sexual preference that is different, it is the nature of the preferred conditions of, especially Olive's, sexual interest that intrigued and compelled me as I was reading the play. I might say that Lawler looks at the difference between 'people of the vow' and 'people of the now', regardless of gender.

With this personal response to the nature of sexuality in the play in mind, I then became interested in another way of encountering the play, much more sympathetic to my concerns as a playwright whose interest in oral history, verbatim interview and archival research has characterised much of my own writing. When I travelled to the National Library in Canberra recently I began reading *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia* by Joy Damousi in which she declares that, foundational to the acceptance in Australia of a new 'Australian voice' was the play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.[1] Leslie Rees in *The Making of Australian Drama* also notes that 'what was emerging was a conspicuous method of national self-expression as a means of self-assertion'.[2] Indeed, it is impossible to read any commentary, reviews or academic analysis of the play without encountering an almost universal claim that *The Doll* has a 'strident, distinctive Australian accent that became part of the play's hallmark'.[3] Others talk about the sympathetic reception the play had in England but the bewilderment of the American critics who postulated that, although Australia and America shared the language of English, they could barely understand each other such was the particularity of our idiom.[4]

Much of my own delight in the idiom in the play is the way in which it resembles the parlance of my beloved Uncle Ross, one of my few living relatives. Ross is, as our slang would have it, a 'dead ringer' for Roo, not a cane cutter but a man of many casual employment opportunities and with them the serial sensation of home and away. A gifted mechanic who counted tow-truck driving, long haul trucking, panel beating and office cleaning among his suite of casual skills, he would often speak to me of 'giving me a clout across the earhole' if I misbehaved or talking about the television being 'on the blink' or a car having 'conked out'. The weather was 'crook', the beer was 'crook' and his mother, my grandmother, had 'just gone crook' at him for some reason or other. He was referred to, by her, for so long as 'that mug lair' that I often forgot that he actually had a Christian name. His girlfriends were, according to her, 'all arse and teeth and a few quid' and he himself was too often something of a 'lurk merchant'. The worst thing he himself could say about someone was

that they ‘had a death adder in their kick’ meaning that they wouldn’t shout for their round at the pub, i.e. afraid of being bitten if they put their hand in their pocket. Reading *The Doll* was like a nostalgic visit to the Kogarah loungeroom of my grandmother’s tiny CSR-loaned weatherboard home where I found words and phrases that I hadn’t heard for years and yet I understood perfectly. I marvelled at the inventiveness and wit of the parlance and bemoaned the ‘gentrification’ of my own language that had most certainly known it’s first home in this swamp of rhyming, base and street slang.

Surely it is Australia’s history as a former British colony that meant that the play, and the Australian slang in it, was better understood by the English than the Americans, I assumed. If I looked up the derivation and antecedents of the idiom is that what I would find? It was and it wasn’t. Olive remarks that Nancy put her up to a ‘dodge’ meaning an ingenious contrivance, which comes from the British writer Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* in 1830. *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying and Quotation,*also notes that in late 19th century naval slang a ‘dodger’ was the mess deck sweeper, who thus avoids other duties. [5] Gradually a dodger came to be known as a malinger, a shirker or a bludger and ‘dodgy’ became a word for goods or behaviour that was suspect or faulty. I liked the listing of ‘devil-dodger’ as a priest. So that is certainly a tick for British derivation.

I then looked up Pearl’s use of ‘if she cottons on to me doin’ anything wrong, she could break out the same way’ using the same reference hoping at least to find a derivation for ‘cottons on’ but instead the editor, Elizabeth Knowles, distractingly lists the intriguing ‘to die with your ears stuffed full of cotton’ meaning to be hung at Newgate prison. The ‘ears stuffed full of cotton’ bears no relation to a metaphorical allusion about choking to death but rather to the fact that the Chaplain of Newgate was for a long time named Cotton. So to die with your ears ‘stuffed full of cotton’ was to die with the Chaplain’s edicts to repent ringing in your ears! ‘The Phrase Finder’ on the internet defines ‘cotton on’ as ‘to get to know or understand something’ and posits the origin as early as 1648 when the poet George Wharton mocked the English Parliament by using the word

cotton to mean ‘to make friendly advances. Whether this was a reference to the rather annoying predisposition of moist raw cotton to stick to things or whether it alluded to moving of cotton garments closer together during a romantic advance isn’t clear.’[6] In the US the phrase is ‘cotton to’ rather than ‘cotton on to’, but I’d say that wasn’t one of the ones that caused the US critics to declare ‘there is a great barrier of language between the United States and Australia.’[7]

