

# DRAMA

## Australian Contemporary Theatre

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### To what extent are the plays you have studied a reflection of Australian society.

David Williamson's *The Removalist* is a truly accurate reflection of 1970s Australia through its use and manipulation of content, language, setting and character. As Williamson himself says, "If you don't find this deeply Australian, then I suggest you watch an Australian rules football match."

The content of *The Removalists* is very confronting in its depiction of the real Australia. Williamson explains that what he was attempting to say was "Beware of the dark human impulses. Beware what lurks under the surface." The result is the deconstruction of the apparently light-hearted Australia. The issues explored in *The Removalists* were not only topical at the time it was written, but remain important today. These issues include corruption in the police force, sexual and physical assault, alcoholism, and the male-dominated society; or, as a Chicago reviewer puts it, "Williamson shows us the nihilistic abuse of power, sex and liquor that have characterized [sic] Australia."

Williamson has managed to capture the essence of Australian dialogue in both matter and manner; that is, what is said and how. The language of *The Removalists* mirrors that of the average working-class Australian: informal, colloquial and embedded with profanities; "Takes more than a couple of mug cops to keep Kenny Carter raising the old bull moose". The use of colloquialisms, in combination with rhyming slang and idioms, encapsulate Australia's iconic relaxed manner, as well as its – perhaps more accurate – laziness. The profanities again reflect this manner, but often possess a sinister tone beneath their use. As Roslyn Arnold reiterates, "The use of four-letter words, abusive terms and ribald imagery is a feature of the Australian drama... It strikes down into the preoccupations and motivations of the characters, sheds light on social rituals, and raises questions about contemporary Australian life."

Set in the city of Melbourne, as opposed to the stereotypical beach or farm, *The Removalists* does not follow the conventions of a typical Australian drama. Yet, this only serves it to be a better reflection of Australian society, as the majority of the population reside in urban areas – contrary to international belief.

Not only are the characters representations of the Australian working class, but truths about our nation's society can also be found by observing the relationships and interactions between these characters. Williamson didn't write a play about the farmer or the beach goer; he used the majority, the middle class, allowing the audience to see themselves within the play's content. As journalist Robert Dessaix commented, "... we think of you as a story teller to us about us." With characters who subvert the stereotype follows real depictions of real people, even if our culture doesn't want to admit it. Kenny Carter is the classic example. While he initially appears to be the loud and drunken, but harmless, larrikin, his deeper, darker demeanour is later revealed. Furthermore, the relationship between Simmonds and Ross is reflective of the prevalence of authority abuse and police brutality within Australia, as well as the existence of unhealthy worker relationships in which one party attempts to dominate the other. Simmonds' quote, "There's one person in authority here and that's me", exemplifies this point.

*The Chapel Perilous* also reflects Australian society, in its content, language, setting and character, but it does so in a far more abstract manner.

*The Chapel Perilous* was written in 1971, during the midst of the sexual revolution and the feminist movement. Sally, herself, is a young woman, exploring herself, experimenting as a sexual being, and challenging the status quo of women – as many did at the time. As she says herself, she is "a rebel in word and deed." During this period of social and political change, *The Chapel Perilous* was

mirroring society; its struggles, its fears, its experiments and its rebellions. In fact, Sally was a metaphor for all Australian women of the 1970s who struggled to be heard or treated as equal human beings. The play also explores other issues such as abortion, socialism, war and adultery, which were all very topical at the time. Additionally, as the play extends over a number of years, from the 1920s to the 1960s, references have been made to a notable event in world history which corresponds to the date of the current action. These provide context for each stage of Sally's life and serve as a literal reflection of Australian society and history.

The language used in *The Chapel Perilous* does not follow the conventions that Australian society has adopted and as Williamson did in *The Removalists*. Instead, it is rather generic and could belong to any nation or any culture. The only language feature that hints at it being an Australian play is the use of profanities and, even then, those used are not what you would typically expect from an Australian drama.

*The Chapel Perilous* is set in regional Western Australia. While this is a stereotypical Australian location, it has become a stereotype because it is true; small, country towns make up a large portion of Australia's landscape. Specifically, the play is set in a church, an accurate representation of the traditional, predominantly Christian society of the 1920s and 1930s – the decades in which the play is set.

While the characters of *The Chapel Perilous* subvert the stereotypes that are often associated with the nation's population, they still accurately depict real Australian personalities. Sally is a reflection of many Australian women at the time who were experimenting with and exploring their sexuality; her mother and father reflect many Australian parents at the time who feared these experiments and explorations; and the authority figures reflect the stance of the Australian conservatives who, too, felt their traditional ideologies were being threatened.

