

Gerry Turcotte: Perfecting the Monologue of Silence: An Interview with Louis Nowra

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Louis, for the benefit of those who may not know your work, I wonder if you could discuss how you started writing, and whether playwrighting was always your major interest? ¹

I never wanted to be a playwright. My career as a playwright started quite by accident. During my university days I belonged to a street theatre group that performed plays against the Vietnam War. As I was the only person who could type I found that I was not typing out my fellow performers' efforts but writing my own. When I left university I sent one of the revised scripts to La Mama Theatre, Melbourne. It was 1973 and standards were different from now. My terrible script was accepted. Sitting in the opening night audience I realized I had written the worst play seen by a paying audience for some time. I didn't want to die with that on my conscience, so I decided to write another one. There, in a nutshell, is the kernel of my decision to become a playwright.

You've been quoted as saying, 'In many ways Australia is still a colonial country. We are still continuing to benefit and suffer from the stiff-upper-lip cultural imperialism of the English, and the loud-mouthed imperialism of the Yanks.' In what ways do you see Australia continuing to labour beneath the mark of this imperialism, and how is it suffering or benefiting from this position?

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for some cultures to escape from American cultural imperialism. Look at the insidious influence of their films, for example. We white Australians have always been in an awkward position. European settlement came about because of the bridging of communication gaps. Our isolation from others was never complete. First there were ships, then radios, planes and now TV. We never had a chance of developing a culture free from the influence of cultural imperialism. Our culture will therefore be an amalgamation of various forces. I would hope that part of the amalgamation (which still has a long way to go) will include part of the aboriginal culture. If it did, then we would have a culture to be proud of.

And yet you are so much more 'isolated' than some former colonies, for example Canada.

Yes, but we're at the cultural *crossroads* of two enormous influences, the English and the American, whereas the Canadians are only under the powerful influence of the Yanks. That's why I like David Cronenberg's movies. He's a Canadian, yet with a visceral imagination that is more powerful than any American's.

Almost without exception, your plays have examined this imperial/colonial dialectic, although your metaphors for this relationship have been remarkably diverse. Albert's imposition of an identity on Edward; Juana's destruction by Lopez; the incarceration of the Tasmanian outcasts by the government — all are images of cultural imperialism. Why is this such an overwhelming focus of your plays?

Writers don't cultivate obsessions, obsessions come from their experiences. I suppose that this focus of my plays has been the result of a very bad head accident I had when I was twelve. It affected my brain considerably. After the long process of recovery I became aware of how, during those four years, I had

been tremendously influenced by my teachers and those people around me. A child doesn't notice this process. I did, because I was in my adolescence. Noticing how much influence teachers have, for example, I began to realize how people will force knowledge (whether it be good or bad or just plain incorrect) on someone. From this realization came my preoccupation with such processes. Out of the preoccupation came a natural metaphor — that of cultural imperialism; something that is very clear (well, to me, anyway), in a play like *Visions*. When I began to write about Australia I was more sensitive to the cultural imperialism that operates here than perhaps some other writers. From out of the personal always comes the political. And I do apologize for using that dreadful phrase 'cultural imperialism', but I can find no better.

So much of your work depicts characters either struggling with inarticulacy or striving to communicate what is inside them with the outside world. This usually results in characters who create a new type of language — an original, personal voice — in order to cope: Venice's anagrammatic language; Betsheb's telekinetic 'voice', or even Pat's 'song voice' in your early play The Song Room. I think it's also fair to say that you seem obsessed with the depiction of power, both as a personal and as a cultural artefact. Do you see language as a key to power, and is this why these themes are so often paralleled?

Oh, absolutely! Because I had to learn to use language properly in my adolescence I became aware of just what a potent weapon it is. It can be used destructively or creatively. Language is power. For example, notice how important speaking correctly is in our western culture. To speak badly indicates that you're from a lower class, and probably stupid. Look at how language is used in cults and political parties. Your use of language in Russia can determine whether you are insane or not.

Is there a malicious irony to the fact that the private inner voice of so many of your characters or groups of characters — the Tasmanian 'misfits', Ivan — is a language so often based on defective speech patterns, mental instability, illiterate teachers and so forth? Or is it, as you've just suggested, that these languages have been marginalized for so long that these are the ones you're interested in recovering?

