

MERYL TOBIN: David Williamson: Playwright - A Profile

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Tall. 6'7". Thirty-two years of age. Clad in jeans and black leather or vinyl jacket and topped by a curly, but not Afro, mop of dark auburn hair, David Williamson presents a casual but imposing figure. The voice? Educated, but with an Australian flavor rather than cosmopolitan.

To an audience of Monash University students in Victoria he introduces himself as the first Mechanical Engineering graduate of Monash. Others introduce him as "a playwright at the height of his powers who has done more than anyone to revive Australian theatre".

"The audience wants to see reflections of themselves", David Williamson says. "Sure, universality is good, but write of your own society first. Then other countries can see it if they want to."

He says his first three plays were criticized by some because they showed Australians drinking out of beer cans on stage and that this shouldn't be seen overseas. "But this is part of this culture", David Williamson points out.

He laughs as he recalls his play, "Don's Party". "It was about human beings I knew. I put beer-swilling slobs on stage and the beer-swilling slobs of suburbia came to see them." Theatres noticed "Philistines" were turning up because beer glasses were being stolen at interval!

David Williamson believes that only a small part of Australia is reflected in our plays. "'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' was working class Australia, but now we are presenting middle class suburban Australia, tinged with academic type Australia", he says. "Many subcultures are left to be observed."

When asked if people ever recognize themselves in his plays on stage, he mentions a character who was "accused of being underendowed" and who was a "s-t" in the play. "He combines the worst characteristics of about four people", his creator says. "One of the four thought it was him and there were bad feelings between us for two years."

But he also adds, "Some of the actual people depicted in 'Don's Party' should have been perturbed, but weren't. Because actors were signalling a gag coming two seconds before it did, it let audiences off the hook. If it was played naturalistically instead of farcically, there'd be no problem.

"It showed the middle class as s s. But this showed them that they were important enough to be shown. One lady from North Balwyn even sent me a letter saying, 'You send us up so funnily in your plays'." The playwright's expression leaves no doubt that there is more to his intention than this. He certainly doesn't want them to go on being s-s!

"Though 'Don's Party' is aggressively Australian I believe it will appeal to others", says David Williamson. "Universality will occur naturally as our plays prove to be of interest to other nations."

"Don's Party", which is peculiarly Australian, will be going to London this year. He asks if this is for its freak value or because the human situation is universally appealing. He believes it to be the latter.

"The Removalists" has already gone to America and Holland. Wryly he gives an example of Dutch reviews he has had translated. "Where is the comedy? I don't see no comedy. It is stupid." It was not until he saw photos of the production showing Kenny's head almost severed and blood everywhere that he realized why the reviewer wrote as he did. The interpretation of the play was one of violence.

Yet though a policeman in the play bashes one of the main characters, Kenny, to death, David Williamson says the play is not about police brutality. He says the audience reaction varies as to this as an

"anti-cop" play. "For instance, to Maoists it has no laughs. At the end they'd give a power salute. But to others it's a Comedy of Manners with laughs throughout."

He claims, "Audiences are sick of amateur philosophers. I leave it as observations and let the audience fill in with their own psychological and philosophical theories instead of imposing mine".

David Williamson likes to stress the naturalistic. His writing is from observation of real people doing real things. "A play needs an ongoing social interaction for two hours. It is an attempt to study a social situation", he says.

"Social interaction is my primary interest. Some are only interested in inequalities and injustice." But he believes that politics is too limited a field to write about and want to look at the whole spectrum of human behaviour in his writing. "Inequalities are of importance-he's got too much, he's got too little", he says, "but other social matters-attraction, rejection, death and grief also interest me."

David Williamson laughs at the first drafts of plays he wrote 10 years ago. "They're strictly for comedy value now. I learnt my first lesson in theatre with the Tin Alley Players at Melbourne Uni. in 1967", he remembers. "In 'The Indecent Exposure of Anthony East' there I was on the stage, me, thinly disguised, talking for two hours on what's wrong and right with the world. It gave everyone the s s. I went into a deep depressive trance for a year afterwards."

Credit is given to Betty Burstall's La Mama Theatre in Carlton. It gave writers of plays a place to learn. David Williamson points out that playwrights need places to learn their craft, just as writers need publication. This was lacking in the mid 60's till about 1967. "Production depended on the personal taste of a handful of people", he claims. "These people saw their role as educating the community with the best from overseas-not with the mores of their own society. It was as if they were gazing at the vast sea of beer-swilling slobbs out there." The incipient paranoia he claims this created in him gave him his motivation to write something that would have to be produced.

But "Don's Party" and "The Removalists" were held by key people in the industry for one and two and a half years. As David Williamson says, "Literary editors and artistic directors can get out of step with the population and plays which are relevant are not performed". It was only when they were given a little theatre performance at La Mama that interest was shown. "It showed that people wanted to see Australian plays and nothing convinces like 'bums on seats'. It showed there was a potential audience after all for local production."

David Williamson seems proud to be associated with the new nationalism evident in the upsurge of theatre and films. Not only playwrights want to express themselves but also actors. "In traditional theatre", says the young playwright, "actors were put into a downtrodden role. The director and script told them what to do. They wanted to do what they felt they wanted to do. Actors got together. They wanted to express concern for politics, Women's Lib. and other issues."

This led to an uneasy union for actors and writers at La Mama. At the Pram Factory, whose actors first started at La Mama, the group was able to evolve the work together. But David Williamson says, "Writers are idiosyncratic and need a complex dramatic structure. So there is a built-in conflict between the two". After he wrote the first draft of "The Removalists" the cast wanted it to be an anti-cop play. But obviously he felt the need to do his own thing as he saw it, and this he is doing.

Today he finds himself doing more film writing and television work. He recently finished a play, "The Department", which is set at a small college of technology. It was premiered in Adelaide last November. His film, "Petersen", is currently showing.

When asked if his plays seem to overfeature sexual inadequacies, David Williamson says, "This seems to me to be a male preoccupation. They worry about performance, endurance and size. Maybe this is because I was in the Engineering Faculty, I don't know. But certainly it was a criterion for self-esteem and comparisons were made."

What is David Williamson's favorite play? "It depends on the individual performance and the quality of it", he says. He laughs at the Melbourne production of "Don's Party" where he says Mal was becoming

bigger all the time. "It was running nine months by the time it got to Russell St.", he says, "and by then Mal was 10 times larger."

A natural speaker with a flair for self-depreciation and a sense of the ridiculous, David Williamson could well consider an autobiographical play. Despite repercussions in his private life after "What If You Died Tomorrow?", which drew on personal experiences, was written-it should lay audiences in the aisles at the same time as they struggle with their social consciences and psychological cum philosophical theories.

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