



Ken Harper

Ken Harper is a Melbourne playwright and director working particularly in community theatre. He is currently working on a project in Portland, Victoria.

THE USEFUL THEATRE

The New Theatre Movement in Sydney and Melbourne 1935-1983

*And I always thought: the very simplest words
Must be enough. When I say what things are like
Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.
That you'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself
Surely you see that.*

Bertolt Brecht

Art is a weapon.

New Theatre slogan, 1936

Right now is a time of radical re-assessment of values in Australian theatre. The innovative theatre movements of the 1970s: the political and popular theatre of The Pram and La Mama, feminist theatre, black theatre, theatre-in-education and cabaret have all born fruit and seeded once again in community theatre. Fundamental to this alternative theatre is the democratising of our conception of what is culturally valid. The notion that art is the domain of the privileged few is thrown out and theatre is brought back into the here and now of all walks of Australian social life, both in its content, form and its place of performance. Bound to this is a recognition that all theatre is political in that no play can be performed in a social vacuum.

It is the proper domain of theatre to focus the ethical and social questions that rage outside its doors. If those questions are consistently ignored by a theatre then it is not just shirking the job, it is actively conveying a message of non-involvement to its audience. The political implication of this is to re-inforce the status quo which must contribute to the cultural stagnation of any society. This latter message, by and large, has been the one voiced by Australian theatres up until the 1970s. There are exceptions in individual plays such as *Summer of the Seventeenth*

Doll, The One Day of the Year and *The Shifting Heart*, but in terms of the philosophical stands of particular theatre groups or companies there are only four exceptions, two of them extremely short-lived: the Pioneer Players (1921-1925) and Emerald Hill Theatre (1962-1966) in Melbourne, The Ensemble (1960-) in Sydney, and the New Theatre Movement that spawned theatre groups in Melbourne and Sydney in the early 1930s and in Perth, Brisbane, Newcastle and Adelaide a little later. The Melbourne and Sydney theatres are still operating, making them by far Australia's longest running performing groups, professional or amateur.

The New Theatre Movement has its roots in the Workers Theatre Movement of England in the 1920s and the New Theatre of America. These movements were frankly affiliated with the Communist Party and the emphasis was firmly on the class struggle, using the agitprop style of the Soviets. Following the American trend, workers theatre groups sprang up in the Australian capitals: the Workers Art Club in Sydney, the Workers Theatre Groups in Melbourne and Perth. In these times of acute economic depression the agitprop style served as a means of swift, punchy political statement as well as a vehicle for the optimism felt for the Soviet model. The Russian Revolution was recent history and the writing seemed to be on the wall for the capitalist countries of the West. From the start the New Theatre Movement had two main features: an internationalist ideology and a concern for the contemporary issues of Australian society. By the end of 1935 the Sydney Workers Art Club had produced thirty productions in three years, including seven new Australian plays, four adaptations from novels, full length plays by Shaw, Toller and O'Neill and three contemporary Russian plays. One of these, *Roar China* by Treliakov, a mass stage production using twenty-seven performers, had been produced in Russia two years earlier by Meyerhold. A number of the others to which no author has been attributed were agitprop pieces devised for specific circumstances. Few of the scripts of these early productions remain, but their titles, *The Moscow Trial of the Metro-Vickers Workers* or *Vanzetti in the Death House* show their concerns.

In 1936 the Melbourne Workers Theatre was established and the same year both the Melbourne and Sydney groups began their long association with the plays of the American writer Clifford Odets. Both groups performed *Waiting for Lefty*, a play based on a taxi-drivers strike in New York. This play in particular launched both groups into the public eye and drew favourable comment from the critics. The next Odets play, performed the same year, was also a great success but more for its notoriety than its artistic excellence. This was *Till the Day I Die*, an anti-Nazi play first performed in Sydney. The German Consul General in Australia protested to the Federal Government who, through the NSW Chief Secretary, banned the play from performance. The group revived *Waiting for Lefty* for the first half of the programme then proceeded to perform an 'un-named play'. The police who were there in force attempted to stop the play mid-scene, whereupon the audience were asked directly 'Do you

