COLLECTED PLAYS

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David Williamson

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David Williamson: The Later Plays

David Williamson's first stage play, *The Indecent Exposure of Anthony East*, appeared in 1968. Thereafter, the AusStage performing arts database lists 739 separate production events under his name, the most numerous of any Australian theatre artist and, for an Australian playwright, an achievement second only to William Shakespeare's. That makes a total of 53 plays over 51 years, a body of work which is truly a chronicle of Williamson's times, and thus, by implication, a chronicle of our profoundly changing times.

Before attending to the four works published here, it is important to ask what makes Williamson's drama tick as a whole. Many people have opinions on this question without necessarily having thought deeply about it. Thus, it is claimed that he is a 'naturalistic playwright', or 'issues-based', or a 'sociological observer' of manners and mores. These answers have some merit, but none touch the heart of his approach, one that certainly encompasses a writing style, but also reaches beyond it.

In essence, Williamson's plays are vehicles for relating to the world around him in direct and immediate ways. At its best, his drama pits his own unique creative sensibility, as an Australian artist, at a uniquely evolving social context, contemporary Australia, in a tightly targeted fashion. He is the very epitome of a local playwright. It is hard to think of a stage writer for whom overseas models and methods might matter less.

Williamson's plays often have an epistolatory feel to them, being quickly written, or abbreviated in narrative construction, but always shaped as personal communications aimed at Australian audiences. A Williamson play is a play *for* someone, regardless of what it is *about*. There is no display of literary skill

for its own sake. The end is more important than the means, and this reflects his commitment to drama as an intimate exchange between playwright and theatre-goer. It is this quality of personal warmth rather than any formal feature of the writing that explains the enduring popularity of Williamson's drama.

The third feature of his plays is their extraordinary perspectival flexibility. As a person, Williamson may have a healthy ego. As a writer, it is carefully excised from his drama. The result is theatre that moves easily across different points of view without valorising any as the 'right' one. This is harder than it looks (try this at home!), and requires an approach to stage character that is both morally discerning and emotionally forbearing. Relentless in exposing our foibles and flaws, Williamson ultimately judges them in a forgiving light, recognising we are weak, stupid and desperate more often than we are cruel, mean and evil, and that weakness, stupidity and desperation is a condition few people are above, including himself. If his plays have a message, they are delivered from the sinner's circle not the preacher's soapbox.

The basic unit of a Williamson play is 'a situation'. This is not the same as 'an issue' to be unpacked by a playwright like a suitcase, with an unambiguous message plonked at the end. 'The good end happily, the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means,' Miss Prism sternly pontificates in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In these Williamson plays, as in all the others he has written, this is exactly what doesn't happen. Instead, there is vigorous exploration of what ancient Greeks called an *agon*, a face-off between two equally persuasive but opposite points of view. The initiative shifts from one to another, until some event intervenes to bring matters to a halt. None of these four plays, with the possible exception of *Nearer the Gods*, ends with a clear resolution. Their narratives are opportunistic captures of fast-moving experience, rather than final verdicts on it. Here we sense the democratic spirit of Williamson's drama, his desire to be at one with life rather than wanting to rise above it, trying to control it.

These four plays assay very different *agones*. In *The Big Time*, it is the conflict between creative achievement and failure, and the envy, selfishness and moral myopia that comes with the relentless pursuit of professional success. In *Odd Man Out*, it is the tension between looking at the world through the lens of (Asperger's) logic and a cloud of (empathic) feeling, the irreconcilable difference between head and heart. In *Sorting Out Rachel*, greed and altruism are pitted against each other as three generations of a family engage in the psychological equivalent of World of Wrestling. And in *Nearer the Gods*, the discovery of Newton's three laws of physical motion is set against a backdrop of religious belief, pointing to a universe that can be explained by science, but never explained away by it.

What turns such thematic polarisations into watchable drama is, of course, the characters. These have an allegorical flavour to them that switches between the quasi-poetic and the hyper-real. In 1972, the theatre historian Margaret Williams used the term 'stereotype' to describe this sort of stage persona, and it is a workable one provided we don't think of it as implying a simplistic approach. The virtues and vices are uppermost in Williamson's cavalcade of graspers, users, losers, human doormats, high-hopers, greed-is-good-ers, and born-angry-obstructers. It is the strength of the 'stereotype' as a theatrical device that it makes an immediately observable statement about the people so presented without robbing them of interest and depth.

So we know from the first moments that TV writer Rohan Black (*The Big Time*) is a self-pitying weasel, yet not without positive qualities (though these take a while to surface, and predictably he slips back). And that millionaire Bruce (*Sorting Out Rachel*) is a puffed-up, self-righteous bully, but capable of putting love for his family before love of money. Robert Hooke (*Nearer the Gods*) is the man who runs down Newton's reputation with the Royal Society, yet is also the person who facilitates publication of his world-changing masterwork, the *Principia Mathematica*. And Ryan (*Odd Man Out*) is simultaneously unfit for all normal

human interaction, and intellectually and ethically on a level far above it.