### **How do these plays accept or reject the conventions of Australian theatre? And why?**

David Williamson simultaneously accepts and rejects conventions of Australian theatre, all the while trying to increase the realism of *The Removalists*. Australian theatre is typically realistic in style, has stereotypical characters and a hero, follows a simplistic plot development, and explores non-confrontational issues. The fact that the play doesn't follow all the conventions of a realistically-styled play, however, only increases its realism.

David Williamson has made a deliberate decision to conform with the majority of Australian theatre in making *The Removalists* realistic in style; its realism extending to its use of time, space, language, movement, character and tension. In the 1970s, many of the issues explored in *The Removalists* – issues such as domestic violence – were widely ignored and dismissed by the collective community, let alone discussed through a public medium like theatre. For some watching *The Removalists*, they would be witnessing acts that they had never witnessed before; for others, the play would have served as a mirror, depicting their own lives upon the stage. Thus, through its realism, the situations in *The Removalists* become real and the shock factor – the entire purpose of the play – dramatically increases. No other style could have been used and still maintained the same level of tension, achieved the same effect or evoked the same reaction.

Typically, in Australian theatre, the audience will be presented with stereotypes, and will be able to distinctly define who the protagonist is and who the antagonist is. The characters portrayed in *The Removalists* meet none of this criterion. Instead of depicting the "bronzed Aussie", *The Removalists* follows a day in the life of the middle class and the police; and instead of depicting a hero and a villain, the middle class and the police have characteristics of both, often switching between the two. Williamson reflects that "... the working class hero was just as bad, venal, sexist and horrible as the police man." Ross is the classic example. He is introduced to the audience as innocent, naive, and one who follows the rules established by his authorities. Yet, it is Ross who eventually breaks these rules, transforming himself from a new recruit to a murderer. Despite the depiction of a hero in the

realism style, there is not always a hero in reality. Williamson's intent was to reveal Australia's secrets and, in turn, to shock. Thus, he had to investigate the human psyche and reveal the capabilities that exist in all of us – a much more realistic view than the one too often presented in idealistic fairytales and the like. This raw truth leaves the audience questioning their own morality and not knowing who to support.

While *The Removalists* has a clear beginning, middle and end, and develops chronologically, it somewhat strays from the traditional “climax and resolution.” The play's climatic peak is destroyed when it is revealed that Kenny did not actually die from Ross' attacks, with his “second” death leaving the audience confused and the play unresolved. This rejection of convention supports Williamson's premise that there are no guarantees and always surprises; no easy solutions and always complications; that there is no such thing as a happy ending.

Finally, while the issues explored in *The Removalists* are relevant to Australia and the time, they are not the standard issues that are generally written about and performed in theatre. *The Removalists* discusses issues that are confrontational and in a way that is aptly confronting. Not only does this, as mentioned previously, show the hidden side to Australian life, but it also raises a number of questions about domestic violence, police brutality and sexism, which David Williamson believed that the ever changing political and social climate of the 1970s would be able to accept and respond to.

Dorothy Hewett was once quoted as saying, “Our characters, our themes, our sensibilities, our language, are not foreign to the rest of the world... but they do have certain indigenous qualities,” and it is these indigenous qualities, or Australian conventions, that Hewett has generally dismissed in her work. *The Chapel Perilous* is, without a doubt, an unconventional play.

*The Chapel Perilous* employs a range of different styles, simultaneously accepting and rejecting the conventions of Australian theatre. While the play begins as an epic one, with Sally apparently about to embark on a great task, it quickly introduces features of Greek theatre, in the chorus, and of musicals, in the playing of songs. Comedy and satire, in characters such as Sissy Funt; Brechtian, in the encouraged involvement of the audience; and realism, in each of the love scenes, are also utilised. Some styles are justified based on the content of a particular scene; for example, the use of realism emphasises the tender and raw emotions of young love; however, others appear to be randomly included. It is these “other” styles that make it difficult to justify Hewett's choices. Perhaps Sally's quote provides us with some insight: “It's [life] not just a set of rules... It's all we got and I'm going to live it to the fullest stretch of my imagination”. Perhaps the combination of styles reflects the unpredictable nature of life and the different emotions that Sally experiences during the different stages of her life.

Sally is not a stereotypical character; she is a real human being and could be any number of women in the audience. While she is very clearly the protagonist, the hero, the audience does not always perceive her in a good light due to her many flaws and the many mistakes she has made. The use of Brechtian-style theatre at the end of the play, where Sally speaks directly to the audience during her “interrogation”, encourages them to judge her. This is unconventional as, in the majority of Australian theatre, we are made to empathise with and understand the main character – which is true for most of this play. However, in this final scene, we take the position of society, and we question the morality of all that she has done and been through. We are led to conclude, however, that she is justified in her actions and that society has judged her, and many others like her, far too harshly. We respect her for “walking naked”; for approaching life with both vulnerability and courage.

