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# Re-reading Stephen Sewell's *Traitors*: Ideology and Gender in "the Australian Play"

G.K.H. LEY

My primary focus in this essay will be on Stephen Sewell's *Traitors*, a (re-) reading that highlights its relations with two other, better-known plays by Sewell, *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* and *Dreams in an Empty City*, all produced in a period from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> But I shall insert that discussion into a consideration of issues affecting the problematic topic of "the Australian play," issues such as cultural hegemony, corruption, gender, and ideology. For part of that broader context, I shall draw from contributions made to Harold Love's remarkable *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History*, published in 1984, in the middle of the period to which those plays of Sewell belong.

The topic of "the Australian play" is one that comes back and back again within Australian culture, and it remains curiously problematic. But at the time of the publication of the *Documentary History*, the archetype was Geoghegan's *The Currency Lass*, which Philip Parsons described in his foreword as "one of the very first Australian plays with an Australian setting performed in Australia" (Love xvi). An old nineteenth-century play, but part of a modern ideology: "restored [...] to the stage [...] in the first season of Australian plays at the Jane Street Theatre in Sydney in 1966," as Parsons noted. *The Currency Lass* functioned as the historic underpinning of the initiative by the institutions of the National Institute of Dramatic Art and the University of New South Wales' School of Drama in the Jane Street Theatre season, with its emphasis on a contemporary Australian playwrights' theatre, an emphasis reflected subsequently by Currency Press as well. This nexus formed one wing of Margaret Williams' estimate of the beginnings of the Alternative Theatre, which she dated to 1966; the other wing was Betty Burstall's "La Mama" cafe-theatre in Carlton (Love 221–22).

By contrast, but by no means in conflict, Paul Richardson in writing of the 1840s in the *Documentary History* spoke of the "development of government

legislation to control theatre managements, actors, plays, and by implication playwrights" (Love 67). "For a play to be acceptable to the Colonial Secretary," he continued, quoting from a covering letter, "it needed to be [...] 'perfectly free both in dialogue and plot from anything local, political, sectarian or immoral.'" *The Currency Lass* of 1844 distinguished itself by successfully negotiating this kind of trenchant embargo. A generation later, pantomimes fared better, with *Australia Felix* giving us Mirth the spirit of Australia in contrast to Kantankeros, the reigning power of England, whose servant in suppressing wit was the Lord Chamberlain, the presiding English censor.

What stands out in Richardson's lively account is that the eventual triumph of Mirth did not come before the young hero, Australia Felix, "has his head turned in the direction of corruption" (Love 71–72).<sup>2</sup> From the outset, the immanent context of the problem of the Australian play was the burden of a hegemonic, dishonest, corrupting authority. Cultural hegemony is the enduring structural problematic for repeated questions about the identity of the Australian play, and consequently one theme of Australian drama is the interplay of power and corruption. Yet we should not forget that, under different circumstances, overriding authority is also the history of English drama – of the "English play" – which struggled with the long shadow of the Lord Chamberlain's corrupting censorship since the Licensing Act of 1737.<sup>3</sup>

In 1984 Ray Lawler was dramaturg at the Melbourne Theatre Company, embodying the spirit of the post-war consciousness of the possibility of the Australian play. The emblematic Australian plays of this renaissance were Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year*. Alrene Sykes wrote in the *Documentary History* of the characteristic style of this period as "a guided tour of Australian working-class life" (Love 208), and apart from that class-orientation, we should also bear in mind, in relation to Sewell, the prominent father–son conflict of Seymour's play. Sykes speculated that the "long avoidance of the middle classes in our drama" (Love 208) was due to the substitution of imported British models such as *Rattigan*. But when British drama changed with Osborne, the Australian play might do so too, with the result that "Australian audiences delightedly faced themselves in the plays of Williamson and Buzo," as she observed (Love 208), reading that Australian audience as a new, urban middle class. Therein lies another negotiation of cultural hegemony, and the subsequent generation realized yet one more, between the commercial success of Williamson's work (one path to emancipation) and the intervention of state subsidy. As Parsons and Williams noted,

