

DRAMA

In what ways do Australian plays engage their audiences in the concerns and culture of Australia through their ideas and images on the stage?

In your answer refer to your study and experience of TWO texts set for Australian Drama and Theatre.

The concerns and culture of Australian plays engage audiences through the depth of their characters, vivid storytelling, the creation of setting and exploration of the psychological. In Matt Cameron's play, *Ruby Moon*, the Australian culture of the new suburban Australia is tackled through the Prologue scene, while the underlying fear of the Australian nation is captured in the Epilogue scene. Furthermore, the contrast between these scenes contributes to the image used to portray these concerns. In Jane Harrison's play, *Stolen*, the audience are taken back to the Stolen Generation time, and are invited to watch the concerns of Aboriginal people, such as racism, that have long been in the Australian nation's minds. Like *Ruby Moon*, a fear of white Australians by the Aborigines is demonstrated. This is presented in the Racial Insults and Mungie scenes. It is through these plays and scenes that audiences are engaged by the concerns and culture of Australia.

Cameron uses and plays with the idea of the new and emerging Australian husband and wife through stereotyping. In the Prologue scene of *Ruby Moon*, when I played Sylvie, I tried to bring an element of fear and naivety to my role. When I blocked Sylvie's domestic role, I remember sitting in the large, red armchair, feeling very small and like a child. I evoked an atmosphere of hysteria by my waiting for Ray through my unnerving finger tapping that made the audience feel unease. When Ray came through the door, I leapt off my armchair to greet him, and began to say my lines with a frantic edge. I played an internal struggle to escape from Ray, or begin the usual sequence of events and this is through my ignorance of Ray's repetitious questioning throughout the play, "Do I get a kiss?" I was trying, as Sylvie to break away from the "usual" and I tried desperately to "move on" to Ray and my "scripted lines". Confusion was created in the audience when Ray and I began our "scripted lines": "It's raining cats and dogs" to which Ray replies, "Animals are pelting from the sky." Yet, through the formal conversational language between the two characters, the Australian stereotype: the swearing, rough, Australian is extinguished. The audience thus recognises the emergence of a new "Australian identity". Through the stereotypical roles of Ray and Sylvie, both old concerns of gender and new concerns of gender and the "Australian" are evoked.

However, in Harrison's *Stolen*, storytelling is utilised to illustrate to the audience images of the Dreamtime stories to reflect the wider issue of the Aboriginal fear of the white Australians. In the Sandy's story of the Mungie scene, the fourth wall was down and Sandy enraptured the audience through using sweeping movements across the space of the stage. In the audience, I felt as though I had been brought into a tight circle rather than sitting with the other members of the audience and spread out across the seats of the stage. Sandy's soft voice captured the attention of the audience, further making the audience feel as though they were listening to the beginning of a very exciting story. When Sandy became the Mungie, the white "monster", dramatic tension was created in the audience as Sandy leapt into the audience and began to "munch" on the audience members' arms and fingers. When this happened to me, I felt very fearful and I came to the realisation that this fear was what the Aboriginal people had felt when the white Australians took their children away. When Sandy danced across the stage, slapping his hands with white paint, representing the "white powered magic bone", a very powerful image of the Mungie as the white Australian man made the audience empathise with Sandy and consequently the Stolen Generation. Through Sandy's closing lines, "And the people would never forget," I thought I really would never forget the pain and fear of the Aboriginal people and the Stolen Generation. When Sandy accentuated the word, "never", it made the audience aware that the concern of the Aboriginal people and their invasion by white Europeans was still of continuing relevance today.

Furthermore, in the scene Racial Insults, the continued effect of being “stolen” away from their families is expressed. In particular, Jimmy’s identity and his mind. In this scene, the audience felt the impact of the extent of the pain and suffering Jimmy had experienced when he began to scream out insults to an invisible white Australian, “Lily white cunt,” and, “White supremacist.” His exposure to such language in his short lifetime highlights the extent of life he has been through. The audience begins to realise Jimmy has lost his mind and although they feel sympathy for him, they cannot stop him from committing suicide. When Jimmy’s head snapped forward from the noose, I felt shock ripple through the audience. The audience was very still and silent. A very unsettling atmosphere was created in the audience when Jimmy, after committing suicide, lifted his head and ended the scene with, “they put a knife into me heart and twisted it so hard.” The audience envisaged this image in their own hearts and the extent of the Aboriginal peoples’ suffering was made very clear. Through storytelling and the exploration of the psychological, audiences are engaged by the concern of racism and fear of the Aborigines.

Cameron’s contrast in the final scene of Ruby Moon engages audience members of the concern of underlying fear and mistrust in Australia. When Sylvie emerged from behind the curtains in Ruby’s red dress, the audience recoiled. Initially in the play, the image of the dress was a symbol of innocence but transformed by the end of the play to symbolise corruption. When this occurred, I could hear the audience members gasp and recoil as they felt repulsion, disgust and utter disbelief at what or who Sylvie had become. Ray’s role as a father searching for his missing child is put into question when he takes Sylvie (as Ruby) onto his lap and begins to kiss her passionately. This further shocked the audience and suggested that Ray was not as innocent as he originally was portrayed as. This scene’s image provides sexual connotations between a father and a daughter, which made the audience extremely uncomfortable. The kiss highlighted total mistrust in society as it emphasised the lack of trust to those who we are closest to. Through symbolism, an underlying fear is conveyed as part of the Australian culture.

Through Ruby Moon and Stolen, the concerns and culture of Australia including racism, the role of the suburban male and female, fear of the white Australians and mistrust are explored. Audiences are engaged through the utilisation of character, storytelling, setting and the psychological. It is through these ideas that the concerns are conveyed and audiences are ultimately engaged.