Denise Varney: The desire to affirm and challenge: an interview with Hannie Rayson

Hannie Rayson is one of Australia's leading playwrights whose career spans more than twenty years. Her first major success, *Hotel Sorrento* (Playbox Melbourne 1990), won that year's Green Room Award for Best Play as well as the Australian Writer's Guild Award. In 1994 Richard Franklin filmed it in association with the Australian Film Finance Commission, and both the playscript (revised and reprinted in 2002) and the film as video are regularly prescribed for secondary and tertiary courses. A decade later, *Life After George* (MTC, 2000) broke box office records for the Melbourne Theatre Company and, amongst its many awards, was the first Australian play to be nominated for the Miles Franklin Award. One could say that after Rayson's nomination playwriting in Australia had finally been admitted to the Australian literary mainstream.

In 2003 Rayson has further consolidated her standing and that of Australian drama. Her new work, *Inheritance*, is the first of her plays to move from the smaller and more intimate venues that have been her preference to the Playhouse at the Victorian Arts Centre and the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House. These theatrical spaces and their box office potential position Rayson alongside David Williamson as a writer whose plays are expected to draw a crowd and make a profit for the major theatre companies. Rayson's achievement in this respect is also a significant milestone for Australian women's writing.

While Rayson has enjoyed consistent success over a twenty-year period and positive critical attention, her plays are not easily fixed to a single position. She is a woman writer who writes women characters but does not work within the frame of feminist theatre. She was never a member of the women's theatre groups of the 1970s and 80s and her mentors have been male rather than female. She is, in this sense, representative of a post-feminist perspective. Of the Australianness of her outlook, Rayson's plays examine urban Australian life, recording its linguistic features and its comic delusions, without her being a nationalist playwright probing the national psyche or *mythos*. She is middle-class and belongs to an inner-city milieu, but she also moves out of that zone into ethnic and rural Australia. She is an artist-intellectual, but remains popular and mainstream in a country that is notoriously wary of intellectuals.

Hannie is warm and thoughtful, generous with her time, committed to articulating her work practices and critically reflecting on her work. Her engagement with the arts community (she refuses to call it an industry) and her profile as a public intellectual have involved her in debate about public issues. She made no secret of the reasons for her 1997 resignation from the Board of the Victorian College of the Arts over plans to introduce fees, nor of her criticism of some of its members. Her outspoken views on the management practices of contemporary universities have also been noted. She has said that the suggestion that as an independent artist she is naïve to the economic realities of running a university motivated the writing of *Life After George*.

Born a decade and more after the pioneers of the new wave of Australian theatre, Rayson inherited a theatre culture which had finally shed its colonial straitjacket. As Leonard Radic has noted, by 1990 (by which time Rayson had had three plays performed and published, including *Hotel Sorrento*), 'the time for cringing defensiveness and forelock-tugging is over'. Rayson is both a beneficiary of 'the revolution in Australian drama since the 1960s', enjoying the camaraderie of her generation of playwrights, and an
inspiration to younger writers who see in hers and that of others the possibility of sustaining a career as a playwright.

While Rayson remains independent of any artistic or political affiliation, her career trajectory can be seen as a confluence of three streams of post-60s ‘revolutionary’ theatrical activity. She is a younger witness to the ‘new wave’, and was taught at the Victorian College of the Arts in the late 1970s by its members. Her keen awareness of the personal as political and her representation of the complexity of women’s lives are lines that spread out from a broadly defined and practiced women’s theatre movement. And finally, the community theatre of the 1980s that focused on creating dramatic narratives from and about local community issues was an important launching site for her career as a playwright. The importance of the VCA Drama School is not to be under-estimated in the formation of Rayson as a theatre-maker. In the late 1970s the school was staffed by a young generation of theatre-makers whose values were shaped by the experimental theatre movements of the 1960s. As Rayson recalls, Peter Oyston, the dean of drama, believed that drama students should be taught all-round theatre skills from juggling to letter-writing, rather than being, in his view, too narrowly trained as classical actors.

On leaving the VCA in 1981, Rayson and colleagues received funding to form the community theatre company Theatreworks. There she had a salary, time to write, a group of actors and a workshop floor to test out her words. She is not so much self-taught, but in the constant process of on-the-job training and honing her craft as a writer. She sees her work primarily as her own ‘life-long journey of learning to which I bring one qualification — a pre-requisite for any person who wants to call themselves a student — and that pre-requisite is curiosity’.