want to see this show?' 'Yes!' they shouted, and the play proceeded without interruption. Even more amazing scenes occurred in Melbourne when the Group, now the New Theatre League, attempted to find a venue for their production of the play. None could be found. All halls and theatres had been instructed that the play was not to be shown on their premises. There was a storm of protest that hit the front pages. Finally, the Mayor of Collingwood found a loophole and granted the use of the Collingwood Town Hall on the grounds of it being a private club performance: a crowd of around three thousand people turned out for it, along with hundreds of policemen. Some club! But on arriving they discovered that the building had been locked and bolted. The Mayor, a resourceful man, then broke into his Town Hall by climbing through the window, only to discover that the chairs had been removed! Apparently a group of opposing councillors had arranged that, just in case. The crowd surged off to a vacant block and held a protest meeting but the play was not performed until some time later, this time at the Brunswick Town Hall. Similar scenes of confrontation occurred in Brisbane and Perth, though apparently without the theatrical flair of the southern and eastern cities. Three years later the Australian Government was declaring war on the country whose reputation and ruler it had taken such pains to avoid offending.

Shortly after this the Melbourne New Theatre moved into a loft that could be used for performance in Flanigan Lane. Their next play was written by the Melbourne Radical Writers Group about the events surrounding a mine disaster in Wonthaggi, *The Thirteen Dead*. Although predictable in its message, that it was the capitalist system that caused the gas in the mineshaft to ignite and bring the rock down, rather than some fool and his cigarette, it was nevertheless a very useful exercise. After a couple of performances it was played to the Wonthaggi miners. This was not merely a play, but a broadside in a battle. Whether correctly or not, the personal grief and anger of the miners was put in the context of larger issues. The play served as a focus for the debate, not as the last word in it.

In the years between 1936 and 1939 a considerable number of the plays staged by the New Theatres of Melbourne and Sydney were concerned with war and the threat of fascism. The growing threat of fascism in this period may seem obvious to us in retrospect, but the Australia of the 1930s was not well-informed on current international affairs. Added to this, the Australian politicians were by no means clear whose side they were on. The fascists were putting down the communists in Spain weren't they? Australian political leaders depended on the British Foreign Office for a foreign affairs policy. Meanwhile, Hitler had stated his intentions, re-armed Germany, occupied Austria and taken part of Czechoslovakia. Given the internationalist ideology of the New Theatre Movement, this was the stuff of theatre. Quite a number of American social realist plays by the contemporary authors Odets, George Sklar, Albert Maltz and Irwin Shaw were performed. Shaw's play *Bury the Dead*

in particular was very widely staged, having an extended season in Melbourne at the Apollo and Princess Theatres and at the Conservatorium in Sydney as well as performances in the other capitals. Set 'during the war that is to begin tomorrow night' the play elaborates its anti-war theme through six soldiers who rise from a mass grave, raging against the uselessness of their deaths. This was a crucial play at a time when the questions of armed resistance against the fascists and Australian involvement in what appeared to be a European problem were burning. Australia had already followed Britain into one world conflagration and Gallipoli was the result. Other plays from America with similar concerns were *Trumpets of Wrath* by William Kozenko, *Blood on the Moon* by Paul and Claire Sifton, and *The Home of the Brave* by Maltz and Sklar. The Brecht play *Senora Carrar's Rifles*, written just two years earlier, was also performed by the Sydney group in January 1939. This play questions the ethics of neutrality in a situation of war. The conclusion is clear, unusually clear for Brecht: there can be no neutrality, a war has only two sides.

On the same programme as this play by Brecht was another play which illustrates another of the dominant concerns of the New Theatre in their attempt to create a theatre of social critique. This play was *War on the Waterfront* by the contemporary Australian writer Betty Roland, an agitprop play concerning the refusal of the Port Kembla wharf labourers to load the *Dalfram* with pig-iron for Japan, rumoured to be using it for munitions. This and many others in the Living Newspaper vein were performed on the Domain in Sydney, in work-places or at political meetings. Writers involved in the New Theatres of each capital city devised these fast episodic pieces and the scripts were exchanged between the groups. Among the large number of pieces created in this manner were *Forward One* by Katharine Susannah Prichard, written in support of striking shop-assistants; *Women of Spain*, an appeal for assistance to republican Spain; *No Conscripton*, an adaption by Catherine Duncan; *Soak the Rich*, a play on Fadden's 'soak the poor' budget of 1941.

The Living Newspaper style of performance and the social realism of the Americans, however, had their shortcomings. With the outbreak of the war the issues became clear: there was a great plot against democracy whose spearhead was Nazism, war had become a fact of life. The sometimes overly sententious content of the pre-war productions was less appropriate for a society under the burden of war and so the New Theatre began to develop the satirical revue as a more entertaining and lighthearted way of communicating with their audience. The earliest of these was still unequivocally anti-war however. This was *I'd Rather be Left* written in 1940 by John Reed and James McAuley. This satirical revue followed the Leninist line, that the war was an imperialist war between two conflicting groups of imperialist powers for world supremacy, which was the position of the Australian Communist Party at the time and a direct result of the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin.

