

Candida Baker: David Williamson

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DAVID WILLIAMSON was born in Melbourne in 1942. His family later moved to the Victorian country town of Bairnsdale where he was educated at the local primary and high schools.

After school, Williamson studied mechanical engineering at Monash University, and then went on to teach thermodynamics at the Swinburne Institute of Technology. At the same time, he continued to write sketches for university revues, experimenting with the idea of writing a play.

His first play, *The Coming of Stork*, (1970), performed at La Mama, the experimental theatre in Carlton, Melbourne, was a success, and quickly led to his second critically acclaimed play, *The Removalists*, (1971). Performed world-wide, including a production by Jim Sharman at London's Royal Court Theatre, *The Removalists* consolidated Williamson's reputation and allowed him the financial freedom to become a full-time playwright.

Since *The Removalists* Williamson has written many plays, including *Don's Party* (1971) and *The Club* (1977) (both of which were adapted for film), *Travelling North* (1979), *The Department* (1974), *The Perfectionist* (1982), and his most recent play, *Sons of Cain* (1985), which he directed.

In 1983 Williamson wrote and co-produced the political television series *The Last Bastion* for the Ten network. It is a dramatic history which looked at the events of 1942, when, as Williamson says, 'Australia came to grips with the fact that they were expendable'.

Williamson's screen credits as a writer include *Gallipoli*, *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *Phar Lap*.

The interview with David Williamson took place in his home in Birchgrove, a Sydney suburb adjoining Balmain, and overlooking Birchgrove Park and the harbour.

The house, a pleasant three-storey terrace, was quiet. Williamson's wife, Kristin, was at work, and the children were at school. When I arrived Williamson had been working all morning and devoured a couple of peanut butter sandwiches for lunch while we chatted in the kitchen. It was the day after Phillip Adams' piece on Sons of Cain had appeared in The Australian, and Williamson was still hot under the collar at what he saw as 'an unprecedented, unprincipled attack'.

The interview got off to a bad start. The unthinkable had happened, the entire tape machine had been forgotten! Williamson was kind about it, and fortunately was able to provide the necessary equipment.

The house, with five bedrooms to accommodate the floating population of children from two marriages, also has two studies for Williamson and his wife. Side by side, with a connecting balcony, they have a spectacular water-view through to the Harbour Bridge. Williamson's study showed every sign of work in progress: paper was scattered over every surface, reference books were open, piles of manuscript lay around the room. Every wall was covered with posters—framed and unframed—from various productions of his plays. Already quite a small space for his six foot seven inch frame, the room seemed

even smaller in the general clutter.

Williamson's output is prolific, but he insists that he is not a 'workaholic'. 'It's just I enjoy my work. I like to write, and if I'm not writing a play I need to be doing something else, like a screenplay, or at least researching a possible idea.'

As well as the house in Birchgrove, the Williamsons own a beach house at Pearl Beach—a sleepy but well-heeled village opposite the Barrenjoey Peninsular and Palm Beach. They use it purely for relaxation, and spend some time of each school holidays there. Williamson, who jogs to keep fit, can often be seen pounding the coast road between Pearl Beach and Patonga.

Although he often sounded despairing about his ability to get work done, it seemed like a well-ordered household. Kristin works at The National Times and a housekeeper picks the smallest child up from school and gets the evening meal under way—tasks are evenly distributed amongst the family.

Having enjoyed the experience of directing his most recent play, Sons of Cain, Williamson remarked that he might move more in that direction in the future. 'It gives you a control over your own product which a writer rarely has,' he said. 'And I think I've got the stage where I not only appreciate that control but can use it well.'

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to begin by asking you about *Sons of Cain*, since that's your most recent play to date. Is it the first time you have directed your own play?

WILLIAMSON: Yes it is. I've directed other people's plays but never my own, apart from one short piece years ago. I found it satisfying but exhausting—looking at something on two levels, as a writer and a director, can be fairly emotionally demanding—luckily I had a genuinely supportive cast who helped me a lot with their input. I think if I'd had to work in a hostile environment I would have given it away. But there are a lot of plusses in doing it because you get a chance to fine-tune the script and look at it with the eyes of a director. After a few weeks' rehearsal I'd almost forgotten that I'd written the thing. It was just somebody's text, and that text had repetitions and imperfections, or was too loose. The way you look at a script as a director is very brutal. If the script is impeding an effective production you do something about it—as the writer I was able to do it myself.

INTERVIEWER: Did you change a lot of it?

