Hilary Glow: Many (if not all) of your plays are consciously political. Is class an important issue to you?

Hannie Rayson: Yes, and it occurs to me that mainstream theatre managements do the community a great disservice if they program plays that merely address a narrow belt of the middle class. This perpetuates the myth that Australia is classless. It reinforces the idea that the stuff of art does not manifest itself in working-class homes; that profundity or beauty could never be found in the factory tea room. You want plays to be representational across generations and ethnicities, and across the class spectrum—because great theatre is about the human condition in all its variations. If you only focus on that middle belt of people in the middle class who are feeling anxious about whether they can afford to have Armani napery, but feel guilty about their desire to consume, and parade this as one of the great moral conundrums of our times, then you are not going to create material that has power and passion and depth.

HG: What about the argument that since it's the middle classes who attend the theatre, and that if you are going to persuade people to think in a new way about the world they live in, then maybe painting controversial and hard-hitting pictures of the contradictions and conflicts of middle-class life is an important job for a writer?

HR: You could say that is true to an extent. Great suffering also occurs within the middle class—it's not just the preserve of working people or rural people. I think it's important, though, that in representing the middle class you are not just affirming one set of values. The theatre is itself one of the few public places which has the potential to expose the middle class to how other people might live. By and large the middle class is retreating more and more from engagement with 'the public'. They don't use public transport or public hospitals. They don't send their children to state schools. They have memberships and corporate boxes. So here in this public space—the theatre—people of dissimilar views and backgrounds can come together and can test what they do and do not hold in common with others. It's what David Hare means when he says 'A good play, in the truest sense, ventilates democracy.'

So in that sense it does seem a wasted opportunity to serve up more middle-age, middle-class angst. My interest really is in creating a theatre where you are telling the stories of unheard voices. It is a mixture of things, actually. The trick is to create points of identification, by peopling the stage with as much
diversity as possible. Age, sex, political views, and race—*Inheritance* had fourteen characters with an age range from 14 to 80. But the intention is to be subversive, to shake people around both emotionally and intellectually so that they come into the theatre with one set of views, and find it very hard to leave the theatre with those views intact.

HG: When you say they come in with one set of views, does it not seem likely that they come into the theatre with views that are largely inchoate, or at least unlinked, and that what the writer attempts to do is to articulate, to find the links between sets of ideas, and that that is an important intellectual task for the writer?

HR: That is so in part, but I also think powerful theatre has the potential to make us re-examine and change views that we would be capable of articulating. But you are quite right. Finding the links is the key task for the writer. And the only reason I can do that is that I've spent the time thinking about them—I never want to set out with an assumption that I have things to teach an audience. But because I have spent twelve months researching and thinking about the way, for example, people's politics are shaped, I might actually have been able to do some intellectual leg work in that area while the audience have had their heads on other things—like trying to cure cancer or something!

I think that part of the joy of being in the audience when your own play is being performed (if it's going well) is feeling people's recognition of the links that have been made. People enjoy ‘getting it’. It's rewarding. And there is nothing more gratifying for the writer than observing (surreptitiously) people leaning forward in their seats. Once or twice in *Inheritance* there was a kind of communal gasp or intake of breath. That was thrilling!

Sometimes I don't even know what it is that they're laughing about—like that very contrary moment when Felix comes in with the ‘Sorry’ T-shirt, it's a very mixed moment with a lot of different things happening in people's heads.

HG: As you look at that moment in the play, is your hunch that a good number of the audience have worn ‘Sorry’ T-shirts? Or at least have thought that they might? And here on stage there is a sympathetic character who is wearing his political heart on his chest (as it were) but it seems suddenly foolish and risible. Perhaps the audience laughs at that moment because what they might have felt was a legitimate and respectable political action suddenly seems lame, uninformed and naive?

HR: All of that. But I think it's funny because it's full of contradictions. My intention was for the audience to understand, to get another point of view on, why people were supporting Pauline Hanson. What is their problem with political correctness? This seemed curious to me—what is their problem with it? My job is to take people on a journey to see it that way.

HG: So when Felix walks on stage with his ‘Sorry’ T-shirt it gives the audience a glimpse into that very question: what do people from the country find ludicrous about the idea of political correctness?

HR: You cannot leave the theatre without subjecting your own ‘political correctness’ (if that's your general outlook) to some scrutiny. You have to ask deeper questions about the nature of white people's relationships with Aborigines. Any kind of cant about Aboriginal land rights issues, or the status of white-black relations in the country needs personal re-examination. How am I implicated? There is no way you can leave that play and think that it's okay just to slogancer.