This somersault, from the previous position of trenchant anti-fascism to one of cynical indifference towards disputes between the capitalist powers, did the Communist Party little good in the eyes of the Australian press, and could have done the New Theatre little good either.

From 1940 attempts had been made to declare the Communist Party unlawful, along with various affiliated bodies. The New Theatre premises in Sydney were raided and property, including six stage rifles, was impounded. Furthermore, the group had been banned from performing their agitprop pieces in the Domain after a performance of *War on the Waterfront*, and their lease on the Pitt Street premises, occupied since 1933, expired and was not re-offered to them. Fortunately, this potentially explosive situation was defused when Germany invaded Russia at the end of 1941; Australia and Russia were allies. Shortly after, Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and the direct threat to Australia mobilised all, communist and conservative alike. This was a crisis time and all New Theatre groups except for Sydney and Melbourne were suspended. As a large number of the Sydney group were employed in essential services, its theatrical output was not greatly affected, but the Melbourne group felt the pinch. Lil Diamond writes in the 1948 booklet 'Ten Years of the New Theatre':

The loss of our experienced actors and technicians resulted in a lowering of our standard of production. This in turn led to falling off in our audiences. New Theatre entered upon the leanest phase of its existence.

This time also marked a distinct change in direction for the New Theatres. In support of the war effort, and with an eye to widening their audience at a time when the other little theatres were reducing their number of productions, both the Sydney and Melbourne groups devised camp performances for the troops. The main one from Melbourne was *Giggle Suits and Overalls*, a revue aimed at building unity between soldiers and civilian workers; Sydney produced *According to Plan* and toured other shows. At the same time both groups were having difficulties getting the rights to popular modern plays. J. C. Williamson effectively withheld plays from performance by smaller groups by buying up the options to quality overseas plays. This fact, plus the interest of a new, more middle-class audience, influenced the New Theatres to produce more classics, Moliere in particular, and more new Australian plays.

One risky experiment for the Melbourne group was a production of Afinogenov's *Distant Point*. Staged at the University Union Theatre and directed by Dolia Ribush, this was new territory for the group, being a large and expensive production with a professional director. Artistically it was a great success but the audience stayed away in droves. The staging of this production reflected a growing concern for quality in performance and production. The proudly amateur status of these groups meant that there was little or no actor training and directors worked their way through the various other theatre jobs. Consequently there was a constant 'in training' process going on in New Theatre productions, which produced works of variable quality but did not hinder experiment

in production. The New Theatres were probably the most experimental companies in Australia right up until the 1960s, but their work was hampered by the availability of actors only at nights or weekends. Hilda Esson, a director of New Theatre in Melbourne by night and doctor with the Melbourne City Council by day, writes in *The New Theatre Review* in 1947:

From the earliest beginnings of the New Theatre our liveliest discussions have centred round the problem of how to develop a style of acting and production, vivid, sincere, convincing, that would adequately express the aims of the theatre and the part it has to play in the community . . . To find a method that would bring a more vital quality, a genuine creative spirit to our work: to present real people in real situations, not in a dull naturalistic way, but in terms of theatrical effectiveness, was a difficult task for inexperienced actors.

The recognition of the need for a system of actor training was one of the reasons that Ribush was engaged for the production of *Distant Point*. Ribush was a director of great skill and an exponent of the Stanislavsky methodology of acting. This approach was taken up enthusiastically by the New Theatres. Jack Maughan, a New Theatre director and designer whose production notes for 'Rehearsal' (1940) are in the Latrobe Library, makes extensive observations on actor training in the Stanislavsky method. Time and finances must have restricted such attempts at thorough training.

The move into the classics and new Australian plays paid off for the two groups. The Melbourne group had moved into new premises at 92 Flinders Street in 1942 after a fund-raising drive and a loan. The new venue allowed them to perform nightly instead of weekly and the war-time audiences were enthusiastic for theatre. With the Russians as allies and a more nationalistic and moderate line being taken in the choice of plays, the communist tag was both less applicable and not as potent as before the war. The same tolerance and interest was abroad in Sydney. In 1944 the group performed the first of their Moliere productions, *A Physician in Spite of Himself*, and the next year they did a whole season of Moliere including *Tartuffe*. Other non-Australian plays of this period were Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Chekhov's *The Proposal*, parts of Brecht's *Private Life of the Master Race* and J. B. Priestley's *They Came to a City*. The ambitiousness of these plays suggests the popularity of their productions was encouraging a new sophistication and curiosity.