Nor would it have been ‘fly off the handle’ which is US slang from 1843, ‘knock your eye out’ or ‘knock out’ which is US slang of 1890 (still being used by the Beach Boys in 1965 with ‘the Southern girls and the way they talk, they knock me out when I’m down there’). Nor would they have been the least confused by ‘snazzy’ which is US 1932 slang.[8]

Pearl’s opening gambit that ‘this Nancy had her head screwed on the right way’, meaning to have common sense, is, according to the Oxford Dictionary late Middle English but actually derived from the Old French *escroue* ‘female screw, nut’ and from the Latin ‘scrofa’ literally ‘sow’ and then ‘screw’.[9] The early sense of the verb ‘to screw’ from as far back as the late 16th century was to contort the features, twist around’. However they got to ‘having your head screwed on the right way’ it was definitely with a European derivation. ‘Getting ready for a moonlight flit’ dates back to 19th century Scotland, ‘call it quits’ dates back to the Latin and was in use in English by the mid 17th century, and ‘to know the ropes’ goes back to the days of sailing ships, in use from the mid 19th century onwards.[10]

So what are the phrases that can sincerely claim Australian usage? *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* lists *The Bulletin*, Sydney in 1887 using the word ‘wag’ as a vagrant (from vag to wag)[11] but Olive’s use of it on page 3 of *The Doll*, ‘God you’re a wag’, seems to have more in common with the 1841 Irish use of wag as a mischievous boy (or in this case woman). The Dublin Comic Songster has this terrific line, ‘Vun Afternoon I played the vag, and to the field my vay did drag’. So I think we can give it to the Irish.

But Olive's line on page 6 that, of Bubba, '[she] didn't seem to wake up she was getting far too old' is a bullseye. Green lists 'Australian slang for an alert and resourceful person, always aware of the possibilities of the situation, is to be 'a full wake up'.[12] 1930, *The Bulletin*, Sydney: 'Cripes, you're a full wake-up to that at last, are you?' Same goes for 'top dog' which is confidently listed with the first known use in 1900, again in *The Bulletin*, meaning the boss, or the leader.[13] Certainly, once we get into 'Up there, Cazaly!' the Aussie derivation is a slam dunk since it derives as a 'cry of encouragement' from Australian rules football player Roy Cazaly (1893–1963), star of the South Melbourne team and noted for his leaps into the air for a mark.[14] You definitely would have needed a glossary of Australian slang for that one. And when Olive refers to being 'as happy as Larry' I'm going to preference the contender for the best known character in the world of similies to Australian boxer Larry Foley (1847–1917), 'a successful pugilist who never lost a fight, retired at 32 and collected a purse of one thousand pounds for his final fight.'[15]

It's hardly linguistic news that much of the Australian idiom is based on a combination of historical and contemporary British slang. What is surprising is several words in *The Doll* are American slang of the period and would have been easily understood. I wonder if it really was the idiom that confounded and confused the Americans or if it was just a very convenient screen for an inability to comprehend the moral and sexual insights that I have mused upon above? There is certainly no way to *prove* that is the case, and, without the exigencies of a Ph.D thesis in which I might compare the American and Australian idiom of the time, I don't really have the resources to make an academic case for it either. I am really just defaulting to my lived instincts as a playwright to muse about the ways in which critics, the ultimate hostages of their own times and places, can sometimes focus on technical or structural aspects of a play to explain their response rather than allow themselves to be confronted with the more essential or radical nature of the content of the play. I can hear the howls of derision for such unsupported assertions but I am simply trying to unpick the initial cultural resistance of America, with its entrenched religious morality, to a play with as visionary and provocative a take