HG: Recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 February 2003), Louis Nowra wrote a piece about Australian theatre called ‘Just act normal’, and I'm interested in your response to it. He argues that what makes English playwriting distinctive is its preoccupation with the relationship of individuals to society. He says that ‘the English seem to be saying that the class system necessitates a struggle between individuals’ aspirations and the potent inequalities of society’, and so in English plays there is a constant tension between the self and the world. And he goes on to draw a distinction between this and American plays, which he sees as obsessed with the fate of the individual, with personal psychology and with the perennial question: why am I not happy? This is the context within which he discusses Australian theatre writing, which he seems to be largely
disappointed with. He says that except in the case of such writers as John Romeril or Stephen Sewell, Australian theatre writing has none of the vitriol of a Bond or forensic questioning of a Hare. Even a recent success like Hannie Rayson's Life After George, a story about the loss of political idealism, is soft and full of considerate questioning, and it avoids providing answers. Despite the energy, and even political stances, of many of our playwrights, we have sought a social consensus based on shared values, rather than celebrating the individual . . . Underlying Australian drama is the desire to make the world normal.

What do you think of Nowra's view of Australian drama—that it is soft, interested only in consensual and normalising ideas (rather than extreme or extraordinary ones), even if there is an overt political subject matter?

HR: Those terms certainly identify the kind of theatre you see where, before the curtain rises, you have that sense of ennui settle like a fine mist onto your skin. Perhaps even the design [of the play] suggests a certain softness; all things will be normal and we will be examining a very particular bent of the middle class with its domestic psycho-sexual concerns. In fact, I think that's a definition of bad theatre across the board. You have that feeling when you see a lot of intolerable American drama which embraces those three things (soft, consensual and normalising). But I do relate to that sense of a kind of normalising. I know that I am not interested in going into some areas (which I know Louis is interested in)—like writing plays about madness. I am interested in carving out territories which I can identify with, and if I am giving voice to people on the margins or people who do not have a political voice—which is a big motivation on my part—then I want to be able to create characters that people in the mainstream will understand.

It is my task to create portraits of truth and complexity, which will subvert prejudice and cliché. So, in that respect it could be seen as a kind of normalising. You know, I don't have a desire for you to find Asian people more inscrutable after seeing a play of mine, or for it to be confirmed indisputably that Vietnamese youth are all dealing in heroin, eating dog and doing their homework. Or indeed that a Muslim boy regards human life as totally expendable. But then again, the Muslim boy may blow up a car in Toorak Road and you may find yourself cheering. I want to make theatre which is about humanising us, unsettling our complacencies and ultimately swelling our reserves of compassion.

HG: What Nowra's article does is give us two interesting comparative talking points. One is the English fascination with class and how that has produced a body of literature and plays in which the individual is pitted against the context of class and, on the other hand (and I think he's right), the American obsession with the self and the pursuit of happiness. Do you see Inheritance as steering a course between those two concerns?

HR: I see all my plays as steering a course between those two things. They are entirely about bridging the public and the private, about trying to deal with private moments in the stories of people's lives set against the historical, social and political backdrop. Politics exists and is manifested in how we live. My task as a dramatist is to make the recognisable and the particular and the known shed light on the bigger canvas. People think about politics as being quite separate from the way they live their lives, and my project is to bring the two things together.

HG: One of the ways you do this in Inheritance is by making one of the characters, Maureen Delaney, an ambitious politician in the mould of Pauline Hanson. What the play suggests is that the terrible personal hardships that bring the characters to their knees become the matter of political rhetoric and expedience.

HR: That's using politics in the most narrow band. A better example is the ways in which sweet little old ladies like Dibs and Girlie actually operate with treachery because of an unexamined, ingrained racism. So, that to me is a political act—to demonstrate that all of us are implicated in deeply entrenched racism towards Aborigines. We see in Inheritance an Aboriginal story about land rights (Who gets the farm?) played out with references to the stolen generation. Nugget is the illegitimate son of Farley but he was adopted after the death of his mother, because there was an assumption by the white family that he would get better schooling, a better family life and more opportunities being raised with them than with an Aboriginal relative. And that is just a straight parable about the stolen generation (although Nugget wasn't actually stolen). This was a way of personalising and making familiar the political and social
trend towards assimilation, and subjecting white Christian motives to some scrutiny. As a writer you're always looking at the big things that happen and then bringing them in, making them particular, telling them in such a way that they actually have new meaning because people can see them from the inside.