The increase in the number of Australian plays performed also indicates a new direction for the New Theatres. Both groups had always done some Australian plays but these were mostly agitprop or issue-oriented plays like Prichard's *Forward One*, the group-written *Thirteen Dead*, and the revue plays. The 1940s saw the performance of a number of less politically-pointed, full-length Australian plays. This had previously been the domain of the Independent Theatre in Sydney and before that the Pioneer Players. One of the earliest full length productions was *Fountains Beyond* by George Landen Dann. Set in a north

Queensland coastal town it concerns a half-caste, Vic Filmer, who is confronted with the prospect of the Aboriginal settlement in which he lives, a traditional resting ground, being flattened to establish a children's playground. Vic struggles with the mayor of the town and with himself. He is promised work in exchange for complicity with the project but this would be a betrayal of the black culture that has accepted him. Leslie Rees, in his *A History of Australian Drama*, describes this play as 'highly significant. A pioneer, the first serious drama about Aborigines on the fringe of white towns'. Another significant play of this period was *Lawson* by Oriel Gray, an adaption of several Lawson stories linked by the character of Lawson himself as the narrator. This production was extremely popular, playing to packed houses in both Sydney and Melbourne and in most other capital cities. It was both implicitly nationalistic at a time when things were not going well in the war (1943-1944) and firmly in the democratic spirit of the 1890s.

These two plays, the social realist *Fountains Beyond* with its roots firmly in contemporary issues, and *Lawson*, the celebration of an Australian popular culture of the bush with the radical democratic spirit at its centre, represent the two major streams in Australian playwriting that the New Theatre encouraged, performed and articulated, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s. These two streams also fed directly into the group-devised revues that had developed from the earlier agitprop pieces. Other plays in the social realist tradition performed in the 1940s were Henrietta Drake-Brockman's *Men Without Wives* (1944), *Western Limit* by Oriel Gray (1946 Syd), *Welcome Home* by Jim Crawford, *My Life is My Affair* by Oriel Gray (1946 Syd) and *Here Under Heaven* by Mona Brand (1948 Melb). By 'social realist' I do not mean 'socialist realist'. None of these plays are political in the narrow sense of the word. They did not exist to promulgate the virtues of the proletariat, preach revolution, nor recommend the Soviet State. Such plays were still occasionally performed by the New Theatres but they rubbed shoulders with Moliere, Lope de Vega, Shaw, Miller, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, and new Australian plays.

The playwright Oriel Gray's association with the New Theatre during the 1940s can be used to illustrate both the climate of the times and the working of the theatre. Oriel Gray joined the group in 1938, a communist convert as a result of the Spanish civil war, 'the last crusade'. She was employed to write radio scripts for a Communist Party sponsored programme and went on to write revue sketches and full-length plays, beginning with *Lawson* in 1944, and ending with her departure from the group after *Sky Without Birds* in 1952. She developed as a writer in the monthly workshop structure that the Theatre used to work new material, and her plays were topical and essentially didactic. Only a few could be regarded as 'party line' plays, but ideological commitment was central to the group and a writer for the Theatre was expected to keep this in mind. This is the other side of the coin to the New Theatre's widening choice of plays and attempt to accommodate a new middle-class audience. The

playwright Betty Roland for instance, who had two plays produced by the Sydney New Theatre in the late 1930s, became the invisible woman when she and her husband were labelled Trotskyist. Roland had already written *A Touch of Silk*, a popular success and one of the best plays of the period. She should surely have been regarded as a valuable source of new plays and encouraged. The New Theatre, however, did not look at another Roland play and she eventually gave up writing for the theatre.

