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STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS

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P R E F A C E

In 1976 five research papers in Australian history, written by second year students in the ordinary History IIB course, were presented in this format. The favourable response that they received suggests that the project is a worthwhile one and it will therefore be continued annually. This year, however, publication of the papers has been undertaken by students under the auspices of the History Club and the S.R.C.

Each year students in this course are asked to investigate some aspect of Australian history, preferably through research in primary sources. They are encouraged to look wherever possible at questions through which light can be thrown on significant problems by the study of local history. Over a hundred such projects were undertaken this year, and the variety of topics as well as the quality of the papers presented was very encouraging.

The papers published here were chosen not only because they are good papers, but also to show the variety of issues that interest students. Many other papers could have been chosen.

Peter Stephens :	Morpeth in the era of the Steamship.
Mary Livingstone :	The First General Strike in the Coal Industry
Adelle Harding :	The Copeland Gold Rush
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Susan Murray :	The Robertson Land Acts
Lynn Rutherford :	The Bellbird Mine Disaster 1923
Peter Jeffrey :	The Paul Bunyans of Cedar Arm

C. Bacchi
P. Hempenstall
N. Rutherford

The works presented in this collection are not only a tribute to their authors, but also to Carol Bacchi, Peter Hempenstall and Noel Rutherford who provided the opportunity, the support, and the encouragement that made it all possible. The History Club is pleased to be associated with such a worthwhile project.

History Club Executive

AUSTRALIAN THEATRE : A REFLECTION OF THE NATIONAL
SELFCONSCIOUSNESS

BY

J. HARRIS

SYNOPSIS:

The 'New Britannia' syndrome with its materialism, lack of radicalism, lack of social involvement, and petty bourgeois inclination can be proved by a study of Australian drama. The fact that Australians refused to accept their own speech patterns on stage, refused to accept the 'bushman', preferring the gentle English sounds of the drawing room, shoots holes in Russel Ward's myth. The left-wing New Theatre League which successfully produced 'Reedy River', the all Australian musical, saw fit to publish a glossary of the expressions, the 'ockerisms', used, on the programme.

Newcastle has had a tradition of theatre, and it is with regret that more of this tradition did not find its way into the paper. But while working on the research it became more important to search out the nature of Australiana, the ostrich quality, the quality that McQueen defines so well. The paper attempts to argue that no national theatre has been established because no real national feeling, no real community spirit has emerged. What the drama has shown in the late sixties and early seventies is violence, materialism, alcoholism, racism, a hollow tradition of mateship and Anzac, and an overall feeling of insecurity. Australians have never had a real liking for the drama, nor a desire to establish a National Theatre, for the Nation's immaturity has manifested itself in its people's desire to see themselves as they 'would like to be', rather than as they are.

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Australia's first inhabitants, her aborigines had a vital outdoor drama that expressed both their own life style and the nature of their country. The stock of the continent's second and third groups of inhabitants, the convicts and the free settlers, have failed in developing such a national theatre. The convicts, dregs of the London slums, used to protecting 'self first' were a poor base for an institution that demands community involvement. Similarly the free-settlers, while not as 'anti-social' as the convicts, were a mixed bag of opportunists; retired army men who had often sold their commission for a new life in the colonies, disgraced young gentlemen of minor and major families, those down on their luck and hoping to find it, urban tradesmen and capitalists. All these factions had a common aim, to better their own lot. In a new country with no set standard to reach for, yet with a desire for respectability and 'success', they therefore brought with them, and continued to import the cultural and moral values of Britain; "The transplanted culture did not strike quickly in the new soil". (1)

The first theatrical performance in Australia took place on the King's birthday, June 4, 1789; the play "The Recruiting Officer", a hit of the previous London season, was Australia's first 'imported success'. Convicts fittingly served as Australia's first troupe of 'rogues and vagabonds', in a hut fitted out to resemble a theatre 'back home'. It is not surprising that Englishmen transplanted in a new land would wish to set up an institution that was so entrenched in their own culture. English theatre had passed from a mass popular entertainment in the middle-ages, and Elizabethan times, to the aristocratic theatre of the Restoration, to a general acceptance by the growing English middle classes; the English class system was translatable through the seating arrangements in her theatres. What is surprising is that the English tradition lasted so long in the history of Australian theatre; so concerned were Australians in 're-establishing' the values of the 'old country' that moral and cultural as well as monetary value became tied to the pound sterling. The history of theatre in Australia, even through the supposed radical days of the 1890's has been a history of imported successes, and froth and bubble escapist melodrama, until the late 60's early 70's.