With *The Golden Age* I was trying to make the point that if perhaps we had developed an original language then we would have had a stronger sense of ourselves as Australians. Language gives identity. It is crucial. Look at how the French-and English-speaking Canadians react to the question of language. Over the years I have become fascinated with the idea that perhaps those who may be inarticulate or who express themselves in unusual ways, were using language in a manner that was just as valid as those who are the 'guardians' of culture.

*Following on this idea, then, as an Australian writer, keenly aware of the 'cultural imperialism' of Britain and America, as well as of their particularly identifiable types of 'languages', do you feel obliged to seek new forms of linguistic expression for yourself, and, as it were, for your country, in order to challenge or even subvert these louder voices? And is *The Golden Age* one of those voices you'd offer?*

The Golden Age was an attempt to develop a language that the audience would agree (fingers crossed) was perhaps a more interesting and richer language than the carcass of language they now carry around with them. The hard thing was to create a new language and yet it had to be one that the audience could basically understand: a double bind that only the dominatrix of theatre could thrash out. I tried to use rhythms that most of the audience was already familiar with, especially those audience members who are from an English or Irish background. I repeated words and sentences a fair bit so it gradually sank in — or sank without a trace.

*And other than in *The Golden Age*, is your bent for non-naturalistic theatre a reflection of your need to push language beyond the more widely accepted naturalism?*

That's a very good question. Naturalism is a creation of the middle class. It confirms their values, their reality. Even when a naturalistic play is about the working class, it is still a confirmation of the middle class' attitudes towards them.

The way they want to see the working class.

Yes. Bourgeois culture and its dominance in this century has created the notion that naturalism is the natural theatre form. The use of language reflects what an impotent tool naturalism is (forgive the pun). It uses transparent language devoid of power and purpose and metaphorical colour. It has made sure that language is no longer a weapon, as it is in Shakespeare's plays. Language should make people re-examine the world. Language should tear apart the audience's perception of the world and re-make it. The language of naturalism is the language of confirmation. It's the slap on the back and 'g' day, mate' affability.

Hence your need to do new things with language and your annoyance with the naturalistic and 'safe' theatre we see so much of in Australia?

Yes. TV does naturalism brilliantly. I think it's very important that theatre make itself necessary, not as an adjunct of the glowing box in the corner. TV's purpose is to baby-sit the mind. The curious thing is that I've always considered naturalism to be almost surreal. It is very difficult for me to grasp the idea that people on stage are pretending to be real and that the furniture is real and that there is a fourth wall which has only been temporarily removed. I saw my first naturalistic play when I was eighteen — *Death of a Salesman*. I was flummoxed. It wanted to be seen as real, but I knew very well that theatre is unreal. I also found it unnerving that Miller's grim world of grubby cardigans and blighted hopes was considered to be important.

With plays like Visions, The Precious Woman, Inner Voices and The Golden Age, what one is struck with is a preoccupation with history, but of an unconventional, and unsystematic kind. Do you have a theory of history?

No, I don't. You're actually quite right, I am totally unsystematic. Well, my brain is, which is saying exactly the same thing. Although I am often said to be a European influenced writer, my fascination with history comes out of my annoyance that we white Australians don't have a sense of the past. To give an example. This year is 1988. We European Australians have a perfect opportunity to come to terms with what actually happened to the Aboriginal people over the past two hundred years. It means we'll have to confront our history. None of the Bicentennial celebrations will operate on this level. It's a typically Australian form of amnesia. We always turn away from a moral and intellectual obligation to our past and present. The present is the past. That's my concept of history. The past made us. Bob Hawke could have done something even though he is in his third term he will chicken out of confronting our obligations. Future generations are not going to forgive us because we had the perfect opportunity to confront history and account for it.

So your sense of history is how we interpret the past now, and deal with it morally and intellectually.

Yes, and how we have an incredible capacity to forget what we've done.

You've described Albert Names Edward, Inner Voices, and Visions as plays of a 'first coil', ² your own metaphor for the creative framework in which you've constructed your plays. Now, with close to ten other works, including television screen-plays, how do you see your plays divided; do you still feel this paradigm of the unwinding coil applies to your pattern of creative development?