Oriel Gray was flowering as a playwright when the Cold War was forcing the New Theatre to adopt a different profile from the Indian summer when leftist sentiment was aligned with government policy in the united front against fascism. From 1946 the communists were gradually to replace the fascists as the enemy. Left-sympathising organisations narrowed their boundaries and withdrew their liberal tentacles and calls for solidarity. As Oriel Gray herself puts it 'the dead hand of the party came down on the New Theatre'. Gray left the Party after the deeply divisive Coal strike of 1949 which effectively brought down the Chifley Labor government. The Australian Communist Party, by forcing the Labor government to call out the army against the striking miners, severed friendly relations with the Labor Party for good and the 'them and us' attitude was back in force. With Menzies back in power the conservative campaign to have the Communist Party outlawed resumed and the propaganda campaign that accompanied this tarred all fellow-travellers with the same brush. The *Sydney Morning Herald* stopped accepting paid advertisements for New Theatre shows and gave no reviews. Another factor isolating the group was that in a cheeky attempt to challenge J. C. Williamsons' monopoly on quality plays from overseas, the New Theatre staged a production of *Deep Are the Roots* by Gow and D'Usseau, the rights to which were held by Williamsons. They slapped a writ on the New Theatre and the show had to close. As a result the New Theatre was black-listed by the other agencies. Fortunately, their encouragement of local writers was paying off and in that year, 1947, the group produced five Australian plays, most of them new. Notable among these was George Farwell's *Sons of the South*, a dramatisation of the great shearers' strike of 1891. This play is firmly in the tradition of Gray's *Lawson*, Prichard's *Pioneers* (1944 Syd) and *Eureka* by Diana Reeve (1938 Syd) in its celebration of the Australian democratic ethos, home grown in the Bush. This tradition was to find its most popular expression in *Reedy River* by Dick Diamond and others in the Melbourne group six years later.

Sons of the South was also performed by the Melbourne group in 1947, directed by Hilda Esson. Esson has been described as a kind of elder stateswoman in the New Theatre of Melbourne. A girlhood friend of Katharine Prichard and Nettie Palmer, Hilda was involved in the vigorous literary forum of the 1920s and 30s described in Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles At Home*. She was also married to Louis Esson, playwright and co-founder, with Vance Palmer and Stewart Macky, of the Pioneer Players, the crusading nationalist theatre of the 20s. Hilda brought with

her to the New Theatre a rigorous intellect and an interest in theatre which was free of the narrower Marxist social critique. She had a profound distrust of the Communist Party's interference in the work of practising artists, perhaps based on her close acquaintance with Prichard and Jean Devanny, both party-workers and writers under considerable stress. According to Dot Thompson, one of the foremost directors of Melbourne New Theatre, Hilda Esson's interest was primarily theatrical rather than ideological. She and the people working at that time had a great concern for high artistic quality based on the ensemble approach. This led to a journal being published between 1942 and 1949, the *New Theatre Review*. It still sported the slogan 'Words can be bullets' on the front cover, but it contained papers on acting style, design and direction as well as debate on social issues. In fact, the *New Theatre Review* is not unlike an early *Theatre Australia*, only radical — if such a thing can be imagined. It contains interviews with authors, features on overseas and local theatre events, and articles on dance and opera, as well as reports on New Theatre activities in the different capital cities. There is much discussion about 'realism' as a theatre concept and as an approach to the arts in general, but, at least to Hilda Esson's mind, this is not so much a question of form or the Revolution as one of relevant content:

It is not so-called 'propaganda' that inspires the realist theatre but a creative urge to awaken people to the realities of the world around them, to give them hope, purpose, direction and to help them see the possibilities in life.

It is this interpretation of 'realism' that led the New Theatres to perform the classics: Moliere, the social satirist; De Vega, the first dramatist to treat the common people with sympathy and dignity; Shaw and Ibsen. Hilda specialised in directing new Australian plays such as *Sons of the Morning* by Catherine Duncan, and most of the ones already mentioned, as well as many of the classics performed. It should not be forgotten that the audience of the New Theatres was essentially working-class, derived mainly from the unions and other left-sympathising organisations. They expected a social critique that was at least socialist at its root. Despite the intention to widen the Theatre's appeal to more middle-class audiences during the war, it was still a theatre for the 'community' of the Left, and in the 1940s this community was particularly vibrant and healthy. The wide cultural stride taken in the *New Theatre Reviews* attests this; it had its last issue distributed in 1949.

The 1950s were a lean time for the New Theatre Movement. Along with the more hostile social environment brought on by the cold war and Menzies' efforts to have the Communist Party banned which smeared all associated groups, there was a growing disillusionment in the socialist cause. By 1955 the Party was a mere shadow of what it had been. It had lost the weak grip it had on the popular left's support through an intractable Stalinist line which supported the Soviets' post-war imperialist accessions of the Baltic States. When Khrushchev's speech condemning Stalin's crimes was made public in 1957, the roof fell in on the Party.