WILLIAMSON: I had a basic structure I didn't change. I think it would be very difficult to go into a rehearsal period with your structure only half-formed, because big structural changes can cause such problems with all the actors and the staff giving their opinions as to where the structure's gone wrong. In this case everybody had read the drafts and we were all reasonably happy with it before we went into rehearsal, so what happened then was mainly in the nature of fine-tuning, alterations of lines, pruning and condensing scenes.

INTERVIEWER: How long does it take you to write a play?

WILLIAMSON: I do the drafts relatively quickly, sometimes in three or four weeks, but I do a lot of drafts. I think I did five full drafts for *Sons of Cain*, plus endless tinkering and fine-tuning.

INTERVIEWER: Five full drafts would take you about six months?

WILLIAMSON: From go to whoa, yes.

INTERVIEWER: So it's quite a short time, but very intensive work.

WILLIAMSON: Well, it's not as quick and easy as it looks, getting a play on stage, because one of the main constrictions of drama is its brevity and clarity. You can't afford to be discursive. One of the best scenes in *Sons of Cain*, which had worked well through all the previews, we suddenly realised had nothing to do with either the character development or the narrative development of the second act, which was to uncover the fact that a big businessman was heavily involved in financing a drug

operation; so regrettably we sat down and took it out. Richard Wherrett and John Sumner also had a look at it and told us that we could cut five minutes out of the second act by using jump cuts in the crucial scenes instead of fades to black. So between the first preview and the opening night quite a different second act emerged, which is the exciting thing about theatre—you don't really know what you've got until the audience is watching it.

INTERVIEWER: Some people are interpreting *Sons of Cain* as being about the Premier of New South Wales and the Editor of the *National Times*. It's been well received in Melbourne, how do you think it'll go in Sydney?

WILLIAMSON: I think that people in New South Wales will go to the play with their minds already made up one way or another. The Melbourne audiences and critics might be more dispassionate because they assume that the state involved wasn't theirs. This is very unfortunate because the play is fiction. It had its genesis in a social meeting which my wife Kristin—a journalist—took me to, and where I got very involved and excited by the issues being discussed, but from then on it was fiction. Just as the genesis of *The Removalists*, was a story told to me by a removal man. However, your dramatist's imagination takes it far beyond the original story. By sharpening the moral conflicts in *Sons of Cain*, I've made the characters larger than life, and I wanted to pose the question, which is: What do we do when a Labor Government is found to be corrupt? If we are Labor supporters, do we, as journalists—I'm talking in terms of the characters in the play—throw that government out because it's corrupt and risk the chance of having a government which is far more authoritarian? For example, throwing unionists in jail and fining them a thousand dollars a day? Of course, the question is only raised, not answered, but what also interested me were the realities and difficulties of getting true investigative journalism going in a situation where the press is tightly controlled by a few people and where commercial considerations are applied to editorial matter. In *Sons of Cain*, the sales of the journal start falling just as it's doing its best investigative work; the advertising drops because the advertisers don't want to be associated with drug stories; commercial pressures move in, and the decision is made that a 'yuppy' line should be taken. I wanted a dramatic situation to explore those themes and I don't know Wran or Toohey well enough to represent them on stage. I think it will be very hard to get an objective reaction to it in New South Wales, which is sad.

INTERVIEWER: You were talking about *The Removalists* and how it had its genesis in a conversation with a removalist. I saw Sharman's production at The Royal Court in London some years ago and was very impressed by it, although I was taken aback at some of the violence. Were you surprised at how violent it was?

WILLIAMSON: Jim's production is the most violent I've seen. I think he has a powerful sense of the theatrical and his violence was well choreographed and quite horrifying. The design of the play—it was set in a boxing ring—was perhaps just a trifle overstated. Yes, I was a bit shattered by the level of violence in it because although the play is about male aggression and competitive instincts I think a good production has the violence at a pitch where the audience is ambivalent about it. They should quite enjoy the cheeky Kenny Carter getting bashed up by the authoritarian cop early on, because what the play wants to do is exploit the audience's own ambivalence to authoritarian control and to violence. But overall Jim's was a very effective production.

INTERVIEWER: I agree. In reviews and articles, you are occasionally accused of being simplistic and naturalistic. How do you feel about that?

WILLIAMSON: I think it depends on the production. With *The Removalists* for example, it can look like simply a tract against the police force, whereas a good production will reveal that what I'm saying is that we all have sadistic and aggressive impulses. We can all empathise, to some extent, with the Sergeant beating Kenny up in the early stages, but what the play is finally saying is, 'Beware of the beast within'. So I don't think my plays are simplistic, but a bad production or a partisan reviewer can reduce them to simplicity. *Sons of Cain* is anything but simple. It has a very complex moral argument as its core.

