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# THE CLUB

BY DAVID WILLIAMSON

**TEACHER'S NOTES**

BY PETER FITZPATRICK



# DAVID WILLIAMSON'S *THE CLUB*

by Peter Fitzpatrick

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## 1. Introducing the play

In 1976 some jeremiahs greeted the news that Australia's most popular playwright was working on a play about football—Australia's most consuming form of popular theatre—with mutterings about the dangers of sacrilege, or of pandering to the public. But it didn't take an expert to tip the success of *The Club* at the box office. The degree of success has, however, exceeded anyone's expectations, even in Melbourne, the football culture in which the play is set. *The Club*, in its premiere season which opened on 24 May 1977 at the Russell Street Theatre, played to packed houses for an extended four-month run, and brought unprecedented profits to the Melbourne Theatre Company; twenty months later it was back again, the laughs and full houses showing no signs of flagging. Its infiltration of the Rugby States was almost as triumphant. The Nimrod Theatre production in Sydney was scheduled for tours and subsequent transfers to a larger theatre even before it opened.

Within two years of its first production, *The Club* appeared, in very distinguished company, on sixth-form syllabuses in four Australian States. That was a quite extraordinary mark of the new respectability of Australian drama; while its popularity and the relative politeness, for a Williamson play, of its language, perhaps recommend it to the people who devise the syllabuses, someone up there is inviting us to apply standards of success to *The Club* which are not necessarily related to box offices.

David Williamson has a great capacity for writing plays which a lot of people want to see. This makes him a rare, and sometimes unfairly

disparaged, figure in contemporary Australian theatre. He is, in a non-pejorative sense, an old-fashioned playwright; his plays are not avant-garde in their forms or expectations, and only in his unexpurgated dialogue does he take any developed advantage of the freedoms won for his generation of writers. All his plays are naturalistic in form, suited to the proscenium stages and convincingly solid sets of the subsidised State companies who have found a new Williamson play a godsend.

Williamson's earliest work was performed in 1970 at the tiny La Mama theatre in Melbourne, perhaps the main focus of the so-called 'new wave' in Australian theatre in the late 1960s and early 1970s; but since 1971, when *The Removalists* and *Don's Party* were taken up by 'establishment' companies, all of his plays have first appeared in the major subsidised theatres. His interests have been consistently sociological, in the patterns of aggression and submission, the rituals and role-playing, in group behaviour. The groups have normally been drawn very much from Williamson's own experience; indeed, from the randy graduates in *The Coming of Stork* (1970), through the disillusion of the educated ocker in *Don's Party* (1971) and *Jugglers Three* (1972), to the quieter desperations of *What If You Died Tomorrow* (1973) and *A Handful of Friends* (1976), one could trace a line of concern in which the subjects grow older with the playwright—and with the audience which caught that 'new wave' in the 1960s. Increasingly he has dealt with people who are in some degree aware of the gap between their social roles and their unrealised (in both senses) private needs. *The Department* (1974) is more concerned with the patterns of institutional politics than the motives of those

who live by them, but this play too has the stamp of personal involvement—it clearly has a lot to do with Williamson's own experience of life in a tertiary college. The groups he deals with are also predominantly male, and in a number of the earlier plays there is some awkwardness in treating corresponding kinds of role-playing in women. The all-male *The Club* perhaps recognises, and avoids, this limitation.

The exceptions to that brand of first-hand sociological observation are *The Removalists* (1971) and *The Club*. The former, a study of the violence implicit in male sexual and social roles, was inspired by a casual anecdote told by a removalist. Both plays are peopled with mythical or stereotypical figures rather than with the playwright's acquaintances; neither play contains anyone who could be said to represent the author. Both seem to hold a consistent detachment which gives them a good deal of their theatrical strength. There is not much room for the softer or more reflective feelings in either of them; perhaps the tough objectivity of the social observer has a lot to do with these seeming the most tightly constructed of Williamson's plays. They are, possibly for that reason, the most 'prescribed' (and therefore best-selling) of recent Australian plays.

In reviewing the 1977 Sydney production of *The Club*, Frances Kelly described it in *The Australian* as Williamson's 'best and least provincial play since *The Removalists*'. At first glance that seems an odd remark. What could be more parochial than a play about football in Melbourne, drawing as this one does on some very recognisable local identities and institutions? But the success of the play outside Melbourne seems to confirm a pretty strong non-provincial appeal. Export potential is not necessarily a mark of theatrical quality, of course, and the fact that some Americans may have found *The Club* of passing interest during its runs (under the title *Players*) in Washington and on Broadway is of no particular critical relevance. But the first question that confronts us in talking about *The Club* is how far this is 'a play about football', and how far that determines our sense of its achievement.

## The characters

Lou Richards, the doyen of Melbourne football scribes, writes in a preface to the published play, 'If you can't recognise among the people you know the characters and situations in *The Club*, then you've either spent the last few years in a Tibetan monastery or you're a New South Welshman' (p. vii). The comment draws attention to the pleasures of recognition which the play offers; and it implies as well the narrowness of characterisation that tends to go with typicality.