In Sydney the owners of the Castlereagh Street premises the Theatre

had been using required them for their own purposes and the group found themselves on the street with few offers of alternative premises. They finally accepted an offer from the Waterside Workers Federation to share the use of the auditorium on the third floor of their building in Sussex Street. This was a difficult venue because as a shared space, shows needed to be bumped out completely or at least partly dismantled according to the needs of the Federation. The number of shows dwindled from an average of seven per year to a rock bottom of two in 1954 and around three or four per year until 1963. In the boom years of the late 1940s the group had bought a truck to extend their agitprop work to new locations and now they increasingly concentrated their energies in this area. They toured Newcastle, Wollongong and country areas performing revues and short plays. At one time they performed to a group of miners involved in a stay-down strike hundreds of metres below the ground at Glen Davis. If the ribs of the political animal were beginning to show in these lean times they did not go unnoticed. The police were often about during performances and the truck was followed. Their audiences too were now largely made up of converted who had been their mainstay in the 1930s. This was not a result of the nature or quality of the shows they performed but the press boycott. Both the Melbourne and Sydney groups needed a popular success badly. This finally came in 1952 in another celebration of the bush ethos: *Reedy River*.

Reedy River began as a collection of songs and was developed into a full-length play by the Melbourne New Theatre. Based loosely around the shearers strike of 1891, the play is a kind of folk-musical accompanied by a bush band; its songs are mostly traditional ballads, neglected for decades during the jazz age. John Gray, an actor and director, workshopped the play into production with Dick Diamond as writer. The characters were largely developed by the actors themselves and written into the script. New songs were included as well, among them Helen Palmer's 'Ballad of 1891', a powerful song for unaccompanied male choir. This play is an excellent piece of ensemble-created theatre and was a huge success all over Australia, performed in every capital city and revived every few years. It did particularly well in Sydney and the group eventually put the songs to record. Its popularity gave the then infant Australian folk song revival a huge boost, and it was eventually published as a school text. Apart from its popular success, this play is significant for its group-devised origin. No less than seventeen actors, writers, composers and theatre creators were involved in working up the play to the stage, a heritage from the tradition of group-devised revues that the New Theatres had been doing since the 1930s.

Reedy River was first performed in 1953. Later that year the Melbourne group performed *Strangers in the Land*, their second play by Mona Brand, a Melbourne-born writer who had already achieved considerable success with her plays in England, Russia and elsewhere. Melbourne had done *Here Under Heaven* in 1948 and it was reviewed very favourably. Mona had then gone abroad and returned in 1953 to

Sydney. This was the beginning of a long working relationship between Mona Brand and the Sydney group stretching over twenty-seven years. She joined the group in the lean years at Sussex Street when their plays were receiving no press notices and had six plays performed by them under these circumstances. These included both revues such as *Out of Commission*, a burlesque of the Petrov Commission set to the music of *HMS Pinafore* (1955), and social realist plays such as *Strangers in the Land*, a play about English imperialism in Malaya. These plays were performed at the Unity Theatre in London and in Russia. They are all firmly rooted in contemporary social issues but not many are relevant only to Australia. There is a problem with the work of all who write with an ear out the door and an eye in the newspapers: a play that is bound to a particular social and political climate in its subject and style does not always travel well. It is designed to be a part of the hot debate that is going on outside the doors and once that debate has passed, the play itself is diminished. The plays by Brand performed at Sussex Street were effectively censored from that debate by the press boycott at the time they were most relevant and their impact was thus lessened. This continued until the early 1960s.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a number of events occurred that were to affect the course of the New Theatre Movement. The disintegration of the Communist Party increasingly left the New Theatre, especially the Sydney group, without the 'strong advice', as Mona Brand puts it, that had been influential during the Cold War and the 1930s. In Sydney this, combined with their shift to new premises in St Peter's Lane Darlinghurst and the lifting of the press boycott, led to a freer feeling in the group. If there was an ideological vacuum, however, it was quickly filled by the new wave of political radicalism generated by the Vietnam war. There was an influx of members into the Sydney group with a different kind of political commitment, specific to an intense issue. Moreover the Vietnam war spilled over into other issues the New Theatres had been espousing for years: opposition to American cultural imperialism and the championing of democratic Australian nationalism. But meanwhile, Australian theatre had experienced something of a renaissance. In the mid-1950s Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* had put both the Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the Melbourne Theatre Company (then the Union Theatre Repertory Company) on the map. NIDA was established in 1958, and the Old Tote Theatre Company and Jane Street Theatre appeared in 1963 and 1966 respectively. With the exception of the Trust, all of these companies had university origins, all appealed to an essentially middle-class audience. Most had an interest in performing Australian plays and, with the exception of NIDA, all were professional companies. The era of the little theatres was coming to a close. It became increasingly difficult for the smaller amateur theatres to get the rights to the best Australian plays or good contemporary plays from overseas. Many Australian writers held out, as they still do, for professional productions with the prestigious companies.