Theatreworks is generally regarded as a community theatre, although it differed significantly from Richard Fotheringham's definition. Despite the ‘misfit’ between the Theatreworks’ ideology and the middle-class conservatism of Burwood, it is widely acknowledged that Rayson has a community theatre background. More accurately, as the interview will suggest, the community Theatreworks served was more broadly defined than a geographical, ideological or institutional ‘sub-group of people’ with ‘interests in common’. In fact, by the time they moved to St Kilda they had become more experimental than community-focused. It can be said, therefore, that in so far as the community theatre model involved the production of new works, it provided a vital platform for Rayson to become an independent writer. Interestingly, the local community model as defined by Fotheringham returns in Inheritance whose focus is a community in Victoria's Mallee district.

Rayson was later influenced by directors such as Aubrey Mellor, who first directed Hotel Sorrento at Playbox where she would also spend time as playwright-in-residence, and James McCaughey, artistic director of the regional community theatre group the Mill at Geelong, where she was also playwright-in-residence. Thus her formative influences were rather more theatrical than literary. This theatrical background is found today in Rayson's acute awareness of both the creative contribution and potentially damaging effects of the actor, director and designer in the performance of a play.

Rayson's research-based plays are representational on the classical model of mimesis. Her research — by interview, conversation and immersion in a community or milieu — is driven by the desire to arrive at a truth about the subjects' lives. Truth, so emphatically and convincingly placed in parentheses by poststructuralist theory, is for Rayson not so much a universal or humanist ideal as her subjective understanding of a social type in a given situation: whether a Greek-Australian teenage girl's coming of age or a heterosexual male coping with 80s feminism. The truth as represented in Rayson's plays is best understood as the playwright's relation of integrity to her subject matter rather than the presumption of omniscience. If Rayson's dramatic realism rings true for an audience, then that audience should also be aware of the dramaturgy and play of language that shapes the passage of truth. While Rayson's theatre follows in the naturalist tradition of observation combined with a materialist awareness of the economic and the social, it is inflected also with a contemporary sense of gender, race and ethnicity. There is also a moralist, or rather, an ethical voice in the plays concerned with the economies of power and privilege.

Rayson's style is a blending of realist narrative with the episodic structure of anti-naturalism—a map of the formative influences of the theatre culture in which she learnt her craft. Her plays have the satirical and critical view of leftist cultural politics without the polemics of the ideologically-motivated plays of the late 1960s and 70s. While her ‘aesthetic formalism’ as Helen Thomson points out, positions her
within a conservative ‘text/character/narrative paradigm’ \(^5\), her critical perspective undercuts the association between realism and the maintenance of a social status quo. There are touches of melodrama in Rayson's characters, moments of mild hysteria that interrupt the real. Her position is an advance on, and a further refinement of, the work of her theatrical forebears and a unique formation of her engagement with a theatrical context. In the next ten years it will be interesting to see just how far a woman writer can go in Australian theatre and drama.

This interview took place in Melbourne on 4 October 2002 between the closure of the four-week London season of *Life After George*, and the completion of the final draft of Rayson's new play *Inheritance*.

VARNEY: Hannie, to start with the early theatre work, can you talk about the genesis of your work going back to Theatreworks days, or before if you like?

RAYSON: I did an Arts degree at Melbourne University in the mid-1970s. I didn't study Australian literature or drama so when I graduated I still thought that profundity occurred elsewhere—off-shore. In Chekhov for example. It didn't occur to me that beauty or wisdom or great insight could be part of the Australian experience.

Then I went to the Victorian College of the Arts and I began to think differently. Peter Oyston was the Dean of Drama. His idea was to turn out practitioners who would form small companies generating all their own work. As actors and actresses we were not to be passive, sitting at home waiting for an agent to ring. There would be theatre companies all bursting forth from the college, setting up in locations all over Australia, making theatre that reflected the dreams and aspirations of the communities we were attached to. It was a very empowering time and if you actually were successful, you felt quite invincible. It was when I was training as an actor that I very quickly realised I wasn't acting material and I became more interested in writing.

