STILL WATERS

by WESLEY ENOCH

A response to:
The Secret River by Kate Grenville
An adaptation for the stage
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THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

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Author's Biography

WESLEY ENOCH is the eldest son of Doug and Lyn Enoch who hail from Stradbroke Island. His writing credits include *The Sunshine Club*, *The Seven Stages of Grieving* (co-written with Deborah Mailman) and *Black Medea*, all of which he also directed; and *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table* which won the 2005 Patrick White Playwrights' Award.

Wesley has been Artistic Director of Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts, an Associate Artist with the Queensland Theatre Company, a Resident Director with the Sydney Theatre Company, Associate Artistic Director with Sydney's Company B, and is currently the Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company.

His extensive credits as a director span every major theatre company in Australia and include the premiere production of *Stolen* and a revival of *The Cherry Pickers*, both of which toured internationally, as well as *Capricornia*, *The Dreamers*, *Conversations with the Dead*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Fountains Beyond*, *Black-ed Up*, *The Sapphires*, *Rainbow's End*, *Eora Crossing*, *Bitin' Back*, *Riverland*, *I Am Eora*, *Black Diggers* and *Parramatta Girls*.

In 2002 Wesley was the recipient of a Cite Internationale des Artes residency in Paris. Other awards include a Matilda Award (*The Sunshine Club*, 2000), Variety Club of Australia (Theatre Heart Award 2000), 1998 Queens Trust Award and 1997 Young Australian of the Year (Queensland Arts Section).

STILL WATERS

When you pick up the script of *The Secret River* you can feel a weight in it. The cover and paper stock feel full and generous. You touch the gloss of the cover and you look into the surprised eyes of Nathaniel Dean as he sees, as if for the first time, Roy Gordon. The white pipe clay on Nathaniel's face shows him to be whiter than he really is. Or is it the residue of hard work, dirtied by the Land? Roy's face is blackened with charcoal and we can't quite see his full expression, but we gather there is a hardened stare coming back from his eyes. Nathaniel holds a stick in his right hand and you can be forgiven for thinking that Roy is holding the other end, but closer examination shows that the stick seems just a breath away from his grasp. They do not share the holding of this stick, we do not understand the full expression on this black man's face and there is a sense of reliving the first time black and white met.

THIS IS THE SECRET RIVER

I remember Nick Enright saying to me that all the best playscripts seem simple, lacking in detail to the novice reader, uncluttered, clear in the progression of cause and effect, action and reaction… that in the best scripts you feel the momentum of the story and though you can foresee and imagine the outcome of the dramatic action, however tragic, romantic or comic, you still get surprised by the ending. He talked about leaving room in a playscript for the actors to complete the work. That playwrighting was a not a literary art but an extension of play making where the playwright is not a writer but a craftsperson who, like a blacksmith shaping wrought iron, wroughts a play from words and staging, design description, song and instructions to the players.

In between the words on the page there is enough space for an actor to show emotional truths and intent, the room for gesture and the invitation for an actors craft to be expressed. Unlike a novel which relies on the words to tell everything, playscripts are about

forward motion. A novelist can often take the time to describe the environment in which the action is happening, can reflect on the attitudes of characters and take multiple adjectives to paint a picture for the reader. This approach for playwrights can often feel like the 'wrighter' is imposing themselves too much through the characters, slowing down the action and creating a generic indulgence that feels false in an actor's mouth.

The Secret River is a great reminder that these printed words on the page, this playscript, are designed to be voiced by performers. These words are a blueprint for a performance rather than an end in itself.

THE ACT OF TRANSLATION

This script is not a direct adaption of the multi-award winning novel of the same name, by Kate Grenville. Bovell undertakes an act of translation to weave new insights and emphasis into his play, to bring out a more distilled dramatic form of the narrative.

The novel is a clear call for connection and continuity from a writer grappling with her own family's history in Australia. Grenville creates a fictional narrative, loosely based on the fractured history of her ancestors and their early settlement of the Hawkesbury River region, just north of Sydney. Though this novel cannot be considered entirely biographical, it is not trying to be an accurate account of recorded histories, it does speak with an authority and moral truth that is exciting to read. The story seems to act as an allegory of sorts, floating above the specifics of the Hawkesbury and its time, to speak universally about our white ancestors in the landscape and the reasons why they may have enacted terrible atrocities against the traditional owners of our country. Though it is based on a story from Dharug country, the characters and their actions can be seen as generally applicable to all stories of early settlement in post colonial Australia.

You can feel the act of translation in each page turn. From the pages of Kate Grenville's novel, through Andrew Bovell's lens which focuses us more on these first interactions and then the translation

to the stage by Neil Armfield and the amassed talent of cast and creatives. This final act of translation to the stage has made its mark felt on this printed script. Layers of translation and intertextuality create feedback loops for this publication that excites and deepens the experience of reading it.