In general there was a boom in prosperity for most Australians during the 1950s and 1960s that left them uninterested in a theatre of social critique. The arts were more widely cultivated than before but they were the arts of the universities or the race track. The circumstances that would demand that the arts should once again roll up their sleeves and enter the public political arena did not occur until the early 1960s.

Melbourne New Theatre was perhaps not so affected by the disintegration of the Communist Party in this period, although members had been sufficiently intimidated by the Communist smear to use nom de plumes on their programmes until 1955. Vane Lindesay, an innovative designer who had worked with the group on and off from the 1940s until the late 1950s, creating many of their most successful sets, had used the name Peter Lukash derived from Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Their number of productions also decreased in the 1950s despite the success of *Reedy River*. Melbourne had no Mona Brand to collaborate with at this time but they did keep up their number of Australian productions and classics. Among the productions of this period were: *The Torrents*, a prize-winning play by Oriel Gray; *Pacific Paradise* by Dymphna Cusack; Miller's *The Crucible* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Owing to increases in rent and a further falling off of audiences, however, the group had to give up their Flinders Street theatre and operate in a touring capacity from 1960. If the Sydney group was revitalised by the influx of the Vietnam generation and the continuing commitment of Mona Brand, no such revitalisation occurred in the Melbourne group. The energy in theatre, as in Sydney, was coming mainly from university-derived groups, particularly those established by Wal Cherry. These were not overtly political, but they were stylistically innovative. Indeed, a number of actors from the New Theatre became involved in Cherry's ensemble experiment, Theatre 60, and then went on to Emerald Hill Theatre. The subsequent development of La Mama and the APG firmly took the reins of radical theatre in Australia from the New Theatre, although apparently very few APG members were even aware of the thirty-five year radical tradition they were inheriting.

As I have said, however, the path of the Sydney New Theatre was bolder and more vigorous. Of the contemporary theatres that sprang up in Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s, none could really be called politically or socially concerned. Compulsory military conscription had been in force for six years before NIDA commissioned Boddy and Ellis to write *The Legend of King O'Malley*, the popular theatre yarn that had some political bite. Prior to this any reference to the conflict stayed politely outside the professional theatres. The New Theatre, however, had come out with *The One Day of the Year* in the first year of Australia's involvement in the war, and had followed that up with at least one play a year with war as its central subject. It was only as Australia as a whole gradually caught up with the reality of the war that the tide began to turn against it. The New Theatre moved with the student protest movement and in 1967 produced *Onstage Vietnam* written by Mona Brand and Pat

Barnett. *Onstage Vietnam* was an elaborate, hard-edged look at the history of Vietnam combining a range of styles and synthetic media. The thoroughness of its content came from Mona Brand's long association with Vietnam, which included a period of work there; the energy came from those most directly implicated in Australian policy; and the style came from the tradition of the 'Living Newspaper', which had been used by the New Theatre since the 1930s, extended and combined with revue and the media appropriate to the reportage of a technological war. This use of stylistic collage, historical quote, burlesque and collaborative working methods was used by Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis in the development of *The Legend of King O'Malley* three years later. *Onstage Vietnam* was very successful in Sydney, playing to full houses and extended seasons. It also received a production by the Melbourne group at the Emerald Hill Theatre.

The main thrust of the political theatre produced at the Sydney New Theatre during this period was anti-American imperialism. The same year they produced *Macbird*, a burlesque of Macbeth satirising Lyndon Johnson, and in 1968 they produced *Going, Going, Gone!* a revue devised by Mona Brand and Margaret Barr about the selling off of Australia, and *America Hurrah* by Jean Claude van Italie, involving yet another banning, this time for obscenity, which the group was able to turn to its advantage. Since the 1960s Sydney New Theatre has maintained an output of around six shows a year, always including a topical revue and recently including children's theatre productions. They have produced a number of Brecht plays, Dario Fo, Bond, Shakespeare and Stoppard as well as a few Australian plays by Romeril, Nick Enright, Mona Brand, Sumner Locke Elliot, and revivals of *Reedy River*. The problem of getting rights to good Australian plays, however, is still an obstacle. In 1975 the Whitlam government made a grant to the group to assist them to buy a building in Kings Street, Newtown, for conversion to a theatre. This is now their permanent venue. They are still a non-professional theatre operating on a committee basis with a policy of producing socially relevant and committed theatre. The implications of this policy in a society that has changed so enormously in the past twenty years have perhaps not been thoroughly assessed or integrated. Melbourne New Theatre has also continued although hampered by the lack of a suitable venue. In 1976 the group moved into the Organ Factory in Clifton Hill and they have been performing there and renovating the space since then. In 1974 a day-time touring Theatre-in-Education group was established and this still operates in schools and community centres.