Normally in naturalistic plays we listen intently for clues in the ways the characters speak and look in order to learn what they are, and why they do what they do. In *The Club* the clues come more simply. Each role is written to establish, within a few moments, a distinctive type. Gerry, the club administrator, is a cool Machiavellian with polished cheeks; Ted, the president, is all comic bluster; Jock is a tough old relic of a particular kind of pre-war bluntness, who likes to scheme but hasn't the head for it. Danny, the captain, is a nice bloke, if a little touchy about being not quite the player he was; and the young star Geoff carries, with a little superciliousness, the values of a new generation that prefers to hang loose about life, though he has some residual competitiveness which helps to turn the plot.

The man in the middle is Laurie, the coach, whose commitment to the club is satirised while his basic decency puts him partly out of reach of the satire. He is a little more complicated than the rest, and the actor playing Laurie has the task of building a personality strong enough to prevent the play being completely overbalanced by the characters who come ready-made. But even here Williamson is not concerned to give opportunity or space for the development of individuals in depth. He offers an audience little of the information with which dramatists often prepare us for the appearance of their characters. The men of *The Club* define themselves so clearly and so quickly that there is no need to tell us in advance what to look for.

We hear bits and pieces about their private lives—Danny's marital troubles, Jock's reputation for betraying and beating his wife, the illness of Gerry's wife—but nothing of that sort helps define why they play the games they play. The only sustained self-revelation is a joke—Geoff's

magnificent fiction about skeletons in the family closet. The place of non-club life is fixed in the opening moments:

TED: [off] How's June?

GERRY: Sick.

TED: [off] That's great. Sick?

GERRY: Mmm. (p. 7)

Soon Laurie asks after June's health, and sends some obligatory love; but while this suggests something of his niceness, the exchange remains pretty perfunctory.

Narrowly conceived characters sound like a dramatic defect, but this is a question that repays some careful attention in relation to *The Club*. If we take the play as purely a funny play about football, then we are probably left with the view that its characters are superficial; whether we find that pardonable or not will depend largely on how funny we find it. But *The Club* also has some claims to be considered from two other points of view: as a sociological play and as a morality play, from which the question looks quite different. As a sociological play, it offers types of behaviour characteristic of what happens in a society obsessed by male competitiveness. In this view, Williamson makes a satiric exposure of six characters deprived of development by the game, or the society, but not really by the playwright. As a morality play, *The Club* might concern itself with the patterns of interaction, of reversal and reprisal, which are figured in the plot; in this view, its people might be seen as closer to the personifications of virtue and vice that we find in mediaeval morality plays, than to lightning sketches of 'the guys who run your club'.

That might sound rather a weighty superstructure to apply to such a good night out as *The Club* affords. But all three notions of the play (light entertainment, sociological and moral) do seem to be true to the kind of play this is. How relatively important they are should be a subject for plenty of disagreement; how they can be held together seems partly to do with the form of the satire, which will be discussed later.

## Social content

Let's look at the sociological interests first. This brings us back to the question of how far the play is 'about football': while most favourable reviewers have hinted at deeper meanings, it

is clear that the game (or more precisely the cultural forces which make it and feed it) is central to the play. It may function as a metaphor for other forms of virility trial, or as a parallel to other kinds of institutional in-fighting, but it is the kind of metaphor and parallel which won't be pushed to one side. The play won some good notices in America; alongside the reviewers who found no point of contact were comments like the influential Clive Barnes' reference to 'the universality of its well-kept jungle'. However, the sort of 'universality' that minimises or disregards the specific concern with club politics would seem to amputate much of the play. A good deal of the author's satiric method depends on a 'feel' for the footy-culture, or comparable sports cultures at least.

For instance, Williamson makes great play, in setting up the double-dealing and delusion of his characters, with a slipperiness of language which seems endemic to the game (any game?). Geoff underlines the irrationality of commitment to the game or the club, in a statement that seems basic to the argument:

GEOFF: ... It's all a load of macho-competitive bullshit. You chase a lump of pigskin around a muddy ground as if your bloody life depended on it and when you get it you kick it to buggery and go chasing it again ... (p. 39)

Nothing in the play challenges this dismissal of footy's place in the great scheme of things. Given the premise that winning and losing relates to nothing in particular, the game's language must itself create meaning and importance where the real business of life provides none; this produces an all-or-nothing language of metaphor which extends into fantasy, and can never mean what it says. Such lingo is familiar to all of us. Coaches and commentators speak of players being prepared to crawl over broken glass, or run through brick walls, to get the ball; I recently heard one speak of the need to find players ready 'to fight and die' for their club—which seems a wasteful as well as unreasonable demand. Terms like 'fierce desire' (trying very hard), 'desperation' (trying even harder) and 'professional' (coolly competent) suggest the way that words in footy-language carry different meanings and values from those they have in normal talk.