I had three quarters of the spiral: *Inside the Island*, *Sunrise*, and *The Golden Age*, but when I was commissioned to do a new play the Artistic Director of the theatre (I will not mention his name for fear of waking the artistically dead), he said, when I told him I wanted to write an Aussie version of *The Magic Mountain* (set in the Blue Mountains): 'It's such a gloomy subject, and I don't even want to commission it. No one will see a play set in a TB sanatorium.' Very Australian attitude, I thought. I have put the play in abeyance because of it. *The Watch-tower*, for that was what it was called, was to illustrate my growing preoccupation with how the body reveals what is happening in the soul and mind. Australians think that they are isolated on an island, snug as a bug, free from the rest of the world's problems. As Australian quarantine officers know, it's a very hard battle to keep Australia free from foreign diseases.

In a recent Sydney production of The Golden Age, you added a scene with a blind pianist which isn't in the original. How closely do you like to be involved in the productions of your plays, and how much

rewriting are you willing to do? More crucially, who decides what will be added and where?

More good questions. What actually happened was, in the première of *The Golden Age* at the Melbourne cultural centre it was running more than three hours which meant that the staff had to be paid double time after eleven o'clock, so I had to cut out two scenes two days before it opened (a previous scene had already gone, the tennis match). A lot of people criticized *The Golden Age* for having a shaggy dog quality in that it ranges between Melbourne and Germany. But once those scenes went you realized that it did need to go elsewhere. When Neil Armfield did the production at NIDA I restored the scenes that had been cut out of the Melbourne production and I also put in an original scene which had been cut out in rehearsals, the tennis match. I think the NIDA production proved that it was crucial to the undercurrent of it because the two boys are a bit like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*; they are living this wonderful life and then they fall into the dark hole, down into a topsy-turvy world. The blind pianist is, to me, part of the metaphorical undercurrent, and also I think he's funny. Blind pianists are funny. (Sorry Ray Charles.) When *The Golden Age* went to Nimrod, that tennis game was taken out, which I thought was a mistake. The boys entered the bush too quickly. You have to fall into it, you don't appear in it. You fall into it like Alice fell down the rabbit hole. By taking out that scene you unbalance the play and destroy the emotional current. The Nimrod production was very, very intellectual and my plays are not intellectual, they're very emotional, and once you start to accentuate the intellectual quality, they seem pretentious and silly. Now to get back to the second half of your question, once a play goes on I generally don't revise, I generally don't see a play again, because I'm usually going on to my new play and I don't want to be influenced. But with *The Golden Age*, because of the series of cuts down in Melbourne, I found I had to follow the play constantly, so much so that when it went on in Sweden, I was still revising. And now it's in its completed form. This process is, however, very unusual for me.

Your plays have always struck me as particularly Gothic. The insanity scene in Inside the Island, Juana's trances in Visions, and in Sunrise, the African nightmare which pursues Venice from within. And then there are the novels. The comic grotesquerie of a Frogman in The Misery of Beauty or the grossly over-fertile tribal forest in Palu, are each, in their own way, very 'Gothic'. Is this a deliberate invocation of the genre?

I've always been fascinated by horror movies. Good horror movies have always been a revitalization of clichéd metaphor. David Cronenberg's notion that 'the body is a weapon that is used against self' is physicalized in front of you. In horror movies metaphor is physicalized, in the same way as in Gothic where, I think, fears are physicalized, whether it happens to be Frankenstein's monster or Dracula. I'm fascinated by that process where metaphor can be physicalized. I've always thought that one's first aim is to appeal to an audience on a visceral and physical level.

In other words you find the Gothic voice particularly useful for questioning and subverting cultural and literary expectations?

Absolutely! I think this makes my plays occasionally difficult for people in that they perhaps expect that they are going to be arid Beckett or Arden. But when people actually see my plays, or perhaps read them, I think they realize I have a good waking knowledge of 'pulp' culture.

You don't really like your audience to be comfortable, do you?

I find that the plays that I like, or the films, or the novels, shatter my preconceptions, and shatter the way that I think of the world. The worst thing in life is habit. I want the audience to constantly think 'I don't know what's going to come next and I'm really afraid'.

So where does the Gothic influence come from other than film? I know you've read and translated much German writing. I believe you're also a fan of Kafka's work?

Yes. I think that, again, one of the nicest things someone said about me was they liked the fact that I could jump from reading Proust to reading the horror comic. I have no sense of high culture and low culture. They're all on the same level to me. When I was living in Germany I loved things that ranged from Kafka to Murnau, the silent film maker.