INTERVIEWER: When you wrote *Don's Party*, you were writing about a particular left-wing, upwardly mobile type. Do you think that breed has died out since you wrote the play—it seems to me there's a new era of conservatism occurring at the moment—or do those characters still exist?

WILLIAMSON: There are still a lot of left-wing intellectuals in the teaching and caring professions. The intellectual right-wing hasn't formulated anything particularly arresting. I think the conservatism you mention is a restating of seventeenth century free market rhetoric and seems to be confined to mining executives and maverick academics.

INTERVIEWER: Apart from *Travelling North*, you've tended to take a situation like a bureaucratic department, or a newspaper office, or a football club, and explore the interaction of people working in close proximity. Is that something that intrigues you?

WILLIAMSON: Yes. The patterns and style of human interaction has always fascinated me, and when I was a psychology student I found myself being drawn towards the social psychology area which looks at the way people relate to each other, the way they use language to disguise their real motives. Something that's always fascinated me is how simple and basic urges towards power, acquisition and wealth can be rationalised on any number of grounds, such as, 'We're doing it for the good of humanity'. People use language to unconsciously dissimulate, and the way they disguise their innermost thrusts and motives to others and to themselves has been an enduring fascination to me.

INTERVIEWER: *Celluloid Heroes* is the only one of your plays which hasn't worked. Why do you think that was?

WILLIAMSON: Well, I think it was a bummer. That was a time when the accusation of oversimplification could probably be justified, because it was a bad play which didn't create characters that were complex enough to last the distance after interval. Part of the problem was that I felt I was writing to order—for the AFC's tenth birthday—and I was supposed to be writing something light and bright and happy, but my feelings about the film industry were anything but light and bright. I think I let my personal bile about the indignities writers suffer in the film industry, and how basically shoddy it all is, spill over into the play. I wasn't sufficiently objective and I made the characters overly evil or two-dimensional.

INTERVIEWER: Can you still see room for a play about the industry then?

WILLIAMSON: Yes I do. I think it's a rich area for dramatic exploration, but perhaps I could be more mature and distanced from it all now. I haven't thought of tackling it since *Celluloid Heroes*, but that was simply social satire dipped into crude farce. Not one of my best efforts.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there's a danger that writers won't produce their best work when they're writing to a deadline or for a commission?

WILLIAMSON: Well, it's the only time I've worked to a commission and it's the only time I've been ashamed of the final product. You see, when I listened to all those journalists talking before I wrote *Sons of Cain*, it sparked me off immediately. I couldn't wait to write it, and I think that's a healthy sign. I couldn't wait to write *The Removalists* either. If something grabs your imagination and you run with it, it's the best sign that something interesting will emerge. If you sit down with a blank sheet and say, 'What will I write?', you can be in trouble. Not always, but often.

INTERVIEWER: When you've finished a play do you ever wonder what on earth you'll write about next?

WILLIAMSON: I've honestly never had that feeling. Sometimes, if a play's been hard work, I know that I don't want to do one for a while, but up in my drawer there are hundreds of ideas waiting to be explored, and just about every second day the essence of a dramatic situation strikes. Mind you, often those ideas don't turn into anything. You start them and discard them. I've done a lot of that in my career—getting ten pages into a play and deciding there's nothing there. But I've never felt that the actual material will dry up because I sense so much drama around me in everyday life.

INTERVIEWER: When you are going through a hiatus period, what do you work on?

WILLIAMSON: I usually do a bit of film work or a television series like *The Last Bastion*, which I did

between *The Perfectionist* and *Sons of Cain*. I regard myself essentially as a dramatist and plays are the works that are dearest to my heart, but in a country like Australia you're really going to exhaust the patience of your audience, and your own creativity, if you write a play every six months. So that's how I pace myself. Unfortunately I can't stop work and sit back and ruminate for twelve months. I have to do something in between.

INTERVIEWER: Are you a workaholic?

WILLIAMSON: Well, I enjoy working. A lot of writers say, 'Oh, I can't stand the grind of the typewriter, facing the blank page . . .' and all that, but I've always found the reverse. I find writing a very exciting part of life and some of the other parts of life are the distraction. I shouldn't really say that because I enjoy family life, I love my wife and kids, but Kristin's a bit the same. She loves her work and her writing and her family at the same time. So we've got this eternal guilt because if you're not writing and you're paying attention to the family you feel guilty, but if you're writing and not paying attention to the family you feel guilty. It's an eternal drag one way or the other.

INTERVIEWER: You don't think it's resolvable?