Creating the intellectual framework of the play involves positioning all of the characters to get maximum coverage of the thematic territory. It involves unearthing the contradictions in each character's world view, and then most importantly burying the research inside the narrative; burying it in both the detail of the character and the plot. I try to be as surprising and unpredictable as possible because that's the stuff of the drama. So you are not just seeing some sort of values-clarification exercise, or illumination of a moral fable, or an inventory of ‘issues’.

HG: You pointed out in an article you wrote in the Bulletin (19 November 2003) that we are all utterly over the experience of sitting through the monomania of the ‘issue’ play.

HR: It's propagandist, by and large. In the Bulletin article I used the expression ‘corridor theatre’. You get to the theatre and you know with a sinking heart that for two hours you'll be walking down a corridor which you can see, at the outset, has a sign that says ‘No more freeways for Melbourne’, or ‘Ban Uranium’. So you want to avoid that. It was very irritating to me to hear certain critics say Inheritance was simply an inventory of rural woes that the play worked through. In fact, in this play, plot is privileged, and the themes are actually very buried, so much so I thought they needed to be dragged out a bit more!

Inheritance is a character-driven play. When you talk about the ‘issue’ play, there is an assumption that you set out with a propagandist motive. I like to think that my plays are more sophisticated than that. When I say my work is character-driven I mean that the plays are always peopled with characters that contain huge contradictions, as we all do, and I am always interested in their having surprising kinds of qualities. People who are ruthless bastards in the board room are very charming at dinner parties, and people who work for the UN or help sink wells in Borneo can be extremely nasty to their own mothers in Bentleigh.

HG: In a sense, a character's internal contradiction produces an inherent dynamism within the drama that helps to keep an audience interested: which way will he turn now, how will she jump? I suppose the clearest case of this in Inheritance is in the character of Dibs who seems, on the one hand, to have acted out of, or to have been motivated by, a sense of Christian charity all her life, but on the other hand has clearly maintained over a long period some fundamentally racist views that make it possible for her to turn away Nugget, her adopted Aboriginal child. Do you think that the same kind of contradictory energy can be found in Nugget himself?

HR: That's a good question—there are a few contradictory elements running through Nugget. I think with him it's about wanting to belong and have the same status as the other members of the family, and yet feeling somehow cut off from a black heritage. That's a tension within him. There is a scene at the end of the play where he rakes over his past and his relationship with his father, Farley, who had been the champion of Nugget and treated him like a son, but Nugget comes to realise that wasn't enough. One of the major themes in this play is about the white silencing of our history, and how that has completely and utterly disempowered Aboriginal people. I wanted to show that, and to underline it and ram it home. We see that the rug is pulled from underneath Nugget and he is left without anything, and yet the father is still saying to him that some things are best left unsaid, and it's impossible to shift the deadening oppressive hand of keeping things secret. We are not speaking the truth about what has happened because of white guilt from having colluded in the oppression in the past.

HG: We've talked about using contradiction as a dramatic tool, but you also talk about it having a liberating quality, as having something of an ideological effect for audiences. You hope that people will feel sufficiently unsettled by the experience of watching a piece of theatre that they may think in a new way about old, familiar and received ideas. I'd like to explore that further with you, and to ask, too, whether it matters that only relatively wealthy people can go to the theatre. This is one of the criticisms one often hears about contemporary theatre: only rich people can afford to go, and that in the face of the liberal-minded attitudes of MTC audiences you are already preaching to the converted. Does this, if it's true, undermine the punchiness of your work?
HR: I think it's harder and harder to predict who audiences are, and what their political views might be. If I look around the 900 seats in the Playhouse, it's hard to know who they are, there is a range of people, and I think that one of the good things about *Inheritance* is that people have come down from the country to see it, people who generally wouldn't make the effort. The MTC has a range of prices, there is a student rush and half-price tickets and that sort of thing, and so it's possible to look out and see quite a lot of young people in the audience, which is very gratifying. Nonetheless, it's a very expensive business, but it's an expensive business wherever you go—even the Fringe is expensive. It's dear going to the theatre, full stop. Where people are coming from politically is very varied, really. I think you will find that working people are no more likely to go to the Trades Hall than to the Princess to see *Mamma Mia*. In fact, if they are not regular theatre goers, they are probably going to save up and go commercial rather than to a Fringe venue. And that's what I am really interested in—speaking to the *Mamma Mia* crowd. I say this because I feel that *Inheritance* could possibly provide the things they would be looking for in a good night out. But their experience of theatre in the past has put them off (too boring, too high-brow, whatever).