When I left the College, I teamed up with a group of people to form a company which we called Theatreworks. (We got funding from the Victorian Ministry of the Arts, the Australia Council and Local Government.) The members were Caz Howard, Peter Sommerfeld, Peter Finlay, Susie Fraser and me. Paul Davies and Mary Sitarenos joined later. I was the youngest member of the group. The others were in their middle thirties, and I felt lucky to be part of it. Peter Sommerfeld was a lecturer at the then Burwood Teachers' College in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and we set up an office and rehearsal space there.

Burwood was an odd choice really because none of us felt in any way ideologically simpatico with that area. It was a very conservative, middle-class, suburban place—and still is. We called it ‘Kafka country’. So making theatre that affirmed the status quo was not high on our agenda. We wanted to make subversive stuff. We were unlike the two other theatre groups to emerge from the VCA at the time, the Murray River Performing Group who established the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, and West Theatre who made leftie theatre in a working-class area. We were largely at odds with the dominant values of our particular community, which was a tricky position for a ‘community’ theatre to be in. Later we moved to St Kilda (a more culturally diverse, working-class, arty, bohemian community) and that paradox was resolved, but by then I'd left the company.

Theatreworks gave me the time to write: I had a salary — about a $170 a week. That was mighty. Because the VCA had a philosophy that students would be multi-skilled rather than specialist, we could all turn our hands to lots of things. I could juggle, fire-eat, work a lighting-board, apply for grants, run workshops. We were also taught skills about dealing with the arts bureaucracy. For a playwright just starting out, the opportunity to work in the theatre every day for four years was invaluable. My instinct for the theatrical comes from that experience.

But the most significant legacy of my time at the VCA was the revelation that being Australian was an advantage rather than a handicap in my ambition to be a theatre-maker. I read Helen Garner and I went to see David Williamson plays and I began to read more and more Australian literature. It was epiphanous. It dawned on me, for the first time, that the material of one's life and experience was valid material for art. Insight about the human condition was not solely the preserve of Russians hovering around the samovar or Norwegians experiencing angst in their drawing rooms. What's more, being at the
College engendered a feeling that we were really part of creating a new and distinctive theatre culture: an Australian one that was to this point only fledgling. We were not hindered by oppressive traditions, we were creating the Australian theatre. It was nationalist and feminist and fuelled by a new, raw energy. It was very heady and empowering.

VARNEY: In Mary, a play about a Greek-Australian teenager, you engage with multiculturalism and ethnicity, issues outside your own experience. Could you talk about the development of the play?

RAYSON: Mary was not exactly my first play but it is the one where I learnt a modus operandi which involved going out and getting a picture of lives that were unfamiliar to me. At that stage I had never been to Greece and knew nothing about Greeks. So, for example, I would hear of a Greek wedding and I would go. And someone there would ask, ‘Are you Greek?’ And I'd say no, and then tell her what I was doing and she'd say you must come to dinner and I will introduce you to people. And that's how I would find my way into the women's network. This was women facilitating the research actually, by introducing me to other women. Old-fashioned networks, I suppose. I started to learn what it was I was looking for, how I would go about interviewing, how I would elicit the kind of anecdote that I wanted. I also worked with a youth group, and with students at Doncaster East High School for a term, to familiarise myself with teenagers. I remember distinctly coming to a point in the research where I felt that I had stumbled across the truth, even though the idea of truth is problematic. When I talk about the truth, I mean the feeling that I am in this other world now, that I understand it. This has since happened in each of my plays. I can't predict when it will occur, but it always does.

Mary was the play that taught me how to go about writing a play. How to use research, how to build character and structure a narrative. It was the beginning — because I am still learning about it.

VARNEY: I'm interested in your early influences, especially female influences and supporters. You have mentioned reading The Women's Room in the introduction to Room to Move. As a woman artist did you consciously look for female role models and mentors? If so, who were the women whose support for women writers should be documented and recognised?

RAYSON: Maybe it was to do with the times, but women were not in positions of power back then and did not have an influence or a supportive role. Peter Oyston, Aubrey Mellor and James McCaughey provided that support.

VARNEY: Leonard Radic in State of Play notes that by 1990 plays by women were ‘being staged regularly not just by fringe or community groups in small theatres and in poor circumstances but increasingly by mainstream companies too’. He notes that five of the eight plays in the inaugural all-Australian season by Playbox at the Malthouse in 1990 were by women. These were your Hotel Sorrento as well as new works by Tess Lyssiotis, Therese Radic, Robyn Archer, Joanna Murray-Smith. Can you tell us about this time? Was there a sense of history in the making? Of a shift in the landscape of Australian theatre?