WILLIAMSON: No. In fact I don't think we were designed to solve all the problems in our life. I think our emotional mechanism is tuned to provide ambivalent and conflicting emotions on just about every dimension. For example, boredom stops you becoming too static but if you, say, go out exploring the hinterland you get anxious that you might strike trouble, so anxiety stops you being too exploratory. So for people who are looking for Nirvana through psycho-therapy and group- therapy or whatever, and who are asking, 'What's wrong, why am I always anxious and in conflict?', the probable answer is that we were designed that way to keep us active and effective. I'm not even sure that we were designed to be happy!

INTERVIEWER: How depressing. You mentioned Kristin earlier, and I know you have a 'blended' family. How many children live with you?

WILLIAMSON: We have four living here, except that one is travelling overseas at the moment. Two from Kristin's first marriage, one from mine and one joint effort, so we've got a houseful. Plus Mathew, from my first marriage, who lives with his mother and comes to visit. So on occasions we have five kids here. It keeps you rooted in reality. There's no time for artistic tantrums at the Williamsons'. You'd get very short shrift if the muse visited and you said, 'Begone while I put down this great idea'! I've always felt envious of those artists we see in Hollywood who suddenly get inspiration from God or wherever, and banish everybody so they can work on it. In my experience that doesn't happen.

INTERVIEWER: Does Kristin work from home?

WILLIAMSON: She's got an office next to mine, but more and more she's going into the office these days. In the earlier years as a journalist she found she couldn't concentrate very well with all the bustle, but she's progressively got used to it and finds it better to work there now.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any conflict when you were both working from home?

WILLIAMSON: A bit of irritation at times, mainly over the phone calls. There were quite some scenes of me bursting into her office in a typically authoritarian male bully fashion assuming that my calls were vital and hers were not. We were going to resolve it by getting separate phone lines but we never got around to it, and these days she goes to work.

INTERVIEWER: Do you leave the phone on when you're working?

WILLIAMSON: I don't get that many calls quite truthfully. Most people respect the fact that writers do work, and I find that the calls that come through are reasonably important. People don't phone up just to chat, although perhaps I've been gruff with them in the past.

INTERVIEWER: You're originally from Melbourne aren't you?

WILLIAMSON: I was born in a suburb called Bentleigh, then we went to the bush, to Bairnsdale, where my father had the local bank, then we came back to live in Oakleigh, and I've lived in a variety of places around Melbourne, ending up with Kristin in Carlton for a while, before we moved out to nine acres of bush near Diamond Creek, with kangaroos hopping all over it and all that stuff. Pete Steedman, the ex-M.P., bought it from me.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you leave the property?

WILLIAMSON: We wanted to be nearer the centre of a city. It was such a physical effort to see plays and films, although I found living in the bush very pleasant. The only trouble with a Melbourne winter—which is very cold—is leaping out of bed and starting the old pot belly stove at seven o'clock just to make the place liveable. But after a while we felt we needed a change.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you decide to come to Sydney, rather than staying in Melbourne?

WILLIAMSON: I can truthfully say—and I'm condemned for being very superficial when I say it—but it was the physical environment of Sydney that attracted me, not the fact that it was a hot bed of film or theatre. I think cultural activity is reasonably divided between the two cities. But as a young child I'd been on visits to Sydney, when I was only four or five, and I can still remember the look of the ferries, the jacarandas and the flame trees, the sunlight and the harbour; I always saw it as an exotic fairyland city, and I kept that image at the back of my brain. I'd been saying to Kristin for years, would she consider moving to Sydney, and she'd always said, 'No, Sydney's full of con-men and hucksters, it's corrupt and evil, ruled by the great God Mammon,' and I'd say, 'Yeah, but it's pretty'. Anyway, we were in Denmark living through a Danish winter, and the kids had a picture book called *Australia the Beautiful*, with a photograph of Sydney Harbour and the Opera House on the cover, and I said, 'Kristin, when we go back, can't we live there?'. For me, even though the Danish winter was much worse than a Melbourne one it had evoked that cold feeling. Finally, after much persuasion, she agreed to give it a try.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a set pattern to your work?

WILLIAMSON: Usually. It's pretty mundane. We take it in turns to do the shopping and the school run, and then I work through until five or sometimes six. We have a grandmotherly woman called Beryl who comes in every day. She picks up Rory from school and brings him home and then starts to cook the meal so that Kristin and I can keep working. Otherwise I'd go berserk. I think if I had a working day that was only ten to three my nerve-ends would get very frayed.

INTERVIEWER: It seems very organised to me. When you're working, how does the process occur—do you type or write in longhand?