The Workers Art Clubs, forerunners of The New Theatre Movement, were established for workers as a cultural forum with a socialist bias. The New Theatres into which these evolved carried on this role, elaborating 'progressive' ethics to this particular working-class audience on the social issues of the time. This was a community audience in that they

were brought together by their particular position in society; they had common concerns and they saw themselves as a part of a broad progressive community both in Australia and in the rest of the world. The New Theatre was one of the voices that articulated this sense of community. In the 1940s when things were going well for this community and they could afford to be optimistic about their future aspirations, when they were in comparative harmony with the rest of Australian society in the fight against fascism, the New Theatres reflected this, expanding the spirit of their playing to include a broader audience. In so doing they refined their own playing techniques and aspirations. This was the time of Moliere and the celebration of the Australian democratic spirit. The New Theatre found these new audiences during the war but the community audience of the unions and the progressives was still the backbone of the Theatre. And so they should be, it was their theatre after all. The expanded format of the war years continued on into the post-war years, but with the increasing polarisation of the left and right brought about by the Cold War, the audience of the New Theatre was reduced to the community that inspired it. In the later 1950s, however, the community of the left went through a period of crisis and disintegration, and the New Theatre movement began to lose its communal audience. It was left with a philosophy that was still flexible enough to allow dynamic theatre with a social concern, but no self-defining radical community audience. The exception to this was Sydney's participation in the popular movement against Vietnam in the 1960s. But the problem remains: without a community base the groups must compete in a market-place which now embraces many of the concerns the New Theatre has espoused: popular theatre, indigenous theatre, the theatre of social critique, but with all the professionalism that the market-place requires. Where is the New Theatre to go from here?

Above all else, the New Theatre has been the useful theatre: disseminator of information, focus of ethical debate, champion of democratic principles, action group for the underdog, kicker of complacent bums, forum for radical community ambitions, party giver, teacher and most importantly, entertainer. And what has the New Theatre contributed to Australia in theatre? First and foremost, a tradition of ethical concern in the theatre, a positive idea of how the arts should contribute to the everyday lives of people and not simply distract them from their problems. To this end the New Theatre has always lived within its times, reflecting the concerns of the day. This is a valuable tradition in a society that has too often accepted the velvet glove theory of art. It is into this glove that the New Theatre has attempted to slip, if not the iron fist, at least the workaday hand.

Secondly, throughout its existence the Theatre has been the active champion of the local product. In its time the New Theatre has produced over a hundred Australian plays and has encouraged a considerable number of writers to produce work for the theatre at times when it was, to

say the least, unprofitable. The development of the popular theatre format, from the early agitprop through Living Newspaper to the theatre collage style of *Onstage Vietnam* and the New Theatre revues, prepared the way for the rediscovery of this style in the 1970s by the Australian Performing Group and the Nimrod.

Thirdly, the New Theatre serves as a model for an alternative theatre structure to that of the hierarchically structured companies that dominate our theatre history. Its fifty year commitment to a collective structure gives the lie to the argument that this structure can't work. It has worked, allowing the group to change direction within the ambit of the Theatre's aims, creating a fertile forum of debate in the process. There is a tradition of collectivist theatre structures in Australia beginning with The Pioneer Players, through the New Theatre and Emerald Hill Theatre to the APG. Of these, the New Theatre survived the longest. Linked to the collectivist approach is the ensemble method of generating theatre. The group processes that were used in the creation of *Reedy River* are today often employed, particularly by community theatre companies, as a basic working method.

Fourthly, the New Theatre has quite simply created a large body of brave and innovative theatre in its period of existence, all within the limitations of its modest assets and amateur status. On the eve of the Victorian Arts Centre's unveiling of its new theatre complex, and the accompanying rhetoric of Money equals Quality coming from our subsidised theatres, it is well to remember the three thousand people who watched the Mayor of Collingwood climb through the window of his town hall, waiting eagerly to see *Bury the Dead* performed by amateurs. Good theatre is about new perceptions of an old condition and when it is good, it is indeed a weapon.