RAYSON: When the Malthouse opened in Melbourne, it did feel like real shifts were taking place. The Malthouse was a new theatre, a beautiful venue, which I still think is a really lovely place to be. This was mostly to do with the fact that it was a company with a charter to do all Australian work. That's what felt fantastic. Instead of a company which might include one Australian play in a season, now we had a season of eight or twelve plays. Before that, you had a palpable sense that the audience was going to an Australian play as some kind of obligation. You could feel their expectation that it would be an inferior work — that it wouldn't be profound, that it wouldn't engage with the human condition with the same intensity as a foreign classic. But now it was different. People had an appetite to see work that was Australian. So it was very exciting to be part of that.

It was my first opportunity to work with the director Aubrey Mellor. He taught me so much. And his belief in the possibilities of an Australian theatre was so inspiring and empowering. It wasn't just talk. He was actually putting our stories on stage. And then Richard Franklin expressed an interest in making a film of Hotel Sorrento. Franklin was an ex-pat who had been working in Hollywood for years. He had done Psycho 2 and FX movies and he'd been working with Alfred Hitchcock. And there he was, wanting to make my little art-house thing, which was very funny. He made the film and it did feel very heady.
Each time I started a new play, I tried to locate a social phenomenon: that is, a trend, or a shift, or a site of contradiction, that I would really like to understand better. And that's how I've continued.

What does it mean to be Australian? That was the question in *Hotel Sorrento*. How are men dealing with feminism? That was *Room to Move*. What happens when female friendships are ripped apart by a question of ethics? That was the issue which started me writing *Falling from Grace*. And early in the process, I come to this exciting point. Will my question sustain a body of research that will be revealing for me — and for an audience?

VARNEY: *In that first season at the Malthouse, was there any sense amongst the women — yourself, Tess Lyssiotis, Therese Radic, Robyn Archer and Joanna Murray-Smith — that you were part of something together? Or was it a case of separate writers and separate works?*

RAYSON: No. It was a case of separate works and it was individualistic. But I love the fact that I went to the theatre the other night to see Michael Gurr's *The Simple Truth*, and Joanna Murray-Smith and Matt Cameron were in the audience and I was thinking, you know, we are writing well now. And it is so exciting. If you included Andrew Bovell and Nick Enright amongst those writers, you could see a group of playwrights who share common values about theatre, but who realise them in different ways. I love that sense in which you feel you are part of something. But it doesn't cohere into a 'push'. I'm not sure why. We're very friendly, but everyone has a different aesthetic and a different sense of where their work sits.

VARNEY: *Is there a sense amongst the female playwrights of all being women therefore having something in common?*

RAYSON: I didn't really have a sense of identifying with other women playwrights, because at that time a lot of women theatre-makers were very interested in biography theatre, in which a female figure who had not received the attention that she deserved at the time was celebrated. A lot of women's theatre was dominated by that and I was not interested in that particularly.

VARNEY: *Are you suggesting that amongst practitioners of women's theatre there were preferred topics, even a correctness, and that if you identified with women's theatre then that's what you wrote?*

RAYSON: The question for me is really about nationhood. I believe the shift in the 1970s towards new Australian works was part of a nationalist tradition. In the theatre, I feel more connected to a nationalist tradition than a feminist tradition, although my work and my life are deeply informed by feminism. And now, nationhood and nation-building and national identity are coming so much more to the forefront because of globalisation. It's so contrary to what we expected. We expected that all perspectives would be global and that actually protecting the national culture would fall by the wayside. In fact it has become more urgent.

VARNEY: *I wonder if you would like to comment on whether women's theatre has been driven by a particular attitude to the masculine. Your writing has thematised love in the heterosexual relationship.*

RAYSON: I haven't really got anything more to say to that. I feel like the task for me is to be able to write men better and to write them more fulsomely. I know I started out with my male characters being the ones who asked the questions in order for the women to be fulsome. You would look down the page of one of my plays in the early days and you would see that the men were the ones who went 'aha hmm', 'no, tell me more' and the women would have big chunks of stuff. This was because I felt that I had an understanding of where the women were coming from. When I was writing *Mary*, I'd be with these grandmothers who didn't speak English, I'd have a feeling for these women. I'd feel connected to them: an empathy, which I didn't feel when I was trying to write men of a similar age and race to me. I used to feel that I could get the women more readily than the men, despite the language barrier. But I've been learning to write men more fully, and I do feel more confident now and more interested to make men the big characters in the plays. Maybe that's to do with having had a son, maybe age, whatever. It's hard to know really.