WILLIAMSON: I do a first draft of a play in pencil with a rubber—the most primitive form of word-processor. I find it very efficient, and have never felt the need to change; I like the old artisan feel of the pencil and paper. I do one or two drafts in pencil—two for *Cain*—and then the rest on my typewriter, which these days is an electric.

INTERVIEWER: How does the dialogue come to you—in sentences or whole chunks?

WILLIAMSON: I hear it inside my head. Sometimes I hear particular actors doing it, more often I hear my own voice doing it. I think most dramatists are either ex-actors or frustrated actors, and I'm certainly a frustrated actor. I've tried a few times but I'm really bad. I was the removalist in the La Mama production of *The Removalists* and I wasn't good in it. So yes, I act it out in my head. Sometimes I speak it out loud, very rarely because I'm so embarrassed at my bad acting. I act a lot better inside my head than I do when it comes out of my mouth. In my head I'm quite good. My first drafts are usually terrible because they're so fluid—I write what I first hear, and it's in the process of refinement that I shape it and turn it into something succinct and dramatic.

INTERVIEWER: When you gave up engineering to be a playwright, did you still want to be an actor?

WILLIAMSON: No. I always knew my limitations. Well, firstly I'm six foot seven and built like a bean

pole so there didn't seem to be much hope for romantic leads, and secondly I always got landed with things like the Little John part in Robin Hood sketches, so I wasn't a huge success. However, I love the process of writing material for actors to say and the material getting an immediate response from the audience. I used to write for the university revues but I also wanted to write novels in the early days. I wrote countless thousands of turgid words which I found when we lived at Diamond Creek and threw in the tip. Mind you, that was a long time ago.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to try writing a novel now?

WILLIAMSON: No. I think I don't have the specialised skills in that area. Prose writing is a whole different ballgame and language is used in a completely different way. It's the juxtaposition and the appropriate choice of non-clichéd phrases, the order of the words which counts in prose. I think my strength is in writing words that people can actually say, and structuring drama around them. I think I'm okay at the clarity and brevity of structuring, but stringing words together to reveal poetic, human insights is a skill I don't have.

INTERVIEWER: But writing plays is a specialised skill in itself, isn't it?

WILLIAMSON: Yes it is. I think a lot of novelists want to write plays and quite frankly the cross-over rate from either side is not very high. I think Patrick White is a marvellous prose writer for example, but his plays have been patchy.

INTERVIEWER: I read that Hal Porter was the librarian at Bairnsdale. Did he have any influence on you?

WILLIAMSON: No, not at all. He was an *awesome* figure. He both intrigued and terrified us at the same time because he seemed like another species—the cultivated voice, the haughty manner, the gimlet eye—he was quite a presence in the town. I remember when I was fourteen and playing a tuba in the local brass band. We marched along the main street to our annual dinner and were told to put our instruments in the back room of the hall. There was Hal Porter entangled with our extremely attractive and voluptuous teacher on the couch. I thought I'd struck Bohemian Life in full flight! Hal didn't seem unduly embarrassed, the history teacher was more so I think. To the local youth he was representative of an artistic strand of life that seemed quite unattainable within the humble confines of Bairnsdale.

INTERVIEWER: Do you come from a theatrical background?

WILLIAMSON: No. My father was a banker, and his father was a policeman in Collingwood, and my mother came from a working-class family in Brunswick who went through a lot of poverty in the Depression. My grandfather on her side, Fred, was a hard-drinking blacksmith who tended to forget his daughters' names. So one side of the family was working-class and the other lower middle-class, which made for an interesting clash of values. When Kristin first heard my parents talking, she said, 'Well, I know where you got your dramatic instinct from, they're always bickering. They never stop acting'. I'd thought this was normal, I'd never realised that this was in any way different, but it suddenly dawned on me that she was right. They engage in ironic repartee all the time, constantly having a shot at each other even though the affection between them is quite obvious.

INTERVIEWER: Did you enjoy reading as a child?

WILLIAMSON: Yes I did, from an early age. I was a precocious reader, although my mother exaggerates and tells people that I started reading when I was eighteen months. That's all bullshit, but I did read early and voraciously. I remember reading *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* at the age of seven or so.

INTERVIEWER: How did you become interested in plays? It's much more difficult to read a play than a novel after all. Did your interest stem from reading or watching?