on sexuality as *The Doll* and to question, ever so gently from many years after the fact, whether it was just the idiom that confounded them. Australian critic Bruce Grant posits that the Americans did not understand the social character of Roo and Barney but I wonder if Olive's non-conformity as a woman presented the even greater moral conundrum, at least on Broadway.[16] In the end, why something does or doesn't work in a specific context is part of the mystery of working in the theatre, a random pill that every playwright must swallow at one time or another in their career, spectacularly offset by the delight of a line that is unexpectedly funny, an audience that is uncharacteristically responsive, or a work that confounds its critics and becomes an HSC-studied, enduringly performed classic.

As far as the language goes, I do believe that the mix of it all, combined with the distinctive Australian accent, is in its own way uniquely Australian and that, even though much of it derives from elsewhere, the combination and subtleties of meaning being used in this play, in this specific context, are uniquely Australian. Indeed, I found, in my lexicographic travels, a marvellous note in the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Australian Usage* by Nicholas Hudson:

> 'Humpty Dumpty's famous dictum is, "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." This distresses some people, who believe that words have a real meaning which exists irrespective of current usage. Some worship at the shrine of etymology, and this makes some sense: it certainly explains what a word once meant, and may be used as an argument against some new usage. But what of new usages which have become established? Those who believe in real meanings are like those who seek real meaning in life; they are embarking on a fascinating but ultimately self-indulgent journey. At best, they will discover what they believe to be an authoritative arbiter, a dictionary or a prophet to whose wisdom they will defer; they are unlikely to encounter meaning itself.'[17]

So can I invoke Hudson's magnificent provocation to make a case that contemporary Australian playwrights, including myself, are still

writing in a very different and much diversified Australian idiom and that the particularity of the Australian parlance should not be allowed to be corralled merely to the dropped syllables and colourful metaphors of *The Doll*? In the more globally mobile English of the 21st century, where plays in English want to travel to stages across the world, what is the character of the Australian idiom that persists in contemporary drama and can we still see 'national self-expression as a means of self-assertion' in our contemporary drama? Is the American theatre still confounded by the Australian idiom in our drama or is there some other reason why a production of new Australian work in that country continues to be a rarity? When Australian playwrights' work travels to America (or indeed Britain) today, do playwrights feel the need to mutate the Australian idiom to suit American or British linguistic (and cultural) supremacy? And if we do, are we sacrificing the national self-expression and self-assertion, so celebrated in the language of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, on the altar of international success?

Well, the job of the playwright is surely to ask questions rather than to provide answers. Reading *Summer of the Seventeeth Doll* provoked complex feelings in me—about my personal history, about the fate and compromises of Australian drama on the international stage, about the character and nature of the contemporary Australian idiom and how it continues to change and define us. My own fascination with the way Australians *actually* speak, evidenced in my verbatim-based practice, has been enriched by the bold density of Lawler's idiomatic use in *The Doll*. I unequivocally admire the courage and daring he had to rail against both social conservatism in his choice of subjects and most especially theatrical conservatism in his use of language. But the worst, or perhaps the best of it, is that he has made me miss my grandmother terribly, the blunt beauty of her rough, abusive shows of affection, the way in which language provided a palpable armour against the pretensions of the class to which she did not belong, the way in which she could wield a phrase like a fishing line to pull you up out of Barney's Bull, a condition which I always knew should be avoided since it connoted to be 'bitched, buggered and bewildered'. It is through musing deeply on this play, and the

nature of the Australian idiom, that I have realised again that, when she died, I lost not just her spirit and the sustaining beauty of her love, but also the vocal fireworks of her distinctive generation, the verbal callisthenics of their metaphorically-much-more-rich turns of phrase, the sheer and outright fun they had with words and images in their speech. Our parlance, at first glance, seems almost pale and insipidly controlled in comparison, rinsed of vulgarity and vigorous colour, by corporate-speak and weasel-words and endless spin. I might, as Samuel Johnson did, lament:

> 'I am not yet so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of the earth, and that things are the sons of heaven. Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas: I wish, however, that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote.'[18]

*The Doll* is like a linguistic time capsule of that age, but so too will be the work of contemporary Australian playwrights today. Ultimately, I cannot wish for the swirl and mix of words and meanings and usage to stand still, for then there would be no need for we contemporary writers to continue to capture our times in all their diversity and particularity. And so I find my fingers itching anew to press 'record' on a device that can help me once again to archive an aspect of the Australian community in order to play it back on stage, in all its contradiction and surprise, as we continue to wish to see ourselves with not only fresh eyes, but fresh and open ears.

**References**

1. DAMOUSI, Joy, *Colonial Voices*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010

2. REES, Leslie, *The Making of Australian Drama*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973

3. DAMOUSI, Joy, *Colonial Voices*, Cambridge University Press,

New York, 2010

4. REES, Leslie, *Intimate Life of the Doll*, Currency Press App, The Doll, 2012

5. KNOWLES, Elizabeth (ed), *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying and Quotation*, Oxford University Press, 2006

6. http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/cotton-on.html

7. REES, Leslie, *Intimate Life of the Doll*, Currency Press App, The Doll 2012: Daily News

8. DALZELL, Tom and VICTOR, Terry (eds), *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang*, Routledge, Oxon, 2006

9. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/screw

10. SIEFRING, Judith, *Oxford Dictionary of Idiom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999

11.GREEN, Jonathon, *Greens Dictionary of Slang*, Chambers, London, 2010

12. ibid

13. ibid

14. ibid

15. http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/as-happy-as-larry.html

16. REES, Leslie, *Intimate Life of the Doll*, Currency Press App, The Doll, 2012

17. HUDSON, Nicholas, *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Australian Usage*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993

18. JOHNSON, Samuel, 1709-84, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755

**Other Reading**

O'GRADY, John, *Aussie English, an explanation of the Australian Idiom*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1965

PARTRIDGE, Eric, *A Dictionary of Historical Slang*, Penguin Books,

Middlesex, 1972

# Currency Press

## THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

**Visit www.currencypress.com.au to:**

- Download all the other titles in the series:

  www.currencypress.com.au/cuethechorus.aspx

- Browse and buy our full list of titles, from plays to screenplays, books on theatre, film and music, and more
- Choose a play for your school or amateur performance group by cast size and gender
- Obtain information about performance rights
- For students, read our study guides
- For teachers, access syllabus and other relevant information
- Sign up for our email newsletter

# Currency Press

## THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

### Find us on

www.facebook.com/CurrencyPress

www.twitter.com/CurrencyPress

www.linkedin.com/company/currency-press

### Not in Print podcast

We have always believed in theatre that raises more questions than answers. So each month we're going off script—beyond the page and behind the stage—to speak with a respected Australian playwright about the depth and breadth of a single work. That's one play in thirty minutes with insights straight from the source.

**Listen to Not in Print**

www.currency.com.au/notinprint.aspx


Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools', says Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

'The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.'

'Teacher resources have been developed in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW.'

The teacher resources include classroom activities, assessments and links to the new Australian curriculum. In addition, the secondary resources include an introduction to the text from high profile authors and artists, such as Libby Gleeson, David

Berthold, Melissa Lucashenko, Malcolm Knox and Alice Pung.

‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers’, says Ms Rodriguez. ‘We feel Reading Australia puts adored, but sometimes forgotten, Australian books back on people’s radars, beginning a whole new love affair with some of this country’s finest authors.’

**Visit the Reading Australia website:**

http://readingaustralia.com.au/

**Media enquiries**

Sue Nelson

t: 02 9394 7685

e: snelson@copyright.com.au

**About Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund**

Copyright Agency’s Board is authorised by Copyright Agency’s Constitution to allocate 1.5% of its income to development projects that will support the Australian publishing and visual arts industries

**About Copyright Agency | Viscopy**

Copyright Agency | Viscopy connects users and creators of content, providing licences for the use of copyright material