VARNEY: Would you like to talk about your collaboration with Andrew Bovell, particularly in relation
RAYSON: I loved it. I really loved doing that project and I really love him. I think he's a terrific, super writer. I so loved *Lantana*.

It was a lovely idea — a marriage break-up and the man writing from the man's point of view and me writing from the woman's point of view. But to make it a perfect piece, I think you probably do need one vision and one person to make a cohesive whole. The structure of the piece was complicated: with two people writing, it was difficult to manipulate all the contradictions and make it satisfying. Andrew writes women as leads too and he is very sympathetic to women, with a feminised vision in some way as well. But actually getting him to go in hard from the man's point of view was quite a challenge.

I remember when he presented the male character I kept saying to him I cannot find a reason why I would want to divorce this guy: this is about a divorce and you've created a charismatic, interesting man with whom I could fall in love but couldn't divorce. The character had to be flawed. I remember this conversation really clearly. We were in a café in St Kilda and I said it must be sexual. The whole problem must be sexual. And he was thumping the table saying it is not sexual. And then he'd say, keep your voice down.

VARNEY: If I could refer to your ‘middle period’ of the 1990s, in that time you focused primarily on the bourgeois family drama and the betrayals of marriage and friendships: *Hotel Sorrento* (1990), *Falling from Grace* (1994), *Scenes from a Separation* with Andrew Bovell (1996). Then there was the socially critical *Competitive Tenderness* (1996), which dealt with the out-sourcing of local government services. I wonder if *Life After George* consolidated a shift in focus for you from the personal to public life? In an earlier interview you said: ‘My interest is in the theatre as another forum for debate in the same way as the opinion pages of the Age and films, novels and so on . . . There is a political agenda’. Do you still think that?

RAYSON: I think that's completely accurate. It's exactly how it has developed. *Competitive Tenderness* didn't really work for a whole range of reasons but also I wasn't sure what sort of genre I was working in. But it was definitely the stepping stone necessary for *Life After George* and I can say that with confidence now, because *Life After George* was a success. It played out the big events, edged against the big public canvas, with the private in the foreground. That is how I would describe my style and what I'm working to.

VARNEY: In contrast to the Australian success of *Life After George*, the London production opened in February 2002 but closed after a month. There were high expectations for this production and it was well covered by the Australian media. I wonder if you would like to reflect on what happened with the London season.

RAYSON: I still feel slightly ambivalent. They had Michael Blakemore directing it and he is just a magnificent person, a beautiful man, and Michael Codron was the producer. Codron at 73 and Blakemore, 71, are real veterans. Blakemore is an Australian and we thought this was going to be the key. Rather than kangaroos bouncing around on the stage, he would have a contemporary sense of who we are and everything.

It opened on the West End at the same time as another foreign work, one from Sweden. That closed in six days. Mine ran for four weeks. The context is that the environment in which the show was performed in the West End was really tough. Just so tough. There are fifty theatres. Mine was an unknown play by an unknown author smack in there amongst everything else.

VARNEY: *But four weeks is a standard run for Australian subsidised theatre productions*.

RAYSON: By Australian standards, but not according to the way it was set up in London. It was to have run for six months and then (and this is not just me in my own bedroom fantasising this thing) the plan was that it would go to Broadway. It was put on at the Duchess Theatre where *Copenhagen* and *Blue/Orange* had also been staged. *Life after George* was to be the third production from the same team and each had the trajectory of being a new, intellectually rich and challenging drama. The producers
apparently were completely bamboozled about why it didn't attract a West End audience. They had endless meetings about it.

VARNEY: How do you feel now about the closure?

RAYSON: I got an e-mail from Joanna Murray-Smith when I got back from London and she said don't get too depressed about it. I was very touched by that. However I was remarkably under-depressed. I knew it had worked at home. Had I not seen what the MTC and the STC did with it, with Kate Cherry and Marion Potts directing, I might have been crushed. Because I had seen it work so beautifully in Melbourne and Sydney, I knew that the problem with the play in London was with the production.

The real problem from my point of view was Stephen Dillane's portrayal of George. Dillane is one of the really big names in British theatre. But he played George as a completely ungenerous person — without the big-heartedness which Richard Piper and Geoff Morrell brought to the role in Australia. Dillane played him as a hectoring, bullying, leftie bore. It skewed the whole meaning of the play because you actually could not understand why, first of all, women would fall head over heels in love with him. In the program notes I made it clear that I was attracted to George. But when you saw him in that West End theatre he was boorish. People didn't understand quite where I was coming from. Indeed, as you wouldn't. The way Richard Piper and Geoff Morrell played him, you knew he was inspiring.

VARNEY: Your comments bring to mind a genre of English plays about middle-class people. I'm thinking of Harold Pinter's Betrayal (1978), Peter Nichols' Passion Play (1981) and Tom Stoppard's The Real Thing (1982). Each has been revived in recent years on British and American stages. In fact, Dillane won the 2000 Tony Award for his portrayal of Henry in the Broadway production of The Real Thing, in the part originally played by Jeremy Irons. Cheryl Campbell who played Beatrix to Dillane's George had been in the popular 2000 revival of Passion Play at the Comedy Theatre. In my view, few of the characters in these plays have any redeeming features. I wonder if Dillane played George according to the tradition of the cool and aloof educated Englishman rather than from where you were coming from.

RAYSON: I'm sure he was. It was to do, I think, with the British fear of passion. And there also seemed to me to be an inability or unwillingness to represent Australian intellectual life in any sort of vibrant or believable way. The thing that the British appreciate about Australia is bush literature. The stuff that is really successful is Peter Carey's Ned Kelly, Kate Grenville's The Idea of Perfection (that won the Orange Prize) and Tim Winton's Dirt Music (that was nominated for the Booker). All three are beautiful works but they don't do anything to challenge the British view of Australia as a bush culture. The outback/bush offers them an alternative way of life. They'll eat all that up. But the urban Australian intellectual?

VARNEY: There was some controversy in Australia about the politics of your position on the university. Were there similar points of resistance in the UK?

RAYSON: Yes. One mistake I made is that I wrote detailed program notes which showed my political colours. All the reviewers used them because they usually have one hour to turn around their review and the program notes are very useful. I'll never do that again. The play is not about my politics. It's about the interplay of a whole range of views. That is its strength. You up the ante with the drama when you represent a whole range of points of view. But because I had written my view on the state of universities, they felt they were reviewing my political opinions.

VARNEY: What is your next play about? When will we see it?

RAYSON: It's called Inheritance and is a Melbourne Theatre Company production directed by Simon Phillips. It opens at the Playhouse at the Victorian Arts Centre on 1 March 2003, and at the Opera House for the Sydney Theatre Company on 15 April.

VARNEY: What can you tell us about the play and its impetus?

RAYSON: It's a family saga that sprawls over a period from the 1930s to the present day. It has fourteen
actors. The story is about twin sisters who are both eighty in the present day and played by eighty-year-olds. They have two families and it's about who will be the heir to the family farm. The drama looks at the way in which rural Australia is being marginalised. Whereas once it was entirely central to a sense of Australian identity, country people have become the forgotten citizenry. When I started to investigate the rural crisis, I wanted to make a piece that spoke to urban people from the hearts of rural people. But I didn't want to do anything about drought or about the banks necessarily and it wasn't to be Steele Ruddy or in any way nostalgic. The impetus was to try to understand Hansonism from the rural point of view. I was wanting to take the people of the heartland of Fitzroy and Balmain into the Mallee to see what happens when the politically correct meet One Nation supporters who might be part of your own family. So that was the impetus for it.

VARNEY: Was it a case, as with the earlier Mary, that you were writing about something that wasn't from experience?

RAYSON: Yes. I've been working on it for two years and have spent an inordinate amount of time on the research. I've been all over Victoria but I finally landed in the Mallee as my spot and I've interviewed hundreds of farmers and stock, and station agents. Ask me anything about wheat. I'm an authority. (Laughter).

I went there and basically said, as I do with all my research projects, ‘What's on your mind?’ I am trying to find the key issues. Again and again people talked about the difficulties associated with handing on the family farm. The more I learnt about this, the more I realised there was a beautiful metaphoric significance to this.