In the power games played in *The Club*, all commitments to principle are slippery, and words change or lose meanings at the whim of the speaker. We see this early in Ted's righteous indignation at being called 'autocratic'—

TED: ... I was elected by the members to lead this Club and I'll bloody well lead it, and if anybody tries to stop me I'll crush them. No, Gerry. I'm sick of pussyfooting around. I'm going to speak my mind. He's called me autocratic so he just better come up with some evidence. (p. 10)

—and it is nowhere more evident than in the range of attitudes which each of the men can hold on the subject of 'tradition'. It can stand for the pride of wearing the guernsey, a justification for anything aimed at the greater glory of the club; or it can be a synonym for a hidebound amateurism which for all six men is beneath contempt. All six are concerned in some way to create traditions, to achieve greatness; all are therefore pretty equivocal about the traditions and greatness of others. Ted disparages the concept—'Tradition, tradition, tradition. We've been strangled by it' (p. 14)—but this is a man who hasn't missed a match since he was six, and who sees the future wholly in the light of the past: 'We're going to have a triumph that'll make the great years of the 20s look pale by comparison' (p. 59).

Jock epitomises this slipperiness of principle. We hear that in the past he has shouted and thumped for every conceivable position on every issue, and his attitudes to the portraits of the great which embody the traditions of the club demonstrate that nicely. He cites them as heroes in response to the talk of a strike, the 'great names from a great club' (p. 21); but when whisky and Geoff's 'smokes' deprive him of his rhetoric for a little while, we hear that he's 'got all kinds of enemies around this place and most of 'em are up on that wall'—they are 'hacks and dead-beats', the lot of them (p. 53). Moments later, Ted's humiliation brings Jock back once more to the old pieties: 'What a bloody disgrace to those champions up there' (p. 63). Williamson taps a rich vein of comedy in the way the clichés of football refer to nothing but themselves, in their curious disconnection from genuine emotional meaning.

Although the moral framework of the piece pushes us into the sort of partisan support for

Laurie, Danny and Geoff that made Melbourne audiences greet their triumph at the close with the sort of cheers that are normally only heard on Saturday afternoons, both sides have a lot in common. Our team is less outrageous than the arch-schemers, but it is hardly beyond reproach: Laurie has not been above 'lobbying' to get rid of Jock in the past, and can contemplate selling Danny—all three are basically driven by self-interest. And all six men are dominated by the contest for 'greatness' which the game provides. Laurie and Jock are old heroes—after all, they are on the wall; it is important, even to Laurie, to distinguish their stature from Danny's.

JOCK: ... Let's face it, Laurie, when we were winning our medals it was in a team full of champions. Danny's little more than a talented hack.

LAURIE: Come off it, Jock. He's bloody near as good as either of us were in our day. (p. 37)

Danny, however, seems fairly sure of his claims: 'I've got twenty-five kicks a match for ten years' (p. 24). And Geoff, of course, comes round partly because being a champion is important to him. He knows Laurie's taunt that he is just 'a kid with potential' is a bait; but he rises to it.

Ted walks out of what seems to have been a pretty calamitous presidency with the claim that, 'I'm the greatest President this Club has ever had' (p. 59). And even the inscrutable Gerry gives a glimpse of the sort of competitive pride which makes the game important to him, too:

GERRY: I don't love the CIA and I don't particularly like the game and that might make me an oily weasel in your eyes, but I'm the best football administrator in the country and you're only the second best coach, so don't count on being able to return that photo for quite a long while. (p. 67)

We have a nice instance of the ephemeral nature of this greatness to which they all aspire in Jock's lapse of memory about Harry Payne, whose 'three superhuman goals in the dying minutes' won the 1923 flag:

JOCK: ... I wouldn't be surprised if he's turning in his grave right now.

DANNY: He isn't even dead.

JOCK: Harry? I went to his funeral last year.

GERRY: That was Harry Treloar.

JOCK: Shit yeah. There's so many of em' dropping off I get confused... (p. 21)

While Frances Kelly has a point in saying that the politicking in *The Club* might apply to 'anything from pies to the arts', the play's intuitions at that level don't run very deep. Some analogies are more developed than others, and two are worth noting while on the subject of the play's sociology. One is the author's interest in the nature and value of irrational sympathies: the other is a line of implicit reference to Australian politics, which has particular relevance to audience sympathies in the play. Geoff sweeps through Laurie's pieties about commitment to the club with all the irreverence of a younger, more sceptical (or perhaps just more candid) generation:

LAURIE: ... I love football and I love this Club and it's a bit hard for me to understand someone who holds both of them in contempt.

GEOFF: Yeah. Well I missed the history and copped Jock, Ted and Gerry. (p. 41)

Whatever their degrees of self-seeking, neither Laurie nor Jock would ever dream of articulating such blasphemy. Sentiment, predictably, gets a poor press in *The Club*, though Ted's humiliation and the euphoria at the close of the play leave some room for it still. But the treatment of irrational sympathies opens up some pertinent questions about what this club is that Laurie loves, and what it means for him to hold such loyalty; and, more widely, what such feelings mean in the context of the larger loyalties—like religions, ideologies and patriotism.

