

NEIGHBOURHOOD KATZ

by HANNIE RAYSON

A response to:
Neighbourhood Watch
by Lally Katz

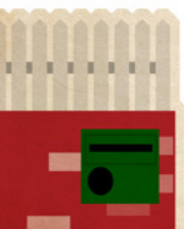


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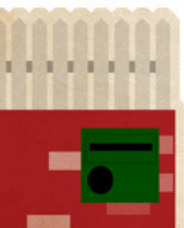
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Author's Biography



HANNIE RAYSON has established a reputation for topical, complex dramas written with wit and humour. A graduate of Melbourne University and the Victorian College of the Arts, she has an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from La Trobe University and is a Fellow of the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne. Her plays have been extensively performed around Australia and internationally. They include *Hotel Sorrento*, *Falling From Grace*, *Competitive Tenderness*, *Life After George*, *The Swimming Club*, *Inheritance* and *Two Brothers*. She has been awarded Australian Writers' Guild Awards, elpmann Awards, NSW Premier's Literary Awards and a Victorian Premier's Literary Award as well as the Age Performing Arts Award.

For television she has written *Sloth* (ABC, Seven Deadly Sins) and co-written two episodes of *Sea Change* (ABC/Artists Services). A feature film of *Hotel Sorrento*, produced in 1995, was nominated for ten Australian Film Institute Awards. In 1999 she received the Magazine Publishers' Society of Australia's Columnist of the Year Award for her regular contributions to HQ magazine.

Hannie made playwriting history when *Life After George* was the first play to be nominated for the Miles Franklin Award. In 2006 she was nominated for the Melbourne Prize for Literature, a prize for a Victorian-based writer whose body of published or produced work has made an outstanding contribution to Australian literature and to cultural and intellectual life.

NEIGHBOURHOOD KATZ

I've only ever known one Hungarian in my life, a man called László, and he was insufferable.

In her poignant black comedy, *Neighbourhood Watch*, Lally Katz introduces us to Ana. She is also Hungarian. And she too is insufferable. Even though László and Ana are insufferable in *different* ways, they share certain character traits, which led me to Google 'Hungarian stereotypes'.

Apparently there is a well-established tradition that Hungarians can be – let's say – challenging individuals. According to this particular website, Hungarians tend to display pushy, intrusive behaviour, especially when they are abroad. They will always find a way of getting by, often by not paying too much attention to good manners. 'If a Hungarian passes through a revolving door right after you,' says the website, 'he will come out before you'.

This might be a shameful slur on an entire nation. But you have to admit, it is gold for a playwright.

When this robustly Australian play opens, we meet the residents of suburban Mary Street. The characters come and go – the actress Catherine, her housemate Ken, Katerina, Ana herself, the chemist, the postman, the Safeway delivery man; Nancy from Neighbourhood Watch pays a visit.

Then there is a dogged Serbian woman named Jovanka. Day after day she takes the bus across town to visit Ana, here in Mary Street. Jovanka always tries to ring first but Ana steadfastly refuses to answer her phone. This is a running gag. Jovanka shows up six times in Act One with her tenacious invitations to Ana, 'You want to have one coffee?' She is rebuffed with equivalent tenacity by Ana, who is 'all the time busy'.

Jovanka shuffles on, then shuffles off. And we know that she will return. Nothing Ana says can persuade Jovanka that her visits are unwelcome. In the first half of Act One this makes for delicious comic business.

The American-born Katz shows that she has an acute and affectionate ear for the speech patterns of her adopted Australia, building her scenes from a rich chattering of voices. This is a theatre in which it no longer makes sense to talk about ‘the Australian accent’ – as if we all conform to one, democratic drawl. Contemporary Australia is a complex of conversations – an interplay of voices, accents and attitudes from all over the world.

In its vocal dexterity the play is reminiscent of both Dylan Thomas’ *Under Milk Wood* and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. Each work evokes the daily life of a small community through the everyday business of its inhabitants. Unlike Dylan Thomas, Lally Katz doesn’t have the poetry of the Welsh idiom to work with. Instead she finds poetry – and comedy – in the brusqueness of Ana’s Hungarian-English.

‘Better you is marry the Ken.’

‘When I first arrive to the Austral I got noting. Noting. No von cent. No friend. No family. No good clothings.’

The play revels in Ana’s mish-mash of syntax and her liberal use of the definite article, ‘the Ken’, ‘the White’. So much of this play is about language – its elasticity, its flaws and the astonishing capacity we have to make ourselves understood – and misunderstood.

There is poetry too in the choreography of the action – as the characters sashay about, changing partners – swinging from one verbal encounter to the next. In the Melbourne Theatre Company’s 2014 remount of the original Belvoir production, this flow of humanity was beautifully managed by director Simon Stone: the show opened with a dance of the wheelie bins as the residents of the street put them out and took them in – week after week. It was a wistful and witty performance of the routine of suburban life.

Personally, I find rubbish night elicits existential despair. I can see that it is satisfying to clean up and dispose of rubbish every week. But the relentlessness of it is dispiriting. You put your garbage out every Tuesday night and then you die.

Perhaps that is why, on the page, the opening to this play is so poignant. In just thirteen crisp lines of dialogue Katz creates a whole world of longing and disappointment. Early on the morning after the Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is elected in 2007, ending ten years of conservative government, a girl sits on her brick letterbox wearing pyjamas. She asks, ‘Do you think the street looks more hopeful?’

Her diabetic housemate Ken, who has been up all night playing the violent computer game *World of Warcraft*, joins her in the early morning, before the street has woken.

KEN: If Jed Bartlet was our prime minister then I’d be excited.

(Jed Bartlet is the idealistic and charismatic president in *The West Wing*.)

CATHERINE: I wish something would happen. That would change the whole world.

This is masterly. We learn so much, with such deftness.

In Lally Katz’s neighbourhood, every character makes an offer which is rebuffed by another. Ken wants Catherine to watch *The West Wing*. Ana invites the Safeway delivery boy to share her ‘vatermelon’. Ana makes overtures to Katerina. Catherine’s mother sends kitchen appliances, which her daughter will never use.

These events are everyday and domestic, but they carry with them gestures of hopefulness, rejection and a kind of stoic fatalism. They are played out in a dance that floats above the commonplace, evoking yearning and desire and a sense of disconnection which feels peculiarly of our time. Sure, time has moved on: Kevin Rudd is now remembered

as a self-satisfied and failed prime minister. But the play captures a moment that is still part of the story of contemporary Australia. It speaks to us, in our words and voices, about who we are now.

Loneliness is the scourge of this neighbourhood. At one point Catherine discovers that her housemate Ken wants more from her than just friendship. But Catherine cannot love anyone – there is something in her past that has closed her heart. In despair, she wonders, ‘Why does everyone want the one thing that is impossible?’

And all the time Bella, Ana’s menacing German Shepherd ‘vith leetle, leetle bit the Doberman Pincher’, barks and threatens from an unseen backyard. (Another website provides one hundred answers to the question ‘How do you know if you’re Hungarian?’. Answer 78: ‘When your dog is a guard dog, not a pet.’)

In the happy-go-lucky-country of suburban Australia the paranoia that beleaguers Ana’s life comes to the fore at a Neighbourhood Watch meeting. A local policeman exhorts the good citizens to help keep the streets safe by ‘spotting signs of trouble’ and ‘keeping each other informed’. Ana (of course) is caught up in her own concerns. She interrupts and, quite off-message, enquires about whether Bella is in danger of the police coming to put ‘von bullet in her’. Apparently Bella has been less than neighbourly to a small white dog which lives nearby.

By the end of Act One Ana’s paranoia about her Serbian shadow, Jovanka, is rising. We start to see that Jovanka poses a threat, that she brings with her some kind of Old World menace. ‘Don’t be the trusty’, Ana warns Catherine. How ignorant Catherine is about life and danger and the potential of human beings to harm and destroy. ‘You do not know the Serbian.’

When Catherine challenges her (‘But, Ana, do you think that you’re maybe seeing a nasty that isn’t there?’), Ana takes her to Budapest and into her childhood. ‘I’m teaching you the sixth sense Kitty-kitty.’ And we get a glimpse of what life was like in Hungary when Ana was a girl.

At the MTC performance I tumbled into interval in a whirlwind of questions. With the rise of terrorism and the preoccupation with security issues, am I being, like Catherine, ‘too much the trusty’? Are we right to be dismissive of the fear-mongering tenor of contemporary politics, or do we need to wake up to how sheltered Australian life has been, and to realise just how *nasty* people can be? I have always believed that Australia has a magical capacity to heal Old World enmities. But maybe that is just naïve.

Act Two opens in Hungary at the end of the Second World War. Ana is tending to injured soldiers, one of whom has lost his legs. Ana falls in love.

Catherine wants her counsel. How do you know when to walk away and when to run after a man?

Meanwhile, back in Mary Street, it often seems that the hardcore action of real life is perpetually postponed. The sickly Ken is consumed by the imaginary *World of Warcraft*. Yes, in the here-and-now he is writing a film script, but he is forever ‘waiting to hear about money’, which we doubt will ever come. Meanwhile, Catherine is an actress: she is waiting for an audition. And Ken is waiting for her.