WILLIAMSON: My interest stemmed from several sources. I agree with you that reading plays is more difficult than novels. I tried to read some Chekhov pieces at a relatively early age and found them

incredibly dreary and difficult because there was no prose connection between the characters. Even now I think—and I'm sure other directors would agree—that his plays remain difficult to read. My interest in drama was kindled by the fact that I had an excellent English teacher in our bush high school called Mr McLeod, and when we did our obligatory Shakespeare he would read it for us, acting it out and making it very dramatic. I remember with *Julius Caesar* he made the whole play come alive for us. It was just what I needed at that time—to come face to face with the greatest dramatist the world's seen taught by an enthusiastic teacher—and I suppose the possibilities of drama must have unconsciously embedded themselves in my mind. Then coming up from the bush to Melbourne and seeing some of the Melbourne Theatre Company's early work of contemporary plays had a great effect on me. I remember being knocked over by the first Melbourne production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*, and of course there were the student productions of early Pinter plays. Seeing plays work in the theatre in front of an audience was very exciting.

INTERVIEWER: Did you graduate as an engineer?

WILLIAMSON: Yes I did; I graduated as a mechanical engineer. I was never interested in engineering particularly but I had a mathematical aptitude, although I got thrown out of Melbourne Uni for failing all subjects and not sitting for five. I was really fed up with it, but my father convinced me to finish it so that I'd have a qualification I could fall back on—the usual thing that was told to kids at that time. I finished the degree at Monash and then taught for seven years at Swinburne Institute of Technology while I was studying psychology at Melbourne University. I was starting a Masters degree in Psychology, and I'd just been appointed to the Humanities or the General Studies Department at Swinburne to take up a lecturing job in Psychology when my first play, *Stork*, took off in the little Carlton theatre La Mama. Things moved rapidly from there: Tim Burstall wanted to make a film of it, John Bell did an excellent production of *The Removalists* in Sydney, and my career as a dramatist started taking off so I could afford to support myself. I got a Commonwealth Literary Grant in 1971 of seven thousand dollars and that was crucial in enabling me to make the leap and go from lecturer to fulltime writer. By the end of that year the plays were in enough productions for me to be able to keep on with writing and still have enough money to live on.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that your father thought you should have something to fall back on, but it's never been necessary has it? By the time you were thirty you not only had many Australian productions under your belt, but *The Removalists* had been performed in London.

WILLIAMSON: Yes, in '71 and '72 I had three plays running simultaneously in Sydney and Melbourne, and I think John Bell's production in Sydney was crucial to them taking off. Before then I'd had small productions in Melbourne which were noticed and thought to be interesting but it wasn't until the Bell production that the potential of my plays was seen by the critics. Shortly after *The Removalists* John Clark did a very effective production of *Don's Party*, and it was those two productions which really established me as a dramatist. Not that I'm not grateful to La Mama and the Pram Factory, I think Graham Blundell did a valiant job on *Don's Party* and Bruce Spence did an excellent job on *The Removalists*, but because they were small theatres and because the professionals in the cast weren't as good as the professionals in Sydney, the plays simply didn't look as good in Melbourne. I'm afraid that the brutal truth is that whatever the spirit and energy and commitment of the Carlton theatre at that time—and it was considerable—any production that would allow me to play the removalist, one of the crucial parts in the play, is not going to be as good as a production that has Chris Haywood playing the role. The whole Carlton theatre was predicated on the fact that professionalism had been used as an excuse to maintain establishment theatre and not to do Australian plays, but when some of that professionalism was vested in Australian plays, all the commitment in the world couldn't make up for the fact that Chris Haywood was a much better actor than I was.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that your first break came with the Commonwealth Literary grant—I'm not sure if this is a fair statement, but it seems to me that playwrights earn much more money in Australia than novelists. What do you think?

WILLIAMSON: That's right, and I really appreciate and feel for the difficulties of poets and prose writers because their medium simply doesn't sell. It isn't unusual for good novelists to sell only two thousand copies of their books, but if a play gets up and running, a lot more people than that see it. I suppose a play is a more immediate experience, people can absorb it in two hours, whereas a novel is a

big commitment in a hectic life. That's why I've always been a strong supporter of the grant schemes to prose writers and poets because they can't compete for the money in the same way that a writer for actors can. Your average television writer, for instance, writing a soap, can maintain a good standard of living, exercising skills that may not be of the highest literary level, but are enough to keep him in bread and butter. But the chances of a novelist—let alone a poet—making a decent living in this country are slim. If we really want a literary culture we've got to support it through the Literature Board and grant schemes. I've got little sympathy for the 'Australian Body of Vocal Opinion' that surfaces in the newspapers saying that if the work was any good the writers would sell, and that anyway, writers work best when they're starving. A heartless and simplistic view. And the expectation that even the very finest Australian novel will instantly sell billions of copies in the States or the UK is not realistic because those two markets are both parochial and self-centred, and are not used to the thought of absorbing Australian writing.