During the 1850's an era in which Australia saw massive changes in population, the cessation of transportation, free universal education, the establishment of universities, little theatre of any merit was produced. Although there was a boom in escapist theatre, no drama developed. In fact the argument that there was a boom is often broached on the basis that 'many distinguished actors visited Australia about this time'. Actors and actor managers had discovered there was more than one way to mine colonial gold and 'artists' like Lola Montes flocked into the country to start a tradition that has continued ever since. Theatre in this era was always purely commercial with interest in quick profit with no intent to build up actors or writers. In fact when former patrons of the Prince of Wales theatre began flocking to the gold fields, it was suggested that the theatre, no longer commercial, should be turned into a giant casino. Although the 1850's are often seen as a period in which the national spirit awoke, little of the energy seems to have found its way into the theatre.

Rees in 'The Making of Australian Drama' suggests that in the 1880's Australian plays were produced on a professional scale yet it seems that they received little public support. Although Darrell and Dampier used local colour, incidents and character, the 'Bulletin', the literary voice of early Australia was not impressed. In 1886 of Dampier's adaption of For the Term of His Natural Life it wrote:

"an agony in six convulsive fits with a prologue and several corpses"

Australian audiences were by this time already seeing only what they wanted to see. Robbery Under Arms was an outstanding success in this period because it showed Australians a vision of the myth they believed to be their heritage. The stories of the egalitarianism, the bravery, devilry and sheer manliness of the authority-flouting bush-rangers excited the people, reinforcing the myth. (2)

"The theatre of the time (80's and 90's) was the actors and the managers. It excelled in realistic properties, melodramatic effects and the exploitation of obvious emotions" (3) Rees suggests that the 'admitted inferiority' went back to 'an awareness of convicts in the colonial background'. (4) Rees like McQueen sees the strong link between the convict and the bushranger.

"In a physically vigorous, if mentally unsubtle people, revolt against the convict inheritance took the form of justifying the convicts in song, story and play, asserting that they were 'falsely accused', the victims of a merciless governmental rather than judicial system, with which Australians had no sympathy". (5)

Not only did the convict heritage produce slow community development; it seems possible that fear of 'the stain' closed Australian's eyes to their own worth and potential. An article in the Royal Australian Historical Journal suggests of this early theatre (and is an Australian's view of theatre):

"In fact, in some respects there was better provision in those days (for theatre) than there is now; . . . the plays were much better, not being vehicles for preaching or unfolding some difficult complex in psychology. We went to the theatre for recreation and amusement, and it gave us what we sought". (6)

When the New Victoria Theatre opened in Newcastle in 1876, the colonial wonder at all things British and generally imported was exhibited. From Allan Watkin in the Newcastle Morning Herald 22.3.1966:

"The auspicious occasion demanded a gala opening night . . . Nell, the California Diamond was performed, thousands of people filled the theatre and the street. Long before the rising of the curtain crowds thronged to admire both the internal and external decor".

The leading lady, the report goes on, wore an 'imported gown' from Paris at the cost of £500.

"No theatre in the colonies is more tastefully fitted up or has more through ventilation".

It is perhaps the wonderful 'picture palaces' and 'theatres' that show up the national materialism and insecurity best. If we couldn't produce home grown overseas sensations we could build just as well; the feeling continued as the following taken from the programme of the opening of the Civic Theatre, Newcastle, in 1929 shows:

"The audience has sat spellbound gazing at the wonderful ceiling . . . underneath your feet is further beauty . . . the finest carpets procurable".