*The Club* also has some specifically political parallels in the way its conflict between power brokers and underdogs is set up. The sense that we are watching something analogous to a confrontation between bosses and workers is underlined by the political attitudes implicit in the taking of sides. Ted, Jock and Gerry all pride themselves on being hard-nosed businessmen. Gerry's background and opinions are a closed book—his kind of professionalism requires that he have neither. But Ted and Jock, at least, seem representative products of a particular kind of social mobility. They are self-made men, even though all we see and hear confirms their incompetence on committees and in business; and their bluster reflects something of the pride and insecurity that comes from being so. Their political views are implied in the crude

conservatism glimpsed in their reactions to the strike threat—Ted's 'There's more than enough industrial anarchy in the community at large without us copping it on the football field' (p. 11) and Jock's 'This is a disgusting and despicable threat...' (p. 20); perhaps there is even a tinge of anti-Labor feeling in Gerry's off-hand remark about a 'flu epidemic—That'll test Medibank'. Laurie and Danny appear very much men of the shop floor, and Geoff might be seen, in this view, as the loner who is to be 'radicalised'. This element of political or class antagonism in the central conflict sharpens our sense of the ways in which the audience's sympathies are being manipulated. It also, incidentally, catches nicely something of the club with which *The Club* has been closely identified by Melbourne audiences, Collingwood: it is a club rich in a tradition of local working-class identification, and rich, too, in the funds of those who long ago moved to 'better' suburbs.

## The structure

For me this is Williamson's most tightly crafted play so far. Its structure deserves attention for the way it fits the play's moral patterns of connivance and comeuppance, and for the sense of aesthetic rightness that it offers its audience. All the action of *The Club* occurs in a single place, the committee room in which the committee never actually meets. There are two doors: one leads to the bar, which provides some reasons for exits, and for the home truths which mount up as the play progresses; the other leads to the rest of the clubrooms. The six characters are shuffled through these doors in most of the possible combinations, enabling plenty of variety in the style and atmosphere of the exchanges. They are never all together at once, and two of them—Gerry and Geoff, the two outsiders who are indifferent to the club's traditions—never speak to each other. These two, who throw into relief the strange commitment of the others by their own freedom from it, fulfil an important structural function for Williamson.

Gerry is on stage throughout the early part of the play, while the battle lines are drawn up. Since he is at the centre of every tactic he helps introduce most of what is afoot while, at the same time, his inscrutable style makes all facts seem slippery. His methods create movement—

he is a pragmatic executive with a task to accomplish, and stays cool and businesslike while the others get sidetracked in pique, bombast or reminiscence. So he organises the exits of Danny (twice) and Ted, and pointedly stage manages his own comings and goings in the interests of arranging a public truce between Laurie and Jock. With Geoff's arrival, he leaves, and the play takes a turn into a more intimate conversational style. While Geoff's man-to-man talks with Laurie and Jock offer, in differing degrees, a parody of straight talk and self-revelation, they do reveal some of the personal forces that drive the plot.

Laurie is also used as a stabilising influence in the second half of Act One. By that time his reliability has been sufficiently established for him to act as a moral yardstick.

The play's subject and gallery of comic types gives scope for a slapstick playing style—the Melbourne Theatre Company revival in 1979 played for every laugh (and got it) in a way that differed markedly from the tighter timing of the first production. But the script remains a very assured and controlled piece of writing. The way that an apparent comic expansiveness is underpinned by a disciplined structure is exemplified in Geoff's long 'confession' at the start of Act Two. The joke about his activities with Mum and Legless Sister looks, on the face of it, an hilariously irrelevant detour from the plot. But whatever its joys as a shaggy dog story, it nicely represents in miniature the craftsmanship of the play. For it is the logic that gets the biggest laughs. As Geoff, with mock reluctance ('it gets worse...'), takes the story another outrageous step, the audience can see what is coming—and the punchlines are funny both in anticipation and on delivery. The stages of the joke are counterpointed with Jock's befuddled chorus—'Hell', 'Jesus', 'No legs?'. While Jock's troubles give room for some conventional drunken clowning, the scene seems to demand that it shouldn't get out of hand. Like all good farce, the action works by a logic divorced from rationality, and it takes some discipline in the playing to keep the logic clear.

That joke bears quite centrally, if in parody, on some of the themes of the play—the insubstantial private lives of the men, the hollowness of the camaraderie and confidentiality

which they affect, the failure of one generation to comprehend the values of the next. And in the way Jock is mercilessly sent up we are given a foretaste of the kind of moral punishment *The Club* dispenses: revenge by laughter and irony, which even catches Gerry.

The play is full of reversals and false appearances. Its plot springs from Gerry's efforts to reconcile Ted and Laurie, two men who are both on the verge of being sacked. The plan for getting rid of them hinges on the team's continued lack of success; nominally, the aim is success in the future, but Gerry's sense of himself as 'the best football administrator in Australia' resides not so much in premierships as in power and control. By the end of the play, with Geoff on side, the team may well be set for victory, and if it is, Jock and Gerry will share in the kudos. But that kind of success will destroy their own plans, and in terms of each individual's aspirations to 'greatness' it is that kind of moral comeuppance that counts. The ending involves a very cunning network of ironies, in the way that the schemes turn on the schemers. Williamson's play has a good deal in common with the moral and structural reversals of Ben Jonson's plays, or (to take up Garrie Hutchinson's comparison in a review of the first Melbourne production) Toumeur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. These plays similarly draw on personified virtues and vices for the basis of their satire.