The plot of *The Chapel Perilous* has no consideration for time, with the play often jumping from one time in Sally's life and one period in Australian history to another. It is also cyclical in structure, beginning as it ends. In this sense, it is not a conventional play. We can only speculate the reason for Hewett's choice; however, some may say that it is a reflection of Sally's own meandering, often confused journey to discover who she is and where she belongs in this world that is so unlike her.

Like Williamson, Hewett has also disregarded Australian theatre's tendency to explore issues that are non-confrontational. Instead, she has explored such concerns as homosexuality, suicide and abortion, which were taboo at the time – and, even now, still offend certain factions of society. The risqué journey of Sally is summarised when she says, "Six lovers, one attempted suicide, one wedding later, is that surprising?" Dorothy Hewett believed that society needed to be open and honest about such issues and that they should not be ignored solely because they made people feel uncomfortable. She was simply reflecting the time of political and social change, and she was reflecting her audience.

### **How do these plays manipulate dramatic techniques to achieve their intended effects on audience?**

David Williamson has used and manipulated language, time and movement to create a confronting and shocking piece of drama.

The language of *The Removalists* has been very deliberately chosen to shock the audience. To begin with, profanities play a significant role in the play. While they are embedded throughout the entire text, it is important to note the way in which they build in weight. The opening scene begins with words such as "bloody" and "arsehole", and so, after the initial shock, the audience becomes acquainted with the nature of the play. However, as the play progresses and the audience begin to feel comfortable with the language, the characters suddenly exchange different, more vibrant four-letter words, brutally interrupting the viewer from their false sense of security. Other significant language techniques include the use of violent and sexual imagery. Violent imagery encapsulates the abundance of aggression evident in Australia and especially in the occasionally corrupt penal system; "Look. Piss off or I'll spray the back of your throat with teeth." – Kenny. Combined with the actual violence, this makes for a very confronting, uncomfortable play. The use of sexual imagery also shocks the audience. At a time when women were protesting for their rights and perceived progress was finally being made, the use of sexual imagery makes the audience realise that not much has changed. The audience is confronted by the way Kenny treats the woman he is supposed to love and by the way the authorities speak about and trivialise the women they are supposed to protect; "She came 5 times in the one grapple." – Kenny (of Fiona). Finally, the use of humour in the removalist's repetition – "I've got ten thousand dollars worth of machinery tickin' over out there" – contrasts vividly with the vicious attacks from the other males, emphasising the latter and making the audience regret their previous laughter.

The play is realistic in its timing, with the sequence of events occurring in a single day. In combination with the other dramatic techniques, this causes the audience to feel as though they are witnessing actual events on an actual afternoon, thus increasing the shock. The suppression and quick relay of events also create a certain sense of suspense and heighten the tension.

Finally, David Williamson has very strongly directed his characters in their movements and reactions, as detailed in italics. The movement mirrors the language, in that there is an abundance of both sexual gestures and violence. Not only is Kenny very openly sexual towards his wife, but the intent of the police officers is not entirely pure either. Simmonds requests Fiona to roll up her sweater and skirt, so Ross can take photographic evidence of her abuse. She does so, in what is later described as an "air of sensuality". The audience is sickened by the way the police and Kate, her own sister, are "gaining perverse sensual pleasure" at the expense of a victim of domestic violence. The violence is constant and graphic; however, what is worse is the violence that occurs off stage, out of view from the audience. While unseen, it can be heard, and so, with the aid of their imagination, the audience presumably conjures up an image that is worse than reality. Williamson is very clever with his manipulation of human nature.

Hewett, too, has craftily manipulated language, time and symbol and, in doing so, has also manipulated her audience.

Each character in *The Chapel Perilous* has a very distinctive way of speaking. While Sally is poetic and educated, for example, many of her lovers are vulgar, informal and aggressive. These traits are often juxtaposed through the characters' conversations. There is also an incredible amount of sexual language – some of which evokes disturbing imagery. An example is “I see a vagina ringed with decayed teeth.” The psychologist echoes the audience's perspective when he says “Never admit how shocked you are” – which is exactly how we are designed to feel and exactly how we do feel. The sexual language reflects Sally's sexual awakening, which, at times, can be disturbing, itself.

Time is another dramatic technique that Hewett has employed. *The Chapel Perilous* takes place over a 45 year period, approximately, which adds to the epic style previously discussed. Some characters continue to reappear without respect for the passing of time or the fact that they have already left Sally's life. The scenes lack a logical, chronological order, with the play regularly jumping forth through time and back again. The combined effect of this causes the audience to feel as though their theatrical journey is inextricably linked to confusion and so, they become empathetic of Sally's own confused journey to discover who she is and where she belongs. Also significant is the use of the amplifier, who helps to establish the context of a scene through references to significant world events. This provides the audience with a little more understanding of where Sally currently is and what she is experiencing.