These characters are rendered with the starkness and clarity of a pen-and-ink drawing. In a Williamson play, people are who they say they are, but this rapidly changes as the situation around them changes, and their personalities have to keep up. Part of the comic fun is watching their language try to cope with the dilemmas that life fires at them like cannonballs. By simplifying one dimension of stage character (to social type), Williamson complexifies another (moral choice). As a result, we can follow the rapidly developing action of the charged situations in his drama without getting lost in a bog of superfluous psychologising.

For what are all these characters searching, in all these Williamson plays, including the four here? The answer seems easy enough: different things. Love, money, success, recognition, resolution, answers to long-held questions—i.e. the usual through-lines and causal motivations. But there are hints that something more fundamental than these goals exists; or, rather, that these goals are dependent on a more fundamental value through which they must be actioned: self-respect.

Ryan, the protagonist of *Odd Man Out*, explodes in exasperation towards the end of the play, when he can no longer stomach the irrational human beings who clog up his logical life like lint on an air vent:

> [*Meltdown*] I am who I am. And you know who that is? Someone right at the limit of the human capability to understand the universe we live in, and I'm supposed to waste my time learning a few pathetic tricks in the hope people won't think I'm odd because I can't stand their superficiality and lies. Before I did the bloody assessment I didn't know I was putting my foot in it all the time. Now I'm tense to the point of exploding any time people are around. Well, fuck people. I am a loner and I love being a loner. Up on a cliff face where everything is pure and the chatter of morons is not filling the air and my thoughts

> clarify themselves. I hate the life you are trying to force me to lead. I'm proud of what I am and to hell with all this crap!

Some version of self-respect is the *ur*-goal of Williamson's characters, from the humblest to the most would-be great. And at the heart of self-respect is personal awareness, the knowledge of who one is—Ryan's 'I am who I am'. These four plays all flow towards what could be called 'epiphanies of the self', peaks of action where the characters see their true nature. Rarely do these moments occur in an atmosphere of moral uplift. Usually, we witness characters failing, and failing badly. Only when some kind of bottom is reached, or a dire threat applied, is self-improvement on the cards.

However, it is not the job of comedy to see us as we would like to be seen, but as we are, in all our compromises, lies, ditherings and betrayals. The main challenge of life in a Williamson play is not to deny our mistakes but to own them as an invariant part of being human. The words of Racine in the forward to his play, *Phaedre*, come to mind, that he chose her as the perfect protagonist because she was 'neither altogether guilty, nor altogether innocent … but drawn by her destiny, and the anger of the Gods, into an unlawful passion which she is the first to hold in horror'.

So too do Williamson's characters recoil at their own bad behaviour and seek to make amends. With personal awareness comes the greatest gift of mortal existence: the ability to choose and the chance to change. Self-respect is not a quality to be sought for its own sake, which would make it only pride. Rather, it is a gateway virtue, bringing moral clarity to a world of flux, and perception enough to choose a more enlightened path.

Thus, in *Odd Man Out*, Ryan and Alice's relationship disintegrates when they realise they have ignored biological facts—his Asperger's, her desire for a baby; but from the ashes of that realisation, they find a way to approach each other again. In *The Big Time*, Rohan betrays Celia, and they separate, but that separation propels them towards better lives; Rohan the maudlin

artiste finding contentment writing soaps, Celia the soapie star realising her talent by finding theatre. In *Sorting Out Rachel*, Bruce's granddaughter is as self-serving, cunning and ruthless as he is, yet it is by repurposing those qualities and not rejecting them that he brings her to emotional maturity, and thus redeems them both. And in *Nearer the Gods*, Newton's most profound discovery, as he acknowledges, is not the laws of motion, but perceiving how little, in the scheme of the universe, they explain. As he tells his friend and ally, Edmund Halley, at the end of the play:

NEWTON: I've given the world nothing more than a few mathematical rules.
HALLEY: You discovered universal gravity.
NEWTON: Every body in the universe attracts every other body? How? How can a force we can't see act across a vast distance?
HALLEY: Your equations spell out how it works.
NEWTON: But not why it works. You don't believe in God, do you?
HALLEY: No.
NEWTON: Gravity, the glue of the universe. The greatest trick of all. How is it done? Only God has the answer.

It is entirely fitting that a scientist who became a distinguished playwright should write a play about a distinguished scientist. Williamson's body of work stands as a record of a changing nation of which he has been, for over half a century, an assiduous dramatic observer. The four plays here both add to that achievement and bring it into new focus.

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