"The Louis seat of Milady's boudoir - is a feature of beauty not to be denied".

and finally a description of the 'stalls Grand Promenade':

"a restful vestibule distinguished by the quiet dignity of its appointments . . . while fortunes have been spent, it leaves not the impression of cost, but of culture".

If the buildings could be copied, the 'stars' imported, the culture could be bought; like the piano, theatre buildings are monuments to a petit bourgeois culture borrowed from Britain. (7)

Throughout the 1920's the scrapbook of the Victoria Theatre reveals a continual line of farce, melodrama, revue and vaudville; with the occasional Hamlet, Operatic season, and boxing match. Plays with such intriguing titles as 'Getting Gertie's Garters (a play with a kick for cold nights)', 'Not to-night Dearie' and 'Up in Mabel's Room', billed as 'America's gayest and giddiest farce for the first time in Australia', and followed by 'The Honeymoon Girl', 'London's sparkling musical comedy triumph'. Only one review of an Australian play from the Newcastle Morning Herald on 'The Sentimental Bloke' was to be found, dated 17.1.1928, with Bert Baily as Ginger Mick:

"Mr. C. J. Dennis, the author, struck a note of originality and the audiences were vastly amused by the quaint expressions of Ginger Mick, and Bill . . . Busker, bonzer, struth, coot - are these words latin?"

Theatre prices had been 5/- dress circle, 3/- stalls, 1/- pit when the theatre opened in 1876, on the eve of the depression 'popular prices' or 'peoples prices' were introduced, Dress Circle 1/6, stalls 1/-. Still keeping up the gentile pretense, but in a true spirit of egalitarianism the 'popular prices policy' was explained in the press:

"to allow for reservations of stall seats . . . and those patrons who prefer seats in the lower part of the house are just as sure of a seat as those in the dress circle". (8)

Louis Esson whose name has become one with development of a national drama is a fine example of the Australian mixture of radicalism, nationalism and socialism. Of upper-middle class stock Esson, like so many of his class became the champion of a working class that he didn't understand; and it showed in his plays. Like Australia herself, Esson was full of contradictions; he, like so many other hopeful writers travelled first overseas, then returned to seek solace in the bush. A professed socialist and radical he could write:

"We need a society wherein the man who thinks will be more esteemed than the man who only works". (9)

Yet he also said:

"the factory worker has no spirit of revolt . . . Australia is the country of the satisfied working man . . . a cowardly conservative he hates Internationalism, he is British and imperialistic". (10)

But the nationalist in Esson was stronger than the socialist, and the desire to create an 'elite' stronger than both. Esson in his letters to Vance Palmer writes of meeting D. H. Lawrence, Nov. 23, 1925 and suggests a close tie between them:

"Lawrence's Australian adventure is the most astounding literary episode in the history of the country. Katie may get a letter from him soon". (11)

Esson was very much involved in establishing a new political party, the 'Young Australian Nationalist Party' a party he suggested that would be 'more radical than the workers' and 'more cultural than the conservatives'. Suggesting that the new party would be composed of reformers, radicals, socialists, and Bohemian poets he saw it as helping to create 'a sense of nationhood'. Given the recent research into Lawrence's Australian adventure further research into Esson may also reveal socialist involvement in New Guard activities. Although undoubtedly Esson tried to foster a national drama, particularly with the ill fated pioneer players, he was too fine an example of the national insecurity to succeed. (12)

The era of the 1950's, a time when national confidence and prosperity was mounting, saw developments toward a national theatre. Although the labour Prime Minister Ben Chifflery had promised support for a National Theatre, the funds for setting up what became a shadow of the idea, The Elizabethan Theatre Trust, came from public donations; government funding for the arts always being an uncertain vote catcher. The name 'Elizabethan' itself was somewhat odd, a commemoration of an English Queen's visit for an emerging nation's National Theatre. The Trust never became national in any sense other than it toured companies in every state; and it too pursued a policy of importing the 'best' from overseas, and in producing the classics; largely ignoring developing Australian Drama. Similarly the Union Repertory Company, founded on the campus of the University of Melbourne, never met its aims of training Australian actors, writers and theatre personnel. In the period 1953-59 only five Australian plays were produced by this Company.

