

PULLING RABBITS OUT OF HATS

by MELISSA REEVES

A response to:
Speaking in Tongues
by Andrew Bovell



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Author's Biography



MELISSA REEVES is a Melbourne playwright. Her plays include *In Cahoots*, *Sweetown* (winner of the 1993 Jill Blewitt Memorial Playwrights Award), *Great Day*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *Storming Heaven*, *Road Movie* and *Salt Creek Murders* (winner of the 2001 Wal Cherry Award). She has co-written a number of plays including *The Girl I Love* and *Never Let Me Go* (with Margaret Mills, Maude Davey and Nicki Redlich); *Magpie* (with Richard Frankland); *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* (co-written with Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Christos Tsiolkas and composer Irene Vela, and winner of the 1999 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Drama, two AWGIEs, and the 1999 Jill Blewitt Playwright's Award); and *Fever* (with Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Christos Tsiolkas and composer, Irine Vela).

Neil Armfield directed her play *The Spook* in 2004 at Belvoir. The Malthouse followed with a production in 2007. *The Spook* was short-listed for the 2005 NSW Premier's Literary Awards and won Best Play in 2005 at the AWGIEs and the Victorian Premier Awards. *Furious Mattress* was commissioned by the Malthouse Theatre and produced in 2010. *Happy Ending*, commissioned by the Melbourne Theatre Company, was produced in September 2012.

PULLING RABBITS OUT OF HATS

I have worked quite a bit with Andrew Bovell. We have collaborated on two (and a half) plays, and a movie, in a group of writers/theatre makers called Six. The four playwrights of the group, the other two being Patricia Cornelius and Christos Tsiolkas, have all learned much from each other. It is a privilege to see another writer's process up extremely close, from the first seed of an idea to the final performance draft. You get to see how they manage the art of filtering the real world and the world of ideas, and shared avowed intentions into stories, characters, images—theatre. We all came into the group as experienced writers with our own voices, but when working with others who do what you do you can't help comparing and contrasting; you admire, envy, and sometimes even pinch stuff, albeit unconsciously. I want a bit of that, you think. I want Patricia's easy, lyrical, colloquial poetry. I want Christos' morally confounding collisions between characters and ideas.

There are two things I particularly envy in Andrew's writing. The first is a slightly intangible quality that I will call his gravitas. When I pick up the phone and he says, 'Hi, it's Andrew', there's something in the tone of his voice that makes me think it's going to be bad news, but actually he's just ringing to change the time of a meeting. I always get tricked. It is a quality that you find in his plays as well: a hint of impending tragedy, a sort of luscious melancholy. His characters often feel like they are one step away from breaking down and bursting into tears, but they can't because they are with other people; they have to keep talking; they have to keep living. Perhaps this is the human condition—being with other people so you don't break down and sob.

His best work has an aura, an air, quite intangible and hard to pin down precisely why or where it is located, of this being serious stuff, of this being meaningful and important and we should watch closely, listen closely. And we do. I think this is why Andrew's plays, including *Speaking in Tongues*, have been so successful internationally. They announce themselves. They claim their space.

They are about the big stuff, life and death and betrayal and love and corruption and yearning. He writes big plays in the tradition of the great Americans: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill. Not in form so much, but in sweep and scope. He writes about ordinary people and ordinary people's suffering. It can be a risky business, claiming that space, daring to say something, to mean something.

The thing that strikes you first about *Speaking in Tongues* is its structural beauty. It has all the complexity of a mathematical formula, and is unabashedly and non-realistically constructed and patterned. And that is the other quality I envy Andrew for—his mastery of structure. He is a great plotter. A formalist. He has a chess player's brain. He can, and prefers to, work backwards as well as forwards, sideways, up and down and roundabout. He likes pulling rabbits out of hats. His plays have a touch of the board game Mouse Trap about them. Or the catacombs beneath the Pyramids at Giza. He withholds the pleasure of comprehension from the audience, and drip feeds it to them, invoking that 'Aughh' from them all as something clicks into place, making his plays immensely involving to watch, as you, like in a thriller, add the pieces together, bit by bit, until the circle meets its corresponding end, or the step pyramid is formed, or all the Chinese boxes are laid in a row, or whatever other elegant structure Andrew has chosen to construct is finally revealed. In *Speaking in Tongues*, for example, A and B betray C and D, while simultaneously C and D almost betray A and B. C confesses his almost betrayal to A while simultaneously D confesses her almost betrayal to B, revealing the actual betrayal of A and B. C leaves A, and B leaves D. A meets D in a pub and they talk of their spouses B and C, unaware for most of the scene of their intimate connection until a name is dropped into the conversation and D realises that A is C's husband. Then B meets C in a pub... and so on. The complexity does your head in. And we haven't even got to E, F, G and H and I! The intricate string of meetings, miscalculations, coincidences, and mirroring of experiences are worthy of a French farce. And yet the wonder is that here they are enlisted to reveal the small sad lives of our Australian suburban protagonists. It is notable that there is no one protagonist. This is a

collective disenchantment.

The reason why a gift for plotting is such an enviable accomplishment is that the act of writing a play is, like any artistic undertaking, to some extent a leap into the unknown. In my experience, the best plots emerge best when you use your rational, logical brain for the nuts and bolts of the script, a first map of the how, to who, when and why, and then let your unconscious brain make unexpected leaps, strange connections. And if your plot or your scenario already tells a story of its own, has a beauty and ingenuity all of its own, the drama that fleshes it out will be less weighed down with exegesis, the dull explanatory dialogue that will bore an audience to tears. Look at the recent success of radical adaptations of Ibsen: the Belvoir production of *The Wild Duck*, and *The Enemy of the People* and *Hedda Gabler* by the German theatre ensemble, the Schaubüüne. Ibsen's plays work beautifully when they are adapted, because he is such a fabulous plotter. You can do anything you want to his dialogue, because his plots are so perfectly formed.