*It seems strange to me that someone as preoccupied as you are with the inner landscape should have chosen playwrighting over novel-writing, particularly in view of the fact that your approach lends itself so well to the narrative form. Similarly, your ironic sense of — one could almost say black — humour doesn't get much of a go in your plays, whereas in *The Misery of Beauty*, for example, it surfaces in every line. Are you, in fact, more comfortable with the novel form?*

No, I'm not more comfortable, and I know this sounds abstract, but I think it's a question of voices. With a novel it's much harder for me to find a voice, and both novels have been written in the first person. It's a question of finding a voice. What I like in writing plays is that there are various voices inside me and they can then be physicalized on stage. It sounds very much as if I'm being possessed by voices. In a way, a novel is more than hearing a voice: it's also a narrative sense. Even though I love writing novels, I gravitate toward plays, which offer a whole lot of voices to control.

*In many of your plays you confront the idea of 'older' established civilizations crumbling. The demise of these societies often seems to prefigure the collapse of newer, often colonial communities. The plantation in *Inside the Island*, the new republic in *Visions*, the colony in the Tasmanian wilderness of *The Golden Age*, and the Shelton family, with all its bourgeois values and old world inflections, in *Sunrise*. You parallel this pattern of demise with the idea of war and nuclear madness on the one hand, and with an almost inevitable megalomaniac human condition on the other. In your view of the world is this demise inevitable or are you secretly a closet optimistic writer?*

Oh no, you see, the wonderful thing about being a pessimist, is that pessimists are the greatest optimist of all, because they know what the world is like, and so have no illusions to be serious about. I *am* a pessimist, of course, but I'm the greatest optimist of all time, because I believe that the things that are wrong will eventually change. Our behaviour, and the way we mix with other people, will change for the better. I'm becoming more obviously optimistic in my plays. In *The Golden Age* I almost reached the point of reconciliation at the end.

But almost.

Yes, almost (laughs). Hey! I'll get there, I'll get there. I think that some people say that *Sunrise* is pessimistic, and it's possibly my most pessimistic play, but it's because two generations have been cut off — the grandfather's generation, the granddaughter's generation — simply because the middle generation fucked it up. I'm good at decline and fall. The novels that I especially like — by Proust, Lampedusa, Martin Boyd — are finally about the end of eras. When civilizations are changing, and at a point of a certain collapse, the reasons for that civilization coming into being, and evolving like it did, become terribly, terribly obvious. The high point of the Renaissance doesn't interest me because it's a time when the train of cultivation was chugging along beautifully.

In reading your work as a type of 'eschatological discourse' — a type of literature of disintegration — I've noticed, and argued, ³ that those characters striving for new voices, hybrids in a way, never seem to make it. They come so close — they keep coming closer — but still they haven't made it.

In my new play, *Byzantine Flowers* — and it's a good term, your hybrid — my character makes it. I'm still writing it at the moment, but she finally, in her own ways, destroys the culture that oppresses her. And in my opera, *Whitsunday*, set in 1913, which the Australian opera is performing next year, a similar thing happens. The Kanaka maid, I think, is the only true voice; her voice of love overwhelms everything else around her. I'm getting to the stage where I want to try and discover the strengths of these hybrid people rather than the weaknesses that formerly destroyed them. A sense of spirit, of energy, of coming into the world in a completely different way — all of this is, I hope, a sign not so much of weakness but of absolute strength which can overwhelm the older culture.

*At the end of *The Golden Age*, *Betsheb* seems to arrive at a new voice, a 'telekinetic' voice, but she seems to have arrived at it too late. And there is that river between her and Francis after all.*

Yes. Well it *is* too late. The director of the Swedish production had almost a hippy concept of the end, which is not what I was after at all, it was just that Francis had to take her back to where she had to be in order to live. But *he* was stuck not having the skills to exist in that environment. And they certainly

weren't going to set up a hippy commune.

Almost all your plays feature plays within plays: The Precious Woman, Sunrise, two in The Golden Age, maybe three in Byzantine Flowers (laughter). What's the appeal of this device?

Oh. Some of these are very good questions. I read a book that influenced me when I was at university, Anne Richter's *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*. It looked at why he used plays within plays and at how he seemed to grow tired of playwrighting. The book fulfilled a need because the idea of pretending fascinated me. The only plays I saw at the time beside my street theatre work were naturalistic plays, and I couldn't get over the fact, as I've said before, that people were pretending to be real — yes, the stage is patently unreal. Out of this came my sense of how plays within plays reflect in a different light the true circumstances of what's happening around them — it goes back to Hamlet.