HOLD ON TO WHAT YOU HAVE

Like all good writers Bovell uses the stage time judiciously, cutting scenes from the original book and intimating a backstory to focus an audience on a set of core characters and their actions. We see glimpses of authority figures and hear snippets of William Thornhill's life back in London but we never really have to enact whole scenes. Turnkey (p83) and Suckling (p38) are two characters who conveniently mirror each other in the play telling us of an unspoken history. We are focused on the core stories of being in Australia and the hopes and dreams of making a better life for the Thornhill family. At first these dreams are about returning to a romanticised vision of a country that rejected them but then Thornhill's dream transforms into a more ambitious claim to be the Lord of his own Land. Turnkey tells us of Thornhill's pardon whilst Suckling reminds Thornhill where he comes from and the nature of class. We see these two characters briefly but they are memorable because of their dramatic role in spurring Thornhill to decide not to go back to London and to 'fight' for what he has claimed in Australia.

Suckling says to young Willie Thornhill on p39:

> SUCKLING: Well, Master Thornhill, remember this. You're the son of a common thief. And you always will be…

For me there is a wonderful commentary on the fact that the Land has been 'stolen' from the traditional owners and the notion that those who have nothing become the fiercest protectors of family and legacy. People with nothing search for something to call their own and are prepared to take it from others.

BREVITY AND STORYTELLING

Bovell does that wonderful thing of 'getting in late' and 'getting out early' to every scene. He cuts to the barest necessity for dramatic action without the need for extensive scene set up—'getting in late'—and then once he has hit the dramatic story point he was wanting to achieve he cuts the scene without the reflection and commentary that many novels find necessary—'getting out early'. Each scene is a vignette with a dramatic purpose that has economy and brevity at its core. With each scene you can say exactly what is going on in the action (for example, in Act 1 sc 5 Sal meets Smasher Sullivan who scares her with tales of home and danger) and through an accumulation of characters' actions you piece together a network of relationships and attitudes.

It's a true sign of good writing that Bovell can use just one or two short scenes to establish a character. Have a look how Thomas Blackwood and Smasher Sullivan work. They are so economically written, with Blackwood appearing four times (p17, 44, 66, 74) and Smasher only seven times (p21, 33, 42, 66, 72, 74, 82) but they loom large in your imagination and help deliver that ending which is so chilling. These two characters represent the different approaches to living in this Land that William Thornhill must choose between—Blackwood, the man who has gone native and learnt the ways of the locals OR Smasher, the man who literally rapes all the beauty of the Land for his own gain. This is beautifully juxtaposed when Blackwood talks about how Thornhill has dug up the Yams and replaced them with corn on p45:

> BLACKWOOD: See, them yams grow where you put the corn. You dig them up, they go hungry. You best share out your crop when it's ready […] Do well to know what's growing there first, Sagitty. That's all.

In contrast Sullivan is described on p33 by Dhirrumbin, the narrator:

> DHIRRUMBIN: The fires for the lime burned day and night. The

block had been cleared of all timber, used for fuel, and sat like a gash in the forest. He had worked through the empty layers of oyster shells that had lain there for a thousand years, and more. He'd dug out the midden until there was only black mud left. Now he was burning the live oysters, not bothering with the meat inside. The man smelt of burning flesh.

THE NARRATOR'S VOICE

There are many narrators of this play but the most consistent is Dhirrumbin who carries us through time and space to weave the narrative together. This figure is a creation of the playwright but in many ways is the voice of the author. Bovell creates Dhirrumbin from his own view of the story—to help set up scenes—and replaces the narrator and descriptors that Grenville uses as tools in her novel. Dhirrumbin is the only Aboriginal character to speak English fully and so she is a bridge between the white and black perspectives of the story. She often sets the scene for the audience, telling us where we are and how the characters are feeling about what is going on. Narrators are the most literary of constructions, but Dhirrumbin is also dramatic as she gets involved in the action. You get a sense that she is a spirit figure of sorts talking from outside the time of the play. She speaks to us directly as a modern audience and has a broader perspective than any other character. Bovell doubles the actor playing Dhirrumbin with the character of Dulla Dyin, Blackwood's black 'wife'. This makes the scene on p67, where Dulla Dyin gives Sal a life-saving feed of raw eel, even more spiritual. The actor who plays both characters speaks as if one step removed as she plays out the action:

> DULLA DYIN *strokes the side of* SAL*'s mouth like a mother does a baby to ready it for the breast.* SAL*'s mouth opens and the woman holds the black flesh to her lips.*
>
> *Her eyes open at the salty taste of the raw flesh.*

DHIRRUMBIN: Sal saw the face of the woman feeding her but

she didn't pull away with fright. She saw in this face a woman she could trust. She sucked on the raw flesh like a child would suck on a sweet. The woman sat with her through the night, feeding her the eel from her own hand.

Being both inside and outside the action this character holds a spiritual power over the whole story. The ending is delivered in a dispassionate and removed manner which gives you a sense that Dhirrumbin has seen this history played out many times before. She is chilling in her reciting of the actions of that day on p87. She is both removed and involved in the action:

DHIRRUMBIN: The old woman Buryia was the first to be shot. And then Gilyagan, and other women and their children. And then the men. Narribi tried to run. A bullet in his knee made him fall. Loveday finished the job with a club of wood. Garraway was taken by a man's sword. The back of his head sliced away. Wangarra got a spear up. But Dan got him with a shot in the back. The spear fell, unthrown…

BLACK STORY, WHITE STORY

The play follows the major narrative points of the book but Bovell takes us further into the characters and gives blackfellas more of a voice. In the live performance the misunderstanding between black and white is shared by the audience who must decipher the use of Dharug language. I saw the play long before I read the script and I was intrigued by the use of Dharug language. It made me watch the black actors more closely, listening for intention in intonation and body language that would help me understand what the characters were doing. When you read the script the translation is spelt out clearly and you don't understand as definitively that they can't communicate. For example, on p29 when Thornhill confronts a small group on 'his' Land:

THORNHILL: Good day to you, gentlemen. How are you this fine day?

NGALAMALUM: Wanjan diya binnangarri binnangarri? [*Who does he think he is?*]

WANGARRA: Nanu gadyalang, Baggy barrang. [*He must be hot… wearing all that.*]

NGALAMALUM: Nanu ni gadyalang. Thurrull gabara. [*He looks bloody hot… all red in the face.*]

They laugh. THORNHILL *laughs with them but wonders if the joke might be on him.*

THORNHILL: That's right…we're all friends here, sharing a laugh.

The scene continues to highlight the misunderstandings and lack of communication, but because the reader is in the privileged position of reading the English translations of the Dharug words, it is harder to see the confusion on the page. In the live performance it is gripping. We share the frustration of the other non-Dharug speakers and can see how the misunderstandings occur.

THE ENDING

Theatre by its definition needs drama to be expressed through action rather than reflection, and Bovell shows us a series of vignettes that accumulate a sense of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Though, in a world full of words, you get a sense that in the end there is more spoken in the silences.

When I saw the live performance I remember leaving the theatre feeling complex emotions. As a Murri man from Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) I was confronted by the story of a massacre but also heartened by the extraordinary telling of it. Andrew Bovell's script reads like a series of wonderful contradictions. Simple yet complex; inevitable yet surprising; angry yet pacified; just and unfair; easy yet hard.

Bovell has also imbedded his attitudes on reconciliation and his ambitions for a more just society in the writing of his play. He sets a number of challenges in the work that cannot be ignored. Any director or actor who wishes to stage this script must answer a number of fundamental questions before proceeding: How do you say these words? How do you sing these songs? Where do you get enough black actors to play these roles? Where do I get to meet these people? Through his writing Bovell sets up a rehearsal room that must be like the bend of the river itself. A place where black and white meet and must learn to negotiate. He could have made choices that represented the blackfellas as absent figures in the distance that say nothing, albeit less dramatic choices, but instead he has created a more culturally powerful script that explores black and white relations on and off the stage.

The ambition to talk about the first days of settlement on the Hawkesbury River and the missed opportunity for conciliation and cohabitation is also intrinsic to how you stage this show. You need to develop a relationship with blackfellas to address these challenges. You can't put this show on without understanding Indigenous cultural protocols. Though the story is fundamentally not about them, you need the blackfellas in this story. You cannot talk about the claiming of Land by white people without the sense that it was stolen from those who were here before them.

I may have been the only Aboriginal person in the audience that afternoon in January 2013. I found myself being the lone laugher at certain moments and the one remaining silent as others in the audience roared their approval. However, I felt that we were as one at the end of the play, united when those final words were spoken from the last page:

> THORNHILL: Get yerself some tucker, up the house. Missus look after yer.
>
> *He mimes eating, bringing his hand to his mouth.*

THORNHILL: I give you tucker, round the back. Cup a tea. Plenty sugar.

NGALAMALUM *gives him nothing.*

THORNHILL: I would, mate, honest to God. I know what it is to be hungry… What? Too good for my offer of help, are you? Then I wish you'd take your sorry black arse away from here. You lot got to learn to help yourselves now. Can't just be sitting around in the dirt all day, like bludgers.

THORNHILL *reaches to lift him by the arm. At his touch* NGALAMALUM *comes to life.*

NGALAMALUM: NO!

He slaps the flat of his hand hard on the ground, raising the dust.

NGALAMALUM: This me… My place.

These final words struck the audience dumb. The word 'bludger' rang out as if we were hearing a modern sound bite from an Australian media commentator or politician. As a group, the audience sat in silence. Having watched the injustice of white settlement played out for us, experienced the misunderstandings and seen the retribution enacted in front of us, we saw this word with fresh eyes—'bludger'. The air resonated with the word.

'This me... My place.'

You could feel the collective ownership of these words. Black and white wanted to be able to say these words and mean them. Our history stretched out for that one long silent moment. Millennia in a millisecond.

'This me... My place.'

The sound of water as it laps against the river bank and of birds rising and of the wind gathering in the tops of the trees.

NGALAMALUM *remains by the fire as* DHIRRUMBIN *sings a song of mourning.*

As THORNHILL *builds his fence…*

THE END

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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’, Ms Rodriguez says. ‘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:

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