Ken is not beyond a little emotional blackmail: he tells Catherine that his mother is worried he might slip into a coma.

‘Will you slip into a coma?’ Catherine asks.

‘No’, says Ken. ‘But I might lose a leg or two.’

Catherine’s present is beginning to merge with Ana’s past.

We are no longer slipping and sliding among the wheelie bins. Now countries, continents and history itself are sliding into the present day. Ana takes Catherine with her to Hungary, to the events and people of her childhood and adolescence. We register that this encounter is actually happening in Ana’s lounge room or kitchen, but so vivid is

the storytelling that we are transported – and Catherine becomes so embroiled in the tales that she becomes a player.

Faced with the tragedy of Ana's past, Catherine reveals the tragedy of her own life: she is frozen by the suicide of her boyfriend. And it is Ana who sees what must be done: 'Kitty-kitty, this dead boy you love, he is no yours anymore. He is everybody's boy now. You must let him go free final and live your life. You understand?'

In the dance of offers and rebuttals, Act Two moves every character forward. Jovanka becomes friends with Katrina. Ken gets the money for his film. Catherine deletes the dead boyfriend from her phone. Ken deletes *World of Warcraft* from his computer.

And there is redemption.

Jovanka makes the offer to 'have von coffee' and Ana finally accepts. But before Ana can take her up on her offer she collapses. And the ambulance arrives to take her away, eventually to join Martin, Catherine's dead boyfriend.

Histories recede. The Old World retreats to the far side of the globe. Mary Street has been set free of its daze. And multicultural Australia – with its tolerance and embrace – seems set to win the day.

This is a warm and generous play, written with affection and complete lack of sentimentality. In some ways, it reminds me of Patrick White's *Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962). But, ultimately, White writes of the suburbs as an outsider – as a man with an ear for the language of the common folk, but who is too high and mighty to speak like them himself. Katz, by contrast, writes as though she is in amongst the action – a party to what is going on. Perhaps, as one reviewer suggested, Catherine is a muted version of Katz herself. Writers tend to resist the idea that they are characters in their own tales. But the sense that Katz herself might live on Mary Street is what gives this play the authority of a work that is 'bearing witness'.

There is another, closer parallel with the plays of Patrick White. Ana is a distant cousin of the fearsome Miss Docker, the central character in White's black comedy *A Cheery Soul*, which premiered in Melbourne in November 1963 and was most famously played by Robyn Nevin in 1979. Lally Katz wrote *Neighbourhood Watch* for Nevin and the actress served the playwright brilliantly. Nevin's performance gave her the opportunity to revive some of Miss Docker's more forceful characteristics, including her head-down, get-out-of-my-way-I'm-coming-through style of walking. For those of us who enjoy our theatre history the transfusion of red blood cells from one character to the other was pure delight.

Patrick White wrote his plays in the pioneering decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Lally Katz and I are both heirs to that period, when writers such as White, Dorothy Hewett, Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, Alex Buzo and David Williamson were wrestling Australian language into their drama and showing us that big themes and big emotions can be played out on the Australian stage. That's the point: as Australian artists, we have a particular privilege and blessing: to sing the stories of our country, to tell its tales, to ask questions of ourselves that challenge the ways in which we live and think and treat each other.

Today, too many Australian theatre makers are neglecting this aspect of our calling, presenting, instead, rewrites of the classics as if their translations and adaptations were works of individual genius and a major contribution to a distinctly Australian culture. Of course we should be presenting plays by Ibsen, Chekhov and Euripides. But to describe these as 'Australian plays' is simply bizarre.

Lally Katz is a fresh new voice in the great tradition of brave, wholeheartedly Australian theatre. In this play she is funny, wise and watchful. She hears the ways we Australians speak. She loves the poetry of our vernacular and tells stories about us living in our country, searching for love, meaning and salvation under Australian skies.

Lally Katz has let it be known that she based Ana on a real person – a woman she knows.

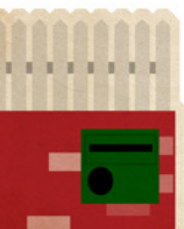
I hope that woman is proud of becoming a great Australian character.

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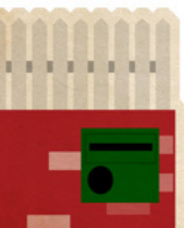
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Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'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 so far been developed for 21 titles (10 primary, 11 secondary) in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW, with another 20 secondary resources already commissioned and due on the website before the end of June.'

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.

‘The extra funding, which will begin in the new financial year, will rapidly expand the free resources for teachers with 20 teaching modules related to books for primary students, 40 for secondary students and 30 for tertiary students’, Ms Rodriguez says.

‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers. We feel Reading Australia will put 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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