The way the plot reversals operate has some consequences for the audience's sense of perspective. What, in the end, is the object of satire in *The Club*? And what is its tone? It is certainly ambivalent. On the one hand the play offers a number of absurd images to do with football and the society which created it. On the other it has delighted Australian audiences and offers an obvious night out for football club ... not that satire requires the destruction of its subject. On the contrary, the good satirist loves his or her victim. But however emotionally restrictive the preoccupation with football, its clichés of talk and behaviour in *The Club*, these things are nevertheless presented as the kind of cultural asset which deserves some indulgence. Perhaps no work of satire can be popularly entertaining without some form of that indulgence. Certainly, the comedy of *The Club* involves us and in no

way challenges us as individuals, whether we kick footballs or not.

But the problem of defining the direction of satire in *The Club* goes beyond the question of the satirist's affection for his subject. These are men playing, in different ways, the same games; their attitudes are complicated by the internal conflicts among the six players, and the tendency of those standpoints to shift with the action. The villains of the piece provide most of its energy and entertainment, and the underdogs are not particularly likeable much of the time. Yet, in the course of the second act, our sympathies become quite clear and the spirit of the stand taken by Laurie, Geoff and Danny proves as infectious as an inspirational three-quarter-time harangue. In the end, it may be that the irrational team loyalties which seemed the butt of the satire become the values from which we choose our sides; and that the arraignment of traitors and tricksters supplants the satire on false social priorities as the play's subject. Loyalty to the team might be unintelligent, might even be a social malady; but loyalty still seems to have a value in itself in Williamson's world.

*The Club* is deservedly a popular play. For all the tightness of its writing, the comments of reviewers quoted below as topics for discussion suggest that it has had a surprising capacity to be many different kinds of play in production. And while for some viewers the talk of moral and sociological range, of social metaphors and classical comedies, might look like gilding the lily, *The Club* has shown a capacity to give pleasure to a wide range of theatregoers at a wide range of levels. It is, very clearly, the work of a playwright at the peak of his form.

## 2. The playwright comments

The following are extracts from an interview given by David Williamson to David Richards from the *Washington Star*, 16 July, 1978.

I used to be a social psychologist and I've always been particularly interested in situations involving power struggles. There are a lot of disputes in Australia in the professional football clubs—territorial battles, usually, between the coaches and the presidents of

the clubs. The year before I wrote *Players (The Club)*, there were quite a few disputes. I thought they would make a good subject for a drama, because the power processes that are played out in the football clubs are not all that different from the types of conflicts you find in all sorts of organisations. I really prefer plays about social processes rather than plays about individual psychology...

The play starts with the assumption that power struggles do occur, and that to a detached, outside observer, these struggles can sometimes appear ludicrous. They're nevertheless frighteningly important in a world context. The gamesmanship and power plays that go on at a high level in international politics have implications for all of us. I'm not suggesting my play has anything hugely important to say about international politics, but that the same types of forces and motives operate at all levels. Just why people engage in such struggles, I'm not sure...

Australia has always felt very insecure about its world image and sports have been one way in which Australia has captured some attention on the world scale. It's not an absolutely sports-worshipping culture, but there's that tendency. The boy who does well in sports in school is generally more highly regarded and popular than the boy who does well academically. Ironically, the women's movement in Australia has turned out to be one of the strongest in the world, because of the fact that they've had a lot to fight against...

If there is a predominant style (in the Australian theatre) it would have to be social satire—fairly trenchant criticisms of our lifestyles, our excesses, our chauvinism, our materialism. The style seems to hover on the borderline between satire and naturalism. A sense of humour may be our saving grace. We're prepared to laugh at ourselves. There's always been a strain of black humour and irony throughout the history of Australian literature.



### 3. The critics' views

The following are extracts from press reviews of *The Club* in Australia, the United States and West Germany.

**Geoffrey Hutton, *Australian*, 31 May, 1977**

Technically this is the best Williamson play I have seen, taut in construction, clean-edged in its character sketching, moving without obvious contrivance or any kind of stage gimmicks to a conclusion which is neither sentimental nor over-written.

...a setting for a study of social mores and personal egotism which might take place in any situation where the human animal is competing for power—in sport, in the trade unions, in the army or in the party room. It is not simply football. It is politics.

Instead of a caricature of the cult, Williamson has made a study of human jealousy, envy, greed, sentimentality and collective morale out of those tedious bickerings which are duly reported in the sporting prints.

**Barry Oakley, *National Times*, 12–17 December, 1977**

*The Club* is David Williamson's first study of an institution in action since *The Department*. The fact that it is less satisfying (though far more commercially successful) than the earlier play is largely due to the limitations of the naturalistic mode.

If your subject is departmental college lecturers, your characters tend to be articulate and self-aware by definition. If you then turn to a football club, the expressive boundaries shrink accordingly; the horizon of the devotee is limited and his language blunt rather than finely honed—he who lives by the club dies by the club. Hence in many of the play's confrontations the characters don't so much argue about the issues as beat one another about the head with them.

