

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

by KATE MULVANY

A response to:
Hotel Sorrento
by Hannie Rayson



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Author's Biography



KATE MULVANY graduated with a BA from Curtin University. She is an actress and writer who has played lead roles with major Australian theatre companies as well as appearing on TV and in film. Stage credits include: *Antigone* for the Perth International Arts Festival; *Mr Bailey's Minder* for Griffin Theatre Company; *Proof*, *A Man With Five Children*, *King Lear*, *The Crucible* and *Rabbit* for Sydney Theatre Company; and *Amadeus*, *Social Climbers*, *Sweet Phoebe* and *Milk & Honey* for Perth Theatre Company.

As a writer her plays include: *Father O Friendly*, *Derek Drives a Datsun*, *Vaseline Lollies*, *Blood and Bone* (Winner of Naked Theatre Co's 'Write Now!' Award), *Naked Ambition*, *Storytime*, *The Danger Age*—which was shortlisted for the STC's Patrick White Award and won the 2004 Philip Parsons Award—*Somewhere* (co-written with award-winning comedian and musician Tim Minchin), and *The Seed*, which won the Best Independent Production at the 2007 Sydney Theatre Critics Awards. After two sell-out seasons at Belvoir, *The Seed* went on to tour Australia. Kate is currently developing the screenplay.

More recent stage work includes playing Lady Macbeth in Bell Shakespeare's 2012 production of *Macbeth*, and as Cassius in the company's 2011 national tour of *Julius Caesar*. Kate adapted the scripts for both, and went on to adapt *Medea* for Belvoir with Anne-Louise Sarks. The production was critically acclaimed, winning multiple Sydney Theatre Awards in 2013, including Best New Australian Work. *Medea* also won Best Theatre Script at the 2013 AWGIE Awards.

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

I'm Meg, I think...

That is...

I'm a writer from a small Australian country town who took off as far away as possible—to as many places as possible—to live and work. And one of my pieces just happened to be a (semi) 'autobiographical' piece. And the characters just happened to be based on my family members—their names changed. And I had also just happened to contend with a prodding press on how my family responded, and I found myself sitting at dinner tables as those very family members discussed 'what was true and what wasn't'. I, like Meg, also got asked to partake in countless forums on 'women in autobiography' and deal with people assuming, as a female writer, that my play (legitimate, in my mind) was some form of extended 'diary entry', and would I 'ever consider writing something fictional?'

And so I am Meg.

Who are you?

Are you Hilary—the broken but coping carer? Are you Pippa—the feisty but sentimental younger sister? Are you Wal—representing the old Australia that gets away with its violent past through its infective jingoism, embracing your own cultural stereotype? Or Edwin—blindly intelligent and culturally bewildered? Are you Troy—the truth-seeker and heartbreaking hope-giver? Or maybe Dick—the belligerent, topsy-turvy patriot? Or perhaps you are Marge—keenly entertaining them all, just trying to enjoy the art?

I don't mean to sound generalised or selfish about it, of course—'claiming' a character in a play that I've neither read until very recently nor seen performed onstage or on film. Although not through choice, I must say. Ironically, this wonderful play about a

small country town was not part of the Australian canon I studied at school... because I was stuck in a small West Australian country town. Before the internet. Well off the radar of touring theatre companies. The curriculum I was educated under must have missed it by a whisker. And so here I am, nearly 25 years on from Hannie Rayson's initial publication, peeking my head in the front door of the Hotel Sorrento, snooping around... and claiming Meg.

It's not a hard thing to do, though, this 'claiming'. Rayson is a master of dialogue and makes everyone so damn accessible. Across the board—female or male, a child, a teenager, a 30-something woman, an elderly man—she just gets how words fall from a mouth. Spill from a heart. Squeeze between the synapses and into a conversation. Every character is a beautifully flawed human being. We start falling in love with them because they are so deliciously contradictory. Their familial conversations bubble and tumble—they pass from being hilariously intellectual to astoundingly mean to boringly domesticated to gently philosophical in a single sitting round the dinner table. And we love them for their contradictions because, of course, they are us. Because one day we may be Meg. But we could very easily become Hil. And dammit, she could be Pippa, if she wants... and god help Troy if he becomes any of them... so on and so forth.

This grasp of character is Rayson's greatest gift, I believe. It's why we go along with every word. It's why a play like *Hotel Sorrento* is a gift to an actor. And I'm going to get more specific here—to a FEMALE actor more than anything.

Because how refreshing is it that the first voice we hear is that of a 57-year-old woman? Seriously. How often does this actually happen anymore? How often has it happened ever? Rayson chooses to start *Hotel Sorrento* with a beautiful monologue/quote about autumn. Read by a middle-aged woman. Sitting on a jetty. Eating fish and chips. A woman falling in love with a book called *Melancholy*. A woman discovering herself, her town, her place in Australia, her place in the world. At 57. It's a delicate start, and therefore confident. We lean in and listen. There is none of the bang, bang, bluster, blunder, own

it, own, it, own it, screamed, balls out, tits out, ‘fucking listen, you hear me?!’ that tends to ‘begin’ our night in the theatre nowadays. That we’ve become so desensitised to, and, to be honest, which I have used many times in my own plays. No. *Hotel Sorrento* starts quietly. A gentle pensiveness. There’s a masterful assuredness in Rayson’s storytelling. She makes us trust her. Woos us, softly, softly... and before you know it we’re in a simmering house of long-silenced secrets and a blistering, desirous need for truth through almost-perfect character-driven narrative.

I use ‘almost-perfect’ for a reason. In this early play, Rayson—like many a young playwright—does get a little bogged down in overly descriptive stage directions that I believe take away from the narrative flow. Some writers do this to make a script ‘director and/or designer-proof’ (a direct quote from a dramaturg I once met!). However, I don’t believe Rayson is that writer. I believe that when she wrote *Hotel Sorrento* she had such a strong feel for her character’s voices, their every move, their emotions, their day-to-day existence that her overwhelming sentiment made its way into the text. Examples are:

WAL’s eyes begin to smart with the sentiment.

From the ashtray placed on one end of the ironing board we see a single stream of blue smoke.

And, often...

They muse.

These directions are evocative but overwritten. Actors don’t like them. Nor do many designers and directors. They’re hard to play because they don’t come from instinct, so they don’t give the performer, director or designer the space to explore other options. But Rayson wouldn’t have thought of that at the time of writing, I’m sure. She would have been deeply entrenched in the world of her play and so the empathy for her characters flowed into those italicised suggestions a little too forcefully. It’s interesting to note that as *Hotel*

Sorrento moves into the second act, these descriptions lessen. She relies more on ‘Silence’ instead of intricate stage directions, possibly because she realised as she was writing just how potent this story was. That the characters held their own without elaboration. And a good actor will use a direction such as ‘Silence’, along with the clues of their character already laid out by a playwright, to much greater effect. As Rayson has matured as a playwright, these descriptions in her later plays are all the more rare. She now uses the more modest but far more open ‘Beat’, which shows a deep trust in the theatrical process, as well as a confidence in allowing the spoken words and silences to speak for themselves.

Something that Rayson has mastered throughout her writing canon is exploring truth—personal, familial, social, sexual, cultural. And nothing tells us the truth more than a mirror. Rayson uses metaphorical mirroring throughout the text of *Hotel Sorrento* wonderfully. But not only that, she layers and layers and layers each truth until it warps dizzyingly and shifts our search as a reader and a viewer. On a glassy sea, the Moynihan family gather. They argue whether to keep a sentimental painting of their town on the wall or take it down. The three sisters—Hil, Meg and Pippa, see mirrors of themselves and images of their potential—good and bad—in the faces of each other. They see their mother in an iron—a steaming ghost still working away in the corner of the room. A brilliant representation of a female in the shadow of the 1950s Australian landscape—smoothing out the family creases whilst ageing slowly, dying relatively young, unhappy, ‘outlived by the iron’. The sisters lament their mother strangely, almost flippantly:

‘Life sucks’, says Pippa.

‘We loved him more than we ever loved her’, says Hil, referring to their father Wal, who she also said was ‘a bastard to our mother’.

‘She’d be here night after night on her own’, says Pippa. ‘Always got the rough end of the stick, our Mum...’

And this is where I shudder. I mourn for this dead woman. I’m aware

of her world—I see her type amongst my own family. And like the Moynihan sisters, I have also turned my back on the past, in the past. I have shrugged my shoulders. I have told myself that ‘those days have long gone’ and given in to the kind of belligerent laziness of Wal and his like after a night out. But I also know my country, a nation that tends to take two steps forward and ten steps back, is a hypocrite. We struggle more and more with empathy. We no longer take care of the ‘underdog’ as much as we claim to. And I know that under the current political, social and sexual climate, I may indeed find myself looking in the mirror one day and see a ghost staring back, clutching a steaming iron and smiling wanly. Not because I’m a woman (although of course we still have a long way to go there), but because this kind of ignorance has heartbreakingly entered every facet of Australian life. Rayson knew exactly where that pulse of fear was and it’s right there in *Hotel Sorrento* for us to see on so many levels—in our cultural sensitivities, our social predispositions, our sexual needs, our shame. So much shame. And in so many reflections. I’m ashamed too, because it seems we haven’t moved on much from what *Hotel Sorrento* speaks about with such clear vision, but it’s also by returning to plays like this that we are reminded to always, always check in the mirror. If not at our own reflection, then at least at the world surrounding us.

Which is, of course, not to say that Australian theatre has turned its back on these issues. Absolutely not. It has grown fruit. Blossomed. Its roots have thickened and dug deeper than ever. It has taken Rayson’s foundations (plus the writers before her) and built mirrors. Glossy and grotty. Flawed but solid. Heartbreaking and hope-giving. There’s something wondrous about this industrial pride amongst artists in Australia—at least, in the theatrical community I find myself involved in. There’s a claim. There’s a desire to keep the stories going, keep the dialogue bubbling, like we ourselves are sitting around the Moynihan table in the *Hotel Sorrento*. Like we’re rallying against the ‘ten steps backward’ and demanding a surge forward of more than two. Of course, we still have our own Meg and Pippa Moynihans that we lose to the ‘Mother Country’ or ‘The States’. But more than ever, we have a rich artistic community that is determined

and proud to tell the cultural stories of our nation, whether Murdoch and his political henchmen like it or not—something I can imagine Dick and Marge chuckling about on the jetty.

In my heart of hearts, I want a sequel to *Hotel Sorrento*. I want Meg and Pippa to come home and join the artistic community I know now. The one that Hannie Rayson herself is still a huge part of. The community set in motion by the magnificent storytellers across time that make up our wonderful national canon. I want to say to Meg, ‘No! We’re not “obvious”!’ I want to say to Dick, ‘We are “awake to our humanity” as artists, even if our politics are not’. I want to say to dear Troy, ‘Please finish the book—you’re our hope!’ and to Marge, ‘Thank you for your feedback’. I want to know who now lives in that house of stories. I hope the walls still ring with arguments loud and strong. I even hope the iron is still there, but cold and unused, and that the inhabitants of the Hotel Sorrento are wandering around in rumpled clothes. And I hope they’ve hung many mirrors. Because that’s Hannie Rayson’s hotel, and its inhabitants—who are all of us—deserve the light.

So I ask again, as Rayson has inspired me to do 25 years on...

In all this...

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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.

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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

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