

FALLING PETALS

BEN ELLIS



Currency Press, Sydney

Falling Ashes

John McCallum

This is a play from the front line of a new generation war. As a baby-boomer parent I'm not too happy with everything it has to say but it is extraordinarily powerful and its parable is alarmingly believable.

A generation that received a free liberal education decided to charge their children for training for jobs that kept disappearing. A generation brought up in a Keynesian world in which governments tried to regulate the conditions under which people could be exploited suddenly abandoned their children to wolves. A generation that celebrated the ideals of personal liberation, freedom and community created a world that they then allowed to be taken over by rapacious corporations. This is the world that Phil, Tania and Sally face so desperately in this play.

One of the hardest things for me is to watch Phil and Tania, the proto-fascist children who are the core of the play's story. These hard, cynical victims of the '90s have learned their lessons well: look out for yourself, jump through the hoops, crawl through sewers if necessary to do what you've been told you have to do in order to get what you've been told you ought to want. Everything they have been taught is bullshit—from the 'Mindpower' motivational programs to the new economics. They happily watch other children die, they torture their friend Sally when she gets sick, they have sex only because it helps them drill into their tightly-focussed minds a few of the rudimentary catchcries of the new orthodoxy that has ruined their community.

Ellis's other plays explore this bitter new generational crisis. In *Post Felicity* a baby-boomer couple are completely unable to acknowledge, let alone understand or care about, the disappearance of their daughter. Not even her death is enough to bring her to their lapsed attention. With the help of a mysterious employer they casually and brutally invent a new story for her and then dismiss her from their lives.

In *These People*, Ellis's response to the refugee scaremongering of the early 2000s, a traditional Australian family tries to deal with their fear of the aliens who are detained behind razor wire at the nearby detention centre. The Daughter of the family, writing an essay for school, captures the insanity of the world she is being raised in by creating a parable in which cute waddling penguins flee an eco-ravaged Antarctica and arrive on Australian shores seeking asylum. In a chilling moment one of the hungry penguins, played by the Daughter, is asked by a brutal detention centre guard to take off her penguin suit if she wants to eat. She does, and reveals underneath a woman in Islamic purdah, who has to keep undressing.

Ellis writes with a theatricality that is quite astonishing—a comic surrealism full of playful savagery and sudden shocks, all rooted in the real world that his characters and his audiences inhabit. It is, in Australian drama, a completely new way of writing about society and politics, based partly in powerful images: the penguins in *These People* and, in *Falling Petals*, the sakura tree under which the desperate and defiant children huddle. Each falling cherry-blossom represents another dead child. When the bodies are burned the falling blossoms are replaced by a rain of greasy ash that the surviving children cannot wipe off.

The strange disease that strikes Hollow, the ravaged country town from which Phil and Tania are so desperate to escape and to which Sally is condemned by her mother's poverty and intransigence, might be a metaphor for AIDS, or perhaps for the effects on ordinary people of economic rationalism, or perhaps for the New World Order. One of the smooth-talking evasive adults, Marg, calls it 'a truly postmodern disease'. The vital organs that it attacks survive individually but they suddenly stop co-operating with each other. The victims die from a failure, inside their own bodies, of community.

The plague ravages the town and the social fabric is torn and burnt. No-one understands what is going on. Families fail and parents and children stumble on blindly, calling on whatever friends they can find to give them support. The only close relationship is between Phil and Tania and the most savage moment in the play is when Phil abandons Tania to sexual slavery and crawls alone into the sewer that he believes will take him to the big city where he thinks he will be able to do his exam and find his success.

The parents retreat happily to the safe country outside the fence that

they have erected around the disaster area of the world that they have created for their children. The dying Sally, caught between two worlds, is left at the end, barely holding on but still fiercely defiant.

These three are part of the group in Hollow rejected, betrayed and destroyed at the very moment when the world should become theirs.