Let's turn again, briefly, to The Golden Age. Few would argue that it is your most spectacular achievement. Did you sense, at the time of its writing, that you had such a triumph on your hands?

No. My personal life was in absolute turmoil and I was actually writing it as I travelled from city to city. I thought it was my best work, but when the reviews came out, they were savage. I didn't want to go on again. The reaction stopped me from writing plays for two years. So that's why I turned toward novels again.

How much work went into the construction of that bawdy, hypnotic — and ironically, degenerate — language which the outcasts use?

To be perfectly honest, not very much. I'm a great fan of *Finnegan's Wake*, and some people realize I've nicked off the opening line of *Finnegan's Wake* for the language. I was reading a lot of ballads from the Victorian era, and I also read the Penguin book of bawdy verse. That became very influential because the way that sex was referred to was refreshingly open. When obscene words were used — like cunt and fuck and prick and things like that — although they were obscene, it was as though the words had been turned upside down and were refreshingly truthful. I became fascinated by the concept that a language could take obscenities and make them beautiful.

One of your short stories deals with the art of translating,⁴ and makes some very interesting comments on the activity and the liberty translators have. As well, not only do several of your characters in *Sunrise work as translators, but also you yourself have done extensive translating in the area of French and German literature. Any thoughts on translating, and do you really agree with the character in the short story?*

(Laughter) I do a bit. The character in the short story takes great liberties with his text, and I actually did that with a play that I grew bored with: *Cyrano de Bergerac*. What I found really amusing is that it was a huge hit, and it earned me a lot of money, but the final act I radically changed; I paid little heed to Rostand. With Kleist, *The Prince of Homburg*, which I think is my best translation, I was wholly true to him. But you see I think the translator's art is ephemeral, because I think translations only serve a purpose for ten to twenty years. Because translations are tied to the common linguistic culture of the particular time. For example, you can read a brilliant translation from the seventeenth century, but it seems remarkably silly now. Plays have to be performable andactable. Now, stage language changes radically in, say, a decade. In the fifties and sixties Tennessee Williams' purple language could be considered naturalistic, now it is quite baroque. So every ten or twelve years *Cyrano de Bergerac* will require a new translator.

But doesn't the reader — or the listener — do that automatically while he or she is sitting in the theatre? While you're sitting, watching Tennessee Williams, aren't you, as 'audience', filtering it, re-interpreting it, or translating it?

Let me give you an example. When I directed Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, I had Nick Enright translate it. We went back to the original and went through all the translations that had been made. There were two that were made in the fifties and sixties which had two problems. One was that it seemed especially English. And the second thing is that Beaumarchais had a rhythm of expletives and

the translation made them seem pathetic. Two good reasons emerged for a new translation. Another example: May-Brit Akerholt and I are doing Ibsen's *Ghosts*. I've read Michael Meyers' translation. It's quite wonderful, but again, it is quite English, and it has a 1960s feel. It is also appealing to the audience through its language by making it sound like a classic when in fact when Ibsen wrote it it wasn't a classic. Those \$\$\$crts of things make new translations necessary.

Let's talk about the new novel, Palu. Briefly, it's a novel set in Australia and Papua New Guinea. It's the story of a young woman's rise to adulthood, and her story is very much that of her country's. Similarly, her association with Emoti, its eventual ruler and despoiler, parallels the country's relationship with the man: they are at first indifferent to, then inspired, then led and finally betrayed, by him. The novel recapitulates many of your usual themes of the importance of independence, the danger of power and the potential for its perversion, and so forth. Can you talk a bit about its genesis as a novel?

I became fascinated by what constitutes a victory. How you can destroy somebody else through the richness — the fertility — of your own vision. This partly came out of the Pol Pot regime, where their vision was so barren, so brutal, that finally it had to lose. I suppose that was one of the first things. The second important thing is that she became a voice in my head. I didn't want to write about a woman, I actually wanted to write about a person like Pol Pot who is married to a woman who had a much richer personality than he did. But as I thought about it more and more, *she* took over, until, when I sat down to write it, I began to speak in her voice.