The club in question has been down the wrong end of the Victorian Football League premiership ladder for a long time, and new forces have begun to coalesce around it. A self-made businessman has blustered his way in as president, and a grey-flannelled marketing man as administrator, the aspirations of both being nicely symbolised by the black vinyls of

the committee room and the pink upholstery of the bar.

Add an aggressive boor of a committeeman and you have an unlovely trio whose cynical expediency confronts the unfortunates at the other end of the scale—the players, the disposable horseflesh. Caught in the middle is the coach, the man of integrity and moral centre of the play.

These, combined with a temperamental champion purchased at great expense, make up the co-ordinates of the sociogram which Williamson skilfully constructs into a working model of group behaviour, where tradition fights the future, principles confront pragmatism, and calumny and flattery go hand-in-hand.

We witness what seems to be an inexorable process, a speeded-up evolutionary survival of the fittest where the participants, faced with naked aggression or hooded deceit, fall back and defend their particular territories to the death. It's a gloomy view of the world, and also a seductive one. Three of the characters—the president, administrator and committeeman—are taken straight from stock, and sound respectively like bluster, oiliness and aggression personified. Though the outlines are vigorously drawn, there's not enough shading to give depth, so the actors tend to treat them as humours... The play survives these unsubtleties because it has the moral focus in Laurie, the coach. He provides a fulcrum of integrity, a moral frame in which the crude aggressions of the others can be contained.

**Greg Curran, *Nation Review*, 22–28 December, 1977**

*The Club* is old-fashioned Australian satire. The men are to be laughed at, presumably, for the limited range of their interests, their chauvinist impulses, for owning a meat pie factory, having a wife called Raylene, an Avis girlfriend, etc. And John Bell's production is not much help in supplying a human touch. Caricature prevails, and the committee and players shout and bang about as if the big game had already started.

Unconvincing moments abound. Jock is conned into smoking a joint with Geoff... and into believing Geoff has a sister who's a double amputee and also his lover. This scene is distastefully funny, but it doesn't build or lead anywhere or explain anything about the

themes or the characters. Old photos of club coaches are removed from the clubroom walls as a joke by Danny and Geoff. Though they are surprised by Jock and Gerry they still take them away. Then there's the machinations of Jock...

In terms of box office, however, *The Club* is likely to be a colossal success. At the Nimrod, theatre parties are collapsing in their stalls. Nothing this 'funny' has hit them since Dame Edna's gladioli.

**Shirley Despoja, *Advertiser*, 20 May, 1978**

Will the typical Australian please stand up? If he won't David Williamson will have to stand up for him. That, it seems, is David Williamson's main function as an Australian playwright: to introduce the typical Australian male to himself.

Rodney Fisher, who has directed the premiere performance of David Williamson's last three plays, *The Department*, *A Handful of Friends* and *The Club*, says: 'Williamson has significantly altered my perception of my fellow Australians.' ...

'Williamson', he says, 'is not a caricaturist. He has disturbed a subculture in which the world of private lives and wives has taken a back seat to a preoccupation long since grown to obsessional proportions.' ('The Play in the Theatre', in *The Club*, Sydney 1978, p. 76).

So it is the subtext—what the characters unconsciously reveal—that is most important...

The subtext represents Aussie Rules as ritual and tribal, a continuing initiation, renewal and celebration of the rites of masculinity. A contempt for women is implicit in the whole play. One character is revealed as an unrepentant, life-long wife beater. Another beats up a stripper:

She egged me on all through her act. Eyed me off, stroked my hair, asked me to take off her garter—played the vamp for all she was worth. But when I went backstage she switched it all off. Treated me as if I was dirt under her feet. Nobody treats me like that, Laurie, least of all a little trollop like that, I'm an official of the greatest football club in this history of the game and I won't have some little slut laugh in my face.

For the obsessionist sport is not a sublimation of sex, it's a substitute for it. It fits in well with women-hating, mateship, wife-beating and poofter-bashing. It takes up the whole

libido drive. For the player it may be 'risking a fractured skull or a ruptured spleen for the amusement of overweight drunks in the grandstand bar'. For the man who has never been any good at football, but who, like one of Williamson's characters, has watched every game of his team since he was six years old, it can be bottled-up aggression, envy, hatred and an overmastering urge to dominate all those who can do what he can't do but would give his ears to. Williamson may be right that all this pent-up fury spills over into all areas of the masculine world, that it is the meaning and motive of the power game, however played. Whatever it is, it makes good raw drama, even though it horrifies when we think about it twice.

**Garrie Hutchinson, *Theatre Australia*, 3, 12 July, 1979**

The first time I saw it I was as impressed with its serious moments as I was with the retelling of jokes, stories and personalities that anyone interested in football would know. But those jokes were some of the things going for it in Melbourne. The relationship between real coaches, recruits, presidents etc. and the ones in the play was evident, twisted nicely and friendly enough to get away with. In Melbourne it is a local play... I've got no idea how a New Yorker or someone from Sydney would approach it, whether they would find any resonance in it at all. I'm from Melbourne.

Second time around, these localising resonances, the relationship of giant Melbourne icons to us smaller spirits, and the 'realness' of the play, seem less important, both in the play and in the production.