Finally, symbolism plays a fundamental role in this play and is evident on a number of levels – in character, mask, setting, and song. Each actor plays more than one character, with the exception of Sally and Michael, who represent individuals in a uniform, conformist world. The three masks represent the headmistress, canon and Sister Rosa, who each, in turn, represent the authority imposing on Sally's life. However, while they are all authority figures, they differ greatly in personality and purpose. When another character emerges from beneath a mask, they develop the characteristics of the respective figure. The main setting of the play is, as the title suggests, the chapel perilous. The chapel acts as a sanctuary for Sally from the hostility of the world; however, it, too, can be hostile and repressive. It is within the chapel that she is brought to trial, found guilty for challenging the status quo, and severely judged by both society and the audience. Each of the songs in *The Chapel Perilous* serves a specific purpose, either complimenting or juxtaposing the action on stage. For example, the erotic song “The Good Ship Venus” is played at Sally's wedding, a ceremony which is typically romantic. The obvious contrast suggests Sally's future sexual scandals.

### **What challenges do these plays provide to a contemporary performer. Explain your answer.**

All three challenges faced by a contemporary performer relate to the relevance of *The Removalist*. Firstly, they must establish a way to make the play's issues relevant to a contemporary audience. The social, political and historic context of the play is fundamental to its purpose. Williamson wanted to write a play that both encapsulated and revealed the hidden secrets of Australia and the hidden futility and naivety of the protests at the time. However, his play is not now redundant due to this. Instead, its purpose has changed from educating to reminding. Most people perceive the play as an indication of the struggles of society in the 1970s, but the reality is that the issues are still as prevalent today. Domestic violence, gender inequality and male dominance, racism, the abuse of authority and police brutality still underlie Australian society – just because they have improved doesn't automatically eradicate the problems. Thus, one challenge is making the audience understand that the concerns explored aren't just a thing of the past, but are still happening today – in a society that is supposedly fair and just.

The second challenge is making the play shock as it is intended to. *The Removalists* shocked its audience as it discussed issues that weren't normally discussed. Now, Australian society is very aware of the issues that exist, but many are desensitised, unconcerned as they are not personally involved, do not understand the extent of the problem, or simply ignore it completely. While there is doubt the play is able to shock as it used to, if the audience is properly educated on the issues it would have something of its intended effect.



Finally, much of the language was designed to be understood by generations past, but with the passing of time, some has become redundant or obsolete. Thus, the language – most notably, the colloquialisms, idioms, rhyming slang and terminology – may have to be updated so as to make sense to a contemporary viewer. The same applies to the profanities, some of which are now so commonplace that they do not concern society as they used to.

The Chapel Perilous also poses a number of challenges when performed in a contemporary environment.

The first is making the ideas explored relevant to a contemporary audience. As critic and publisher Katharine Brisbane said, “Most [playwrights] are a little ahead of their audiences, but Dorothy was far too ahead of hers. Only now are they beginning to understand her.” While this is true in regards to the manner in which the play is performed – that is, as an unconventional, untraditional, radical piece of theatre – it does not apply to the content. Modern society is very complacent and open with their sexuality and sexual experimentation, which are the two major themes of *The Chapel Perilous*. Thus, we do not understand the magnitude of Sally’s rebellion, nor do we understand the plight of Australian women in achieving the rights that we enjoy. Having said that, however, I do not believe the play is totally irrelevant. Women still struggle with their sexuality, society still possesses double standards, and women are still scorned for doing the same as their male counterparts. In this sense, I think they would be understanding and sympathetic of Sally’s struggles. Besides, it is always important to remind and educate the younger generations on Australian history, and the fact that significant steps like this just didn’t happen – they were fought for.

Secondly, the challenge of transitional acting does not specifically and solely apply to a contemporary performer; rather, it would have challenged all those who have chosen to perform *The Chapel Perilous*. However, it is a concern that must be addressed and skilfully incorporated into a performance. As the play was written with transitional acting in mind, we know that it is possible. It is just a matter of thoroughly considering the staging, positioning of character, and perhaps even lighting. Transitional acting also poses a challenge when it comes to the development and sustainment of several characters, very different in nature.

Finally, the historic and cultural references, spoken by the amplifier, enable the audience to follow the timing of the story. However, forty years later, they are no longer as effective as many do not extensively know the history that became before. Thus, it would be challenging to inform the audience of the date of a certain scene and the context surrounding that date, and therefore that scene, using this particular method.

Good writing – and both these plays are exceptionally well written – and good performance always have the ability to shock, no matter what the era. *The Chapel Perilous* and *The Removalists* are as important to Australia as they were when they were written.