Near the end of Palu, when Emoti has virtually turned against all he believed in, and everyone he loved, Palu says of him, 'He perfected the monologue of silence'. Here again, the balance has been lost. The inner voice, representing the potential for strength, becomes the sound of his defeat. Why do so many of your characters have trouble maintaining the balance?

The art of being human is the art of balancing between inner and outer, between your private and your public, self; between your inner self and the way other people perceive you. That's my own personal theory of psychology, and I'm sure it isn't profound at all. I find that all my characters generally are in a historical position of change or crisis. My theory is that when that happens history is affected by human personality, and vice versa. Emoti's inability to deal with real problems in his country, and also his guilt with not being able to live up to his ideals, means that at a time of crisis he has to retreat from balance — he creates an artificial public persona — and forces all his psychic energies back onto himself. He has perfected the monologue of silence.

I know that you've very concerned with the aboriginal question — particularly in terms of this bicentennial situation — where white Australians want to rewrite or have rewritten the 'story' in many ways. How is your version of New Guinean history — in Palu — different to white appropriation of an indigenous story? Or should New Guinea never have been mentioned on the back cover?

(Laughs) The latter. New Guinea should never have been mentioned on the back cover and I had a bit of an argument with the publisher about that because I felt strongly that it shouldn't be seen as New Guinea. Of course, there are obvious parallels, but there was also a lot of West African history in it too, especially in the second half. I was considerably annoyed because I didn't want to, as you say, appropriate a culture that I'm not an expert on. It was beyond New Guinea entirely. I don't write about aboriginals because I'm not an expert on them, just as I would never have written specifically about New Guinea. I would never, never have put myself in that position. Again, like all my work, the landscape functions as a metaphor. So I became annoyed with some reviewers who got testy with me saying that I was predicting for New Guinea a time of bloodshed and chaos. I never mentioned New Guinea during the novel simply because I didn't want to be seen judging a culture that I knew very little about. But the only time I truly got annoyed was when reviewers said how dare I make this culture look absolutely silly, how dare I say that a woman would put a public hair in a cigarette, how dare I say that they bite off their eyelashes and rub their faces until they bleed. Quite simply, that's what happens. I knew more about New Guinea than any reviewer who reviewed the novel, and yet they were telling me what I'd got wrong. That was my argument with the reviewer who said: 'You still make Palu seem primitive.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Because you make her believe in magic.' And I said, 'I don't regard that as being primitive at all!'

It's probably a good point to ask you about research. Anyone reading Palu — well, most people — will

be struck by the meticulous accuracy of your portrayals of the various rituals and traditions. How much research did you do for this novel, and how much research do you like to do in general?

I'd been to New Guinea and I know a few New Guinea women. I read every book I could find on New Guinean anthropology, and you've got to realize there are at least two American anthropologists to every New Guinea tribe, so there's a lot of information about. The real problem is that most have been men so actually to get information from a woman's perspective was very hard — well, there's Margaret Mead, but she got everything wrong anyway. I made sure that every ceremony, every spell, was correct. I could actually give to anybody every single source for this information. Many of the rituals and the like were meticulously researched. I am not, however, generally a great researcher. In *Visions*, my Paraguay resulted from a couple of books that I'd flipped through. When I did *Displaced Persons*, a lot of people thought I'd done a lot of research on quarantine stations and on D.P. camps in Germany and Yugoslavia, but I just read two Penguin specials that came out in 1945. When I did *Hunger* I had a full researcher from the ABC. But I did so much research that, in fact, it blocked me for about six months.

There was a time when the setting of your plays — specifically, the lack of Australian settings — almost overshadowed the plays themselves, at least where critics were concerned. Such a criticism, it seems, would no longer be forthcoming. Do you think this is a sign of new-found maturity among Australian critics?

It's hard to tell because after I was rapped over the knuckles so many times about setting my plays in other countries I've been very scared to set a play in another country again. I've wanted to. There have actually been two plays that I wanted to do, but I got tired of being called non-Australian. I got tired of being told, 'Oh, you're really a European writer, you're doing European themes'. I got tired of all that. It just wore me away.

What do you think is a weakness in your work — one which you feel yourself striving against — or which you feel you've only just overcome?