In a way the really subversive act would be to take *Inheritance* to the country—I really hope that happens because in the bush there are still pockets where homophobia and racism and bigotry go completely unexamined. There are of course many liberal-minded people out there, but they don't have the resources to help others cope with the changes. And also, often, there is a complacency about things, and you will find that people, very educated, thoughtful people will tell you, quite candidly, that there is class issue in their community, and you think to yourself: how can you not see that that's just not true? So, sometimes it takes an outsider to see these things. And even if people get angry that you have not understood, at least you have been really provocative and have got the debate going.

HG: Do you think that *Inheritance* is provocative to the audiences that go?

HR: That I can't really tell, it's all too soon. But I think so. People are completely overwhelmed by it—that's the response that I get. I have really been surprised at how many city people have claimed it as being a story about 'us'. I really did think that was going to be the hardest task, to make city people care, to make them feel implicated.

I suppose it's that they feel, in both a familial and a cultural way, that they are part of those people on stage, connected to them in a really deep way, and it's to do with the language, it's to do with the sense of humour, and the cavalier racism that's sort of acceptable.

HG: So there are many entry points for audiences to access and recognise the world of the play, no matter whether they are city or country folk.

HR: Yes, that's true, and that's why people laughed with the Maureen Delaney political speech, because they know where it's coming from and they are laughing and clapping because it has resonances for them with Pauline Hanson. But it has changed a bit since the Iraqi war started. At first when Maureen talked about 'every Moslem, Asian and Hottentot who won't sign up to the Australian way of life', people used to laugh outrageously but once the war started the big laugh stopped.

HG: In 2004 *Scenes From a Separation*—a work of yours from 1996—was remounted by the Sydney Theatre Company. What did this involve?

HR: *Scenes From a Separation* is a play I wrote with Andrew Bovell and we reworked the play and brought it up to date for the STC production. It's a play about the breakdown of a marriage; Andrew wrote the first half from the perspective of the man, and I have written the second half from the perspective of the woman.

HG: How do you find the experience of writing collaboratively?

HR: I think collaboration is a tough call. I enjoy the process because working with Andrew is a pleasure, but it is certainly not easier than working alone. Everything has to be negotiated and Andrew and I approach things quite differently. For example, he has to have the structure in place first, whereas I need to know who the characters and what the key issues are before I can proceed with the writing.
HG: And you also have a new play for the STC and the MTC for the 2005 season called *Two Brothers*. This is another play with explicitly political content, is that right?

HR: Yes, it's about two brothers who have opposing political allegiances; one of them is a Liberal Party front bencher, and the other is the head of a community aid organisation. The play is an examination of how political differences can occur in a family. I'm interested in looking at the things that help shape someone's political loyalty, and as always I'm taken up with the intersection of the public and the private. The question of what happens when people play out their personal and ideological views on the public stage is of great interest to me. But mostly I want to truly understand why right-wing politics is in the ascendant, not just here but globally. I want to understand how the values associated with conservatism—self-interest, individualism, commitment to the free market—are giving the Right a sense of vigour and energy.

HG: The difficulty, then, must be to present a hard-hitting political critique without at the same time writing something that is merely propagandist or polemical. How do you deal with that?

HR: The task at hand is to find a way of seeing through eyes that are other than your own; to make the world view of these characters utterly compelling, moral and plausible. And this takes a combination of imagination and research. To write this play I had to get a feeling for what it means to be a conservative, and I needed to be able to write from inside the protagonist’s head about what determines his actions and beliefs.

HG: It sounds like a task that requires superhuman empathy!

HR: It is very hard. In the first draft I found it hard to conceal my contempt for the main character. Then I started to give him a few jokes; giving him a sense of humour gave me a chance to relish his dreadfulness. But the main thing that I needed to do was to find chinks in his armour—to find the character's vulnerability, his tragedies and his fears. I think this is the way to make the actual questions of the play more real, more complex and more dramatic. Theatre has to tell the truth. And it has to make the audience feel involved, engaged in the debate. Australia is staggeringly apathetic, and it is an apathy fuelled by the current government's promotion of the ‘relaxed and comfortable’ ethos. In this environment it is more important than ever that the task of theatre is to enlighten, to unearth the truth, and to make audiences feel complicit.