It was during the 1950's that the New Theatre League, founded in 1932, began to thrive and encourage radical theatre in Australia. In the University Archives, the Dungeon Theatre Papers suggest that an active New Theatre existed in the basement of the Trades Hall building in Union Street, Newcastle, in the 1950's. Within this collection is a booklet of the history of the New Theatre. Of the boom of theatre in the fifties it says:

"It was part of the general renaissance of art, embedded with the very ardent nationalism which had grown up during the war years. In the tradition of Joseph Furphy, life was very much in 'temper democratic; bias, offensively Australian'". (13)

Much of the clamour for a national theatre came from the New Theatre League; another example of the curious mixture of left and nationalistic sentiments that have always existed in Australian 'radicals'. 'Reedy River' the first 'all Australian' musical was produced by the New Theatre League in the fifties. Although the various New Theatres had had a history of industrial agit-prop theatre, in the thirties and the forties with demonstrations against the loading of the 'Dalfam' in 1938 with scrap for Japan, and with the Glen Davis miner's strike, Reedy River was given an 'outback setting'. 'Reedy River' was so typically Australian that the programme in the Collection reveals a glossary of 'bush slang' on its cover. Yet the New Theatre League, as Rees and Kippax both agree, did do much to foster Australian writers and actors. The League fostered drama by community involvement, by holding such festivals as the 'Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship' and by establishing what is called 'contact' groups; and above all by attempting to produce Australian drama; through trade unions and the general Australian community. (14)

It is typical that Hugh Hunt the English Director recruited to start up the Elizabethan Theatre Trust could see and understand the problems of Australian Theatre. Theatre he writes:

"is not a hobby to indulge the surplus energy of people whose main interests are centred in other activities, or who seek easy access to social position". (15)

As a nation Australia until the late 60's tried to import culture as she imported technical skills and capital equipment; and it could not be done:

"there is no short cut - no cheap way of achievement; nor will success come by borrowing from or imitating other countries". (16)

Hunt also speculated on the value of the Opera House's influence on drama; once again Australia has built a material monument to art rather than art itself. There will be no real drama until Australia 'has broken off this sense of inferiority which at every turn stunts the growth of the arts'. (17)

The theatre 'holding up the mirror' reflects all the New Britannia's inferiorities, particularly her desire to keep up with 'standards' rather than to develop any of her own. Immature nations do not produce drama.

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Paul McGuire, Betty Arnold, Francis Margaret McGuire, The Australian Theatre, Melbourne, 1948, p.4.
- (2) Leslie Rees, The Making of Australian Drama, Sydney, 1973, pp. 20-98.
- (3) Current Affairs Bulletin, "Australian Drama And Theatre", Vol. 22 No. 7, July 1958, p. 116.
- (4) Rees, op-cit., p. 49.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) A. P. Backhouse, "From the Pigeon Holes of my Memory", The Journal of the Royal Historical Society, Vol. 19, p. 40, 1937.
- (7) Information collected from general file on 'theatre' in the Local History Collection – much of which is undated. Newspaper article by Allan Watkins, Newcastle Morning Herald, 23.3.66.
"Victoria Theatre's Last Days" Untitled undated article by Norm Barney. Programme of the Opening of the Civic Theatre, 1929.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) David Walker, "A Bohemian's Progress; Louis Esson in Melbourne, 1904-1914", Meanjin, Dec. 1972, p. 420.
- (10) Ibid, p. 424.
- (11) Vance Palmer, Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre, Melbourne, 1948, p.66.
- (12) Walker op. cit., p.420.
- (13) From a booklet "The New Theatre". Found in Dungeon Theatre Papers, Archives, University of Newcastle, p.11.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Hugh Hunt, The Making of Australian Theatre. Melbourne, 1960, p.2.
- (16) Ibid, p 11.
- (17) Ibid, p. 22.

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