INTERVIEWER: How does payment to a playwright work?

WILLIAMSON: On a royalty of anywhere from eight to ten percent of the receipts. It's a very efficient method and something that we can thank the English dramatists of the nineteenth century for instigating. It's a guarantee that if a reasonable amount of people see the play the playwright gets a reasonable return at the end of the season.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about *The Club*. How did the idea for the play originate?

WILLIAMSON: Just by being indoctrinated into the rites of Australian Rules Football at an early age. I was taken along to matches at the age of five, stood on a box and allowed to shout myself hoarse. I quickly became a fiercely partisan supporter, which is something that's never left me. If you catch the bug that early on you still feel committed to the game and the team and that sort of thing years later. I grew up in a household full of footy lore, and had an uncle who played League football for twelve years, so that was fairly strong in the family—as was the police line. My grandfather, my uncle and my cousin were all policemen, so a lot of police lore filtered through to my consciousness as well.

INTERVIEWER: Did you play football?

WILLIAMSON: I tried at school. Well, I was so tall that they thought I'd be a good ruckman but I was also very thin, much thinner than I am now. I was six foot seven and eleven stone or something ridiculous, so although I had the height I was very easily brushed aside. I wasn't very useful as a footballer.

INTERVIEWER: Sometimes you have been berated for being a 'trendy'. Does that disturb you?

WILLIAMSON: I wish it were true. I'm hopelessly out of date in my musical, film, clothing and lifestyle habits. Talking to my sixteen year-olds constantly confirms this and makes me deeply depressed.

INTERVIEWER: Although your plays deal with the same sort of structure and inter-relation of people, they are all quite different. Have you got a favourite, or is the last one always your favourite?

WILLIAMSON: I've got half a dozen of my most favourite and half a dozen of my least favourite and that's about as far as I can classify it because I keep getting surprised by good productions of old plays and that causes me to reassess them. Certainly at the bottom of my lists is the ill-fated *Celluloid Heroes*—I wish I'd never written that one—but I haven't correspondingly got a most favourite. I'm very involved with and fond of *Sons of Cain* at the moment because I've just been through the mill with it, and I'm delighted to see how well it's working with an audience, so I suppose in that sense you tend to be closest to your latest one.

INTERVIEWER: Even though there are so many top female journalists these days it still surprised me slightly that all three of the journalism positions portrayed would have been filled by women.

WILLIAMSON: Well, I was saying before how so many plays start in reality, and this was one of the realities I observed in that debate I witnessed going on. There was one male editor and five female

journalists debating with him. There weren't any other men in sight. It just so happens that all the top investigative journalists—with the exception of one or two—are women now. It seems to be a field in which they excel in terms of commitment and moral purpose. For some reason other women seem to have a stronger moral distaste for corruption than men do. I'm sure someone like Brian Toohey doesn't appoint women out of any altruistic reason, like that he'd better not be sexist. He just knows they'll do a better job, be more ferocious and more committed.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it results in some good strong female parts . . .

WILLIAMSON: I'm glad you said that because I think I do write strong female parts. The women that I've been associated with—my wives, my mother and my daughter—are all very strong forthright women; I've never really seen role models of weak, vacillating or neurotic women. I've always assumed that women were tough and strong because I was surrounded by a family where that was the case. Some of my aunts were exceptionally strong-minded. In fact my view of the world was that men were meek and browbeaten and women were terrifying.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still think that?

WILLIAMSON: No, I don't, but I have always seen a moral strength and commitment in women that has perhaps been lacking in some of the male role models in my life.

INTERVIEWER: Does it disturb you that you are occasionally attacked for writing what people perceive to be female stereotypes?

WILLIAMSON: Sometimes the female characters I write are not honest, assertive, intelligent, brave and non-neurotic. Very often the men I write are far from perfect. A lot of the criticism about female stereotypes is misplaced. Stereotypes have a dramatic function. They are *meant* to be stereotypes, or at least recognizable types. The two sisters, Kate and Fiona, in *The Removalists* are types—the hard bitten, upwardly mobile Australian suburban shrew and the feckless, dominated, naive younger sister. They are written that way to serve the dramatic structure of the play, not to serve as perfect role models for progressive womanhood.

INTERVIEWER: I know this is going over old ground, but I wonder if you'd comment on the feud between you and Bob Ellis and how it occurred?