Taking the play first. On a personal note, I well recall Williamson (then an earnest Melburnian) taking the idea around the traps looking for reassurance from football fevered scribes and artistes. It was much debated at the time. Some actors said they would have nothing to do with it because it wasn't true, or at least wasn't true enough. Other worthies thought they'd wait for the actual one and only Great Australian Football Play. And some motivated by malice more than anything else felt it would be a flop and they wouldn't have anything to do with one of those. So much for that judgement!

A high-powered luncheon was even organised in the basement of the legendary

Grace Darling Hotel, where the Collingwood Football Club was founded, so that Williamson might have access to the Real Stuff, Genuine Leatherbound, Old Gold, Mud and Blood Stained, Tried and True Stories. I will treasure for as long as Carlton is synonymous with great beer and great football the sight of Dave and Captain Blood, Jack Dyer, swapping yarns over a glass or two of '63 Penfolds Bin 389.

I mention this because *The Club* is and was regarded as important to Melbourne. Now, however, the Gissing of Glen Waverly has departed for sinful Sydney, and the play is restaged. Tarnished by Sydney and New York and Washington, it runs like a well-oiled tram. And like a replay of a game you've been at, it's a bit predictable. Not in the simple sense of knowing the story, but in the sense that the things in the play that transcended the narrative (hooray for the subtext) like characters and clashes of values have disappeared. I still think that they were there when I first saw *The Club*.

### **Richard Coe, *Washington Post*, 20 July, 1978**

Although the territory may seem familiar, playwright David Williamson has created universal characters and recognisable situations, a world in the microcosm of struggles for power in the management of a football team. Tightly written and splendidly played by an American cast... the play reveals a dramatist with far more on his mind than the picture-lined boardroom of a distant ball club...

Having outlined his characters through terse, often very funny dialogue, Williamson then proceeds to skin his men alive, getting into their true drives and into how deviously men will plot for power.

It is this dramatic skill which gives the play its power to absorb. While one may give more than a passing thought as to what goes on in the Redskins' boardroom (and for those who can remember them, that of the Washington Senators), the tensions come from the men as ordinary, self-protecting humans. While it can't be said that there are no villains here, Williamson shrewdly has poured humanity into all his men.

### **Richard Carter, *Prince George's Post*, Washington, 27 July, 1978**

The uneasy, often rocky marriage between art and politics is given definition, breadth and insight in David Williamson's new play *Players*, now at the Eisenhower Theatre in the Kennedy Center.

Much local promotion of this fine play has been calling it a comedy. *Players* is no more a comedy than *Deep Throat* is a film about nursing. *Players* uses laughs—lots of them—to underscore the essential allegorical nature of the play. The give and take, the bargaining, the favours paid for, future favours promised. And above all, the compromise of personal and institutional integrity for personal greed and gain...

Williamson's script is pared down to bare essentials, like the difference between Marx and Hegel. The play moves with force and drive. The interaction between characters is caught with tremendous human subtlety and nuance... Williamson certainly knows how to tell a story. He never lets you take your mind off what is going on onstage...

Though I found the audience around me laughing a lot (laughing at every off-colour remark made by Fred Gwynne as Jock) I laughed little. The remarks themselves are only on the surface, for they speak of a basic corruption in these men (if not all men) that goes much deeper. And such remarks are merely the frosting on the cake of serious personal insecurity—a thin cosmetic over souls eaten away with rust.

What is so revealing in Williamson's story, and so true, is the absolute gullibility of these people—gullible even to the point of being convinced of the ludicrous. And in their gullibility they reveal their own secrets, hidden truths: Jock's impotence, for instance.

Two things in this play worth remembering are this; first, the people who want to control the team do not want it to be successful. They themselves are more comfortable with criticising a coach who has not been successful, while at the same time refusing to give him the resources to be so. The same principle applies in so many other areas of political and economic life. Inflation, for example, will always exist while those at the top are untouched by it...

Secondly, Williamson's play reveals a deep truth about life. That there is no such thing as

black and white. There are no real enemies, and no real friends, there are no guys all bad, and there are no guys all good. Except maybe guys like Gerry Cooper. Gerry Cooper just doesn't have a soul. And he is the embodiment of what Hanna Arendt called, 'the banality of evil'.

**Sibylle Wirsing, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 January, 1979**

The great virtue of the Berlin production is the absence of compassion. It satirises the pathos of a too tender view of the sports milieu. The senior member of the club, who mouths the most pious mottoes about team spirit, tradition and fair play, is casually unmasked as the worst cheat. Beside him, the low comedian, the representatives of cold calculation emerge as the aristocrats of the group since they don't insist in a bourgeois way on mistaking prostitution for heroism. The young sportsman who has sold himself to the club for a monstrous sum... and who declares—worthily, like an Oscar Wilde figure—that he really can't stand the rugby scrum in the dirt and mud, almost arouses our sympathy. The director has him played in an absolutely unathletic manner with the grandeur of the chosen, who regards it as tremendous fun to walk over the faces of the prostrate mob...