In *Speaking in Tongues*—despite the fact that as the play begins we hear two scenes performed simultaneously—the dialogue has an air of naturalism, almost ultra-naturalism, and in the vein of the surrealists of the 1970s, like Chuck Close, we hear the pimples of speech, the hesitations, gaffes and false starts. The characters are self-knowing, up to a point. They are, in the main, middle-class, educated and articulate. They are primarily concerned with their own lives. They assess and re-assess their lives and their position in the world, their happiness and their unhappiness. They interrogate their own motives, they mourn their failures. They are almost confessional in their revelations to each other. There is something heart-breakingly claustrophobic in the world of the play. Just as miserable in their relationship or out of it, the four characters of Part One, Pete and Jane and Leon and Sonja, are firmly trapped by their own lives. Just as perhaps we all are, but we are sitting in the audience, and they are playing it all out on stage. Valerie, Sarah, Neil, John and Nick, the five new characters of Part Two and Part Three, (I say new, although their existence has been well, if obliquely, heralded in Part One) are

even more inexorably trapped by circumstance, and by their own actions or inactions. They hurtle towards their conclusion, inevitable, or surprising, and revealed as much by a strange underlying web of accidental as well as purposeful connection; the language is physically juxtaposed, disjointed and yet musical—a chorus of voices, all in trouble, a brocade of suffering.

In *Speaking in Tongues*, Andrew orchestrates human folly, in a way particular to the medium of the play and its history. Sometimes, oddly enough, it is a bit reminiscent of Shakesperean comedy, juxtaposing the safe with the dangerous, throwing the world into chaos, and then putting it all together again. Not quite, in Andrew's case. He plays with the pleasure of coincidence and accident. We want and desire and fear that these characters will all meet. And we are given our desires and our fears. We fear there is more to discover, and there is; we discover the worst there is to discover. Humanity doesn't come out very well in *Speaking in Tongues*. Not so much because people betray each other. It is more the heedlessness, the narcissism, the numbness and smallness and sadness of these people's lives that offends. And yet it has a trueness. None of these characters are monsters. They're even trying hard, some of them. And they have their own bleak humour. But they are weighed down by what seems to be an essential human inadequacy, a failure of love, a failure of *jouissance*.

I am not sure why I have seen so many productions of *Speaking in Tongues*. I saw a very early incarnation of the play at La Mama, that I seem to remember was called something different. I feel like I saw Griffin's initial production directed by Ros Horin on tour in Melbourne. I remember a pronounced use of venetian blinds, but maybe I just saw a photo of the set, or maybe it was a different play altogether. I saw one of the performances of a six month tour by Hit Productions at the Darebin Arts Centre, because Ullie Birve, an actress I trained with at Drama school, was playing Sonja and Sarah, and I saw the revival at Griffin a couple of years ago, directed by Sam Strong. And I saw, of course, *Lantana*, the film inspired by the play. What immediately occurs to me as I think about all those

productions is how seamlessly the play graces such different venues and audiences. Andrew's work has both a sort of alternative mystique, perhaps heralding from his early days in Melbourne working with such companies as Whistling in the Theatre and Melbourne Workers' Theatre, and an effortless popular appeal.

Speaking in Tongues is aptly named. Taken away from its natural home, the phrase is itself a conundrum, a puzzle. For how else would you speak but in tongues? As well as alluding perhaps to how language is inadequate, and can paradoxically be an obstacle to communication, it also resonates with Andrew's slightly biblical use of stories as vehicles for discussions about morality. Each of the characters at some point tells a long, involved and somewhat impenetrable story about something that happened to them, or that they saw in passing, the day before, or that morning. Unlike bible stories, however, the stories the characters tell are not parables. They do not on their own encapsulate a human truth. In fact they do the opposite. They are unfinished, fragments of human experience, puzzles, like we experience every day—the small, seemingly trivial day-to-day encounters we relate to our friends and our work-mates and our family, to the people who surround us, providing fodder for speculation about our world, and how it operates. By definition these stories can never be fully explained because they happened to people we don't know, and who have by now returned to their unknowable lives in their indescribable rooms in their unimaginable houses. They are little human puzzles. They often confound. They are teasingly inexplicable.

I love this aspect of the play. The woman who started screaming at a man in the street for no reason. The man whose fiancé got on a plane and never came back. The man who threw a woman's shoe into the bush in the middle of the night. There is something tantalisingly surreal about their lack of completion. And something beautifully familiar. But Andrew does not just stop there and leave us with realistic half stories that we all know. He almost magically completes the story for us. He is, after all, the writer and he is inventing all these characters and moving them around and making them do this

and that, and as the omnipotent god of the undertaking, he can pull rabbits out of hats, he can tell us the other half of our half-observed, strange little subjective stories. He can tell us who that angry woman was, the one who yelled in the street for no reason. He can tell us why the fiancé never came back. He can even tell us why the man threw a shoe into the bush in the middle of the night. And there is something utterly satisfying in that. We become omnipotent, powerful. We become gods ourselves. We are not just one person with their subjective and puzzling view of the world. We see the whole web. We have been given the key. It feels like an immense privilege. It feels like the answer. We have been given all the data to read the world for ourselves.

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Media enquiries

Sue Nelson

t: 02 9394 7685

e: snelson@copyright.com.au

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