I am also writing an Aboriginal character called Nugget. His presence is not to introduce a polemic about land rights, but to tell a story about cultural issues such as white racism. He is the adopted son who has stayed and worked on the farm. He has an entitlement to the farm like everyone else, but he is denied his inheritance. Even though he is a brother, a member of the family, he is still not accorded equality. He is patently a contender for the farm, and is alive and real on the stage, but he is side-lined because he is not really family. The challenge is to get inside him and that's been the hardest of all the tasks. Getting inside the woman character, who is like a Victorian version of Pauline Hanson, and trying to understand the sort of anger and the self-righteousness and the racism there has also been really interesting.

The actual issue about handing on the farms ends up being not only metaphorical in terms of urban-rural issues but also quite symptomatic of all the problems of the bush. You can't split up family farms. Often daughters want to inherit now and won't be happy with the pearl necklace. There is a really interesting demonisation of the daughter-in-law. There are even workshops run by the Department of Agriculture and rural women's networks on dealing with succession issues. The Family Law Act decrees that if a man splits up with his wife, she is entitled to a settlement, but asking for half the property's value might involve selling a farm that's been in the family for generations. So there are suspicions about daughters-in-law. And it has caused all sorts of problems.

There are all sorts of issues. Gender issues, race, class. The lives of many rural people are so epic. I mean the stories are very funny but the actual scale of the drama is so much bigger than anything I've done before. Every family I interviewed seemed to have a tragedy that was off the Richter Scale. The harshness of dealing with dust storms and mouse plagues and farming accidents.

VARNEY: Does that mean that dialogue plays less of a role than in earlier work?

RAYSON: No. I've often felt that my characters are quite intellectual. Good talkers, big talkers, articulate educated people. I used to say in the 80s that I didn't write about men so much because their emotional reticence meant their interior landscape was quite foreign to me. But times have changed and men are more capable of talking about and articulating their feelings. But in the country, there are men of few words. Certainly in women's company they can be very shy. What they were thinking and what they could possibly be feeling is anyone's guess. So this male reticence has come up again. But I do have half the branch of the family coming from Melbourne and they're loud-mouthed, politically correct, Chardonnay-drinking, cafe latte-sipping members of the left and all that stuff. They fill in many of the conversation gaps.
VARNEY: Will it also be longer than your previous plays?

RAYSON: The original draft was five hours long. It's got fourteen characters so you can really go to town with dialogue. There's so much material I found painful to drop. There has been a lot of setting-up to do, especially with the inter-generational stuff. In family sagas in novels you often have to flip back to the front to remember who's who. But in this I've had to be mindful of keeping the audience on track all the time.

VARNEY: A final question in a different vein. Some critics have said that the German middle class has a penchant for self-criticism. They take an almost masochistic delight in seeing their dark side revealed. What do you think Australian audiences want?

RAYSON: I know that it's not that. I think Australian audiences want affirmation. I think they want recognition of who they are. They want identification, recognition, affirmation, celebration, and a degree of satire. They're very seduced by Williamson's plays. I don't think we have the masochistic desire to be flagellated. But the refugee issue has challenged our sense of our legendary egalitarian traits. The shift has been really significant with the Howard Government demonising the Other. The moment you start to say we're not actually like this, that we are not a generous people, this is not something people want to face. But as a writer, this is a reality that I want us to face up to. There is a fine line that I walk: a desire to affirm and to console but also to provoke and challenge.

VARNEY: Thank you, Hannie.

Premieres and publications


Film

Hotel Sorrento directed by Richard Franklin. Produced by Richard Franklin and Helen Watts, screenplay

Video

*The Real Aussie* directed by Tony Wright. Produced by Penny Robins, screenplay by Hannie Rayson. North Fitzroy: Video Projects, 1986. Produced with the assistance of the Human Rights Commission, International Year of Youth (Vic) and Ministerial Advisory Committee on Multicultural and Migrant Education.

NOTES


2 For discussions of the range of community theatre activity in Australia see Richard Fotheringham, ed., *Community Theatre in Australia* (Paddington: Methuen, 1987).


4 Fotheringham 20.


6 Radic 9.

7 Interview conducted by the author with Hannie Rayson at Fitzroy, Melbourne, July 2001.