There is no one who does not lose out on all counts, who is not marvellously enhanced by personal ruin. The club's president, played as an inflated Dame, is ready to sink napkin-soft to his knees while still standing comparatively upright. The coach, too, is bankrupt... from the start mimes the strong man while not hiding the weakling. And the team captain, poor guy, although still listed at the top of the stock market, has already had it. Finally the club elder remains, with a tinny heart of gold and an iron self-regard. He is allowed to rise to glory as a mascot, only because it is not worth bothering to give him the final shove.

So *The Club* is not a play about football... What it's really about, though, is a small bureaucracy and how it works. (Garrie Hutchinson, *Theatre Australia*)

I couldn't take this play seriously for a moment. (Greg Curran, *Nation Review*)

If you do not ask for more than light entertainment from the theatre, you could do worse than this. (John Simon, *New York*)

And what indeed is that ever-glorious essence in Williamson's ingenious mind? It is the very heart and soul of human life as it courageously struggles with that age-old battle of the flesh (human lust and power) and the spirit (human virtue and honour)... (Norman Charles, *New York Graphic*)

## 4. Questions for discussion

1. How wide-ranging are the themes of *The Club*? You could consider in your assessment some of these remarks by reviewers:

While it is a play about football—and totally accessible at that level—it has reverberations well beyond the football field. (Leonard Radic, *Age*)

2. The walls of most football clubs bear a sign proclaiming that 'The club is greater than the individual'. Consider its meaning and application in relation to *The Club*.
3. To what extent does *The Club* seek and offer answers to the following questions: 'Why chase a lump of pigskin?'; 'Why win premierships?'. What is the place of sentiment in *The Club*? Consider especially the decline and fall of Ted in this light.
4. How far do you think moral judgments in the play are determined by Laurie's values? Do you agree with Barry Oakley's view that Laurie provides a fulcrum of integrity, a moral framework in which the crude aggressions of the others can be contained?
5. How far are the men of *The Club* simply caricatures? Do you think the question is important?
6. '*The Club* is almost all plot. All the unnecessary details operate against convincing characterisations.' (Greg Curran). Do you agree?
7. How illuminating is *The Club* on the forms of male relationships in our society?
8. Adrian Wintle, reviewing the Wagga production, found a 'dualism' of 'superficially slapstick comedy' and 'a struggle of ethics' in *The Club*; 'an achievement gained, I think, somewhat at the expense of a certain human quality in the writing'. Discuss.

9. How far do you think *The Club* is open to interpretation in particular productions? You might take these comments as a starting point:

John Meillon's Jock 'is an almost tragic figure' (Bruce Knappet, *Theatre Australia*)

Depressingly, Laurie loses out in the end to the manipulators, and the awful Jock gains control.

Geoff's joke and the concluding high jinks 'send the audience out in a mood of euphoria that I suspect is alien to the playwright's intentions'.

(Barry Oakley, *National Times*)

## 5. Further reading

### On David Williamson

Arnold, Roslyn, 'Aggressive Vernacular: Williamson, Buzo and the Australian Tradition'. *Southerly* 35. 4, 1975.

Fitzpatrick, Peter, *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama Since 1955*. Melbourne, 1979.

Holloway, Peter (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Drama, Perspectives Since 1955*. Sydney, 1980. This book includes reprints of the articles by Roslyn Arnold, Brian Kiernan and Margaret Williams listed here.

Kiernan Brian, 'Games People Play: The Development of David Williamson'. *Southerly*, 35. 3, 1975.

Rees, Leslie, *A History of Australian Drama*. 2 vols. Sydney, 1978.

Williams, Margaret, 'Mask and Cage: Stereotype in Recent Drama'. *Meanjin*, 31, 3, September 1972.

### On *The Club*

Armstrong, Madeleine, 'David Williamson's *The Club*'. *Quadrant* XX11, March 1978.

Fitzpatrick, Peter, 'Williamson's *The Club*: Punches Behind the Play'. *Viewpoints* 79, ed. Brian McFarlane, Melbourne 1979.

Holloway, Peter, '*The Club*', *Insights* 80, ed. B. A. Creed and I. O'Loughlin, Melbourne 1979.

Williamson, David, 'My Life and Times in the Big Apple'. *Theatre Australia*, 3, 6, January 1979. The article includes some quotable quotes from U.S. reviews.

### Reviews

Reviews of productions of *The Club* are listed in the Annual Bibliography of Australian Literature, *Australian Literary Studies*, 1978 and 1979. The reader is referred in particular to the following:

#### On Melbourne productions

Leonard Radic, Age, 28 May 1977. Ian Robinson, *National Times*, 6-11 June 1977.

Garrie Hutchinson, *Theatre Australia*, 2, 3, July 1977; and 3, 12, July 1979.

#### On Sydney productions

Frances Kelly, *Australian*, 9 December 1977.

Barry Oakley, *National Times*, 12-17 December 1977.

Greg Curran, *Nation Review*, 22-28 December 1977.

#### Other productions

Adrian Wintle, Wagga, *Theatre Australia*, 3, 4, November 1978.

Bruce Knappet, Newcastle, *Theatre Australia*, 3, 8, March 1979.