Well, that's really two questions. The main weakness that began to develop at the time of *The Precious Woman* was that my work became tightarsed, and sort of rarefied. The plays allowed no room for the actor and director to breathe. What was in the text was everything about the play. With *The Precious Woman* I found myself in an emotionally barren cul-de-sac. I realized that if I went along *The Precious Woman* track I'd end up writing the emotionally barren works that Edward Bond now writes for example. So I consciously turned away to write something that was on the level of country and western or soap opera to try and find emotions again because finally that's what an audience wants to see. I had to find human emotion and I had to find character. I firmly believe that my best work has a very powerful emotional base, and that the characters are strong and interesting. I like it when people say about *The Misery of Beauty* or *Palu* that they love the characters. Quite simply, when one thinks of favourite plays they have strong characters and human emotion. With my more recent work I think I have a tendency to take too much for granted, not to fill in spaces when I jump from say, in *The Golden Age*, the wilds of Tasmania to Berlin. I think people find Berlin a problem, when they're watching it, wondering how it fits in to the rest of the play. I have a tendency perhaps to miss a couple of bases for an audience. I think one has to make it clearer for an audience.

Who, among Australian writers, do you read?

Ahh . . . beside those I savage . . . Well, I like Peter Carey's stuff; Robert Drewe's. But, basically, I have a very patrician taste, so in Australia it would be Martin Boyd, just as in Italy it would be Lampedusa, Proust in France. Nabokov, of course. Chateaubriand. Because I've been so busy in the last couple of years I haven't been reading as much Australian stuff as I'd like to.

What are your impressions of the Australian dramatic scene now, and of your fellow playwrights?

I like Stephen Sewell's work a lot. We've always promised ourselves that we would write a play together. I like his work because he has a vision that is much larger than a middle-class living room. And I think, in Australia, it's very important to have a vision that is larger than that because one has to question things. Also, I think it's very important to actually 'say' through an epic structure. Our society is based on inter-connecting relationships of class, sex, money and power, and an epic form gives you that. I

liked John Romeril, when he was writing early in the seventies. Basically, I think the real problem now is that we are in a period of economic malaise, and when that happens, theatre, throughout history, has gone conservative. It's gone toward musicals now. I think the distressing thing now is that a lot of young people don't go to theatre because it is a theatre which belongs to the well-off and over thirty.

As a way of closing, I wonder if you could describe some of your forthcoming projects?

Well, *The Last Resort*, a maxi-series which I created for the ABC, is sort of a modern version of *King Lear*. The father is mad: instead of giving his daughters a third of Wales each he gives them a third of a hotel in Bondi, and it's the most sleazy, run down hotel in Bondi. I've enjoyed doing it because Bondi is a true cross section of Australia, it contains the wealthy, the down and out, the drug addicts, the trendies, and it is also true Australia, as it's based around the beach. There's my new play, *Byzantine Flowers*, which I hope to finish soon, and which I won't go into because I'm still writing it. *Whitsunday*, which is the name of an island off the coast of Australia. That's an opera being put on by the Australian Opera company in 1988. It's about a very wealthy sugar cane plantation family who go to Whitsunday Island to celebrate Whitsunday, and they take along their Kanaka maid with them. It's sort of an Aussie 'Magic Flute'. Then there's the new novel which I've been commissioned to do which will be very pleasing to the critics because it will be set wholly in Australia.

Well, thank you for doing this interview, wholly set in an Australian office for publication in Denmark.

NOTES

1. This is an edited version of an interview conducted at The University of Sydney, 17 December 1987.

2. Louis Nowra, 'Inner Voices and the First Coil', *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (2), 1979, 188–99.

3. Gerry Turcotte, '«The Circle is Burst»: Eschatological Discourse in Louis Nowra's *Sunrise* and *The Golden Age*', SPAN 24: *Inventing Countries: Essays in Post Colonial Literatures* (April 1987), 63–80, edited by William McGaw. This article, together with *Louis Nowra, Australian Playwrights, Monograph Series No. 1*, ed. Veronica Kelly (Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam, 1987), a collection of essays, interviews and reviews on Nowra's theatre, represent almost the entire body of criticism currently in print on Nowra's work.

4. Louis Nowra, 'The Translator', *Overland*, 101 (December 1985), pp. 2–6. In defending his 'rewriting' of a German author's 'trash' novels, the character of the story comments, 'Destroyed his creations? I made his pieces of crap into masterpieces' (5). He later avers that, 'I now see that my translations are supreme creations and sometime in the future I will be seen, not as a dishonest translator, but as an honest to goodness writer of the highest quality' (6).

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