WILLIAMSON: Well, I was a friend of Bob's after he wrote a stinking review of one of my early plays in the *Nation Review*, and I had a brief disagreement with him when I met him in Sydney, but we became quite good friends after that. I've always admired Bob, his perceptions, his ironic prose and his humour and I still enjoy listening to him talking in public, but I think that part of Bob's style is to be scathing about any writer—other than himself—who is unlucky enough to have received some attention, and I think it was inevitable that I would be in for my serve sooner or later. It happened when he did a big profile of me suggesting that I was a nice chap, but a fairly dumb engineer who sprinkled a few of his plays with swear words and therefore attracted a lot of public attention—attention which should have gone to other, better writers like himself, and that was the whole tone of the article. It was affectionate in a sense but the thrust of it was that I was a real dill who'd accidentally stumbled on fame and fortune. Kristin leapt into the fray and wrote a very funny piece on Bob's pretensions, but then it was really on because Bob's wife replied with a bitter attack on Kristin. In retrospect I think Kristin would have let the original article lie but she was so outraged that this ex-close friend had done a knife-job that she leapt into the fray, and in doing so perhaps exacerbated the rift. However, Ellis did do some unprincipled things like repeating private conversations we'd had about other writers—over meals with too much wine you can say dreadful things about your peers—and all that leapt into print alienating me from writers I liked and respected. Christ, if we were all held to the things we say at the drunken end of a dinner party as firm views! Since then I've tried to patch it up, but it's impossible for him to stop digging the knife in at inopportune moments, which he does frequently.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of his film reviews?

WILLIAMSON: He runs a populist line in film criticism saying, for example, that Walt Disney is unduly

maligned for *Lady and the Tramp* and that *Coolangatta Gold* was really a masterpiece. I think he's wrong on most counts but it's an interesting line to push.

INTERVIEWER: You've done the screenplay for several films, including for your own play, *The Club*. Do you enjoy writing for film?

WILLIAMSON: Yes. I enjoyed working on *Gallipoli* and I enjoyed doing *Phar Lap*. In fact I've enjoyed most of the transcriptions of the plays to film—some of the screen experiences I haven't enjoyed much, but you just assume that you have a lesser role in film, that you're one of the creative elements contributing to the product, whereas with stage work you think you are the prime element contributing to the event.

INTERVIEWER: What about with *The Last Bastion*, on which you collaborated with Dennis Whitburn, was it difficult working with somebody else?

WILLIAMSON: We worked out a modus operandi which functioned pretty well. We co-produced *The Last Bastion* ourselves so we had some sense of control, and I was happy with the final product, although the real day-to-day production was done by Brian Rosen. But as co-producers we did have legitimate input into casting and areas like that where writers don't usually have a say, so it was very satisfactory. We could actually be part of saying who directed, who acted, who did the art direction, all that stuff. It was good.

INTERVIEWER: How about *Gallipoli*?

WILLIAMSON: Peter Weir and I had a good collaboration with some friction, although that's perfectly normal, so on the whole *Gallipoli* was a worthwhile experience. We had a less happy collaboration on *The Year of Living Dangerously*, which was very difficult because from the inception Chris Koch had a firm view of what the film should be and Peter Weir had another firm view. They fell out, and I was called in to try and get a screenplay up and running, but I found it a difficult situation by the time I was involved. I was there more as a functionary—to do my best—but to operate under the umbrella of Peter's wisdom.

INTERVIEWER: At the beginning of the interview you were talking about the bitterness some writers feel towards the film industry . . .

WILLIAMSON: Yes. I think most writers end up with deep bitterness and the classic book about the industry is called *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, by William Goldman, it's wonderful. Writers do tend to feel prostituted and used. You are the victim of other people's egos: the director or the producer who is determined that *his* vision will go up there on the screen, and that you *will* serve his vision. That's the basic reason why writers feel that if only the director or producer would let them exercise their skills at characterisation, dialogue and structure—which after all is what their work is all about—the film would be a lot better for it. But those skills are sadly all too often under-utilized because the powers-that-be have their own vision of what the film is about and they want the writer to write the scenes according to that vision.

INTERVIEWER: You've directed your own play, would you like to direct your own screenplay?

WILLIAMSON: Yes I would. In the future I think I probably will. In fact I so much enjoyed the experience of directing a stage play that I might try and do far more directing from now on.

INTERVIEWER: If you have any advice for budding playwrights, what would it be?

WILLIAMSON: Don't do it.

INTERVIEWER: Could you sum up what you think are the essential ingredients that distinguish a good play from a mediocre one?

WILLIAMSON: Well, a good play captures interesting or repellent or arresting characters at a crucial

stress point when moral choices have to be made, and this illuminates the very nature of the human species. A play that lasts is one in which the human dilemmas faced by the characters are enduring dilemmas, which have been caught and illuminated by perceptive dramatic writing.

Sydney, April 1985

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