The explosion of new playwriting since the late 1960s has been associated with the Australia Council's funding of a widening range of theatres able to support and indeed compete for new local work. Not only the major theatre companies, whose subsidy carries the obligation to stage new Australian plays, but smaller and more

idiosyncratic theatres now look to Australian plays as potential box-office.  
(Love 210)

In this ambit the question of the Australian play was placed on the ground of the almost pragmatic question of repertoire, ground on which I suspect it does not really belong. But that ground itself, almost as soon as it was established, was seen by many to be just another part of the structural problematic of hegemony, and this is now a familiar story, which is that of the emphasis of the alternative theatre on alternative practices. Margaret Williams documented the new subversive negotiations in her summary of the alternative theatre (Love 220–29). These were, concisely, subversions of theatrical form and style as well as content, principally signifying and empowering the concept of “theatre” rather than “drama.” Inside this conceptual change came that emphasis on a changed method of operation, which might be collective creation or a democracy of production, a mode of performance that asserted its integrity and stood independently from the hierarchy of director and writer.

Document 131 in the *Documentary History* (258–60) reveals this consciousness in the account from Helen Garner of the genesis of the Australian Performance Group’s *Betty Can Jump* in 1972, in which an acknowledgement of the absence of a writer for the workshops of women performers becomes part of the ideology of the practice. The impact of feminism and women’s theatre occurred at the same time as that of popular theatre and its appeal, such as in the work of the Popular Theatre Troupe of Brisbane, alongside initiatives in indigenous drama and theatre, and with what might now be embraced under the term *inter-culturalism*, with Rex Cramphorne’s Performance Syndicate.

This sea change is surely a context for Sewell’s work, as a writer and a creator of plays in the face of the enduring question of what a sincere and committed act of Australian theatre might be. Sewell is, even at the beginning, committing himself to a compact vision that may be communicated in a re-performable script, a stance that might be regarded as artistically conservative or even timorous, but which I suspect was more simply conventional, because his wish was to tear some wounds in the conventional. I shall make only a passing allusion here to his first full-length play of 1978, *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea*, in which he consciously provided a futuristic torturing of a conventional milieu. The historical roots of the drama are clearly indicated by Peter Fitzpatrick in his impressive study of Sewell: “The fact that the events of 1959 occupy nineteen of the play’s twenty seven scripted scenes is an indication of the priority in the play of the attempt to understand the past.” (70)

The generational conflict and the naturalist portrayal of “Australian working-class life” suggest this was as much an attempt to write oneself into a familiar pattern of dramaturgy, and then to subvert it in form at least, as it was an attempt specifically to “understand the past.”<sup>4</sup> Fitzpatrick’s phrase is, curi-

ously, itself part of the received ideology of the Australian play, since this "understanding" is what the father implicitly demands and expects of the son in Seymour's *The One Day of the Year*, which stumbles and fights its way in its closing scenes towards a monosexual reconciliation. Sewell's futuristic paranoia of Australian dictatorship in *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea* was a substitute for that kind of reconciliation with the past, with the nostalgia for Anzac militarism turned on its head, the future projection threatening the present. But what Sewell did in his second major script, *Traitors*, was all the more apparently to "understand the past," a distant and a foreign past, that of the Soviet Union post-Lenin and at the time of the rise of Stalin, the past of his own political commitments in the present.

*Traitors* (1979) was demonstrably a play by a Marxist, about Marxists but not about capital or capitalism, or overtly about Australians. But it was, significantly, the winner of a competition for (Australian) playwrights run by the Australian Performance Group (APG) in Melbourne, and as a result received its first production at the Pram Factory.<sup>5</sup> The introduction to the printed edition by Dan O'Neill, lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Queensland, plainly belongs to Marxist politics rather than to the discourse of the Australian play. Yet O'Neill saw Sewell's plays firmly as part of a "struggle for a new central notion of what theatre is there for" in Australia, and insisted that both of Sewell's early plays "should be seen as exploring our very being as historical, cultural, continuous" (O'Neill 6, 7). So for O'Neill, "Sewell's play comes from a living in the violent under-currents of a post-Kerr Australia" (8), and it was no doubt a Marxist historical vision that located Sewell in history. O'Neill continued, "Sewell's play, like any other, is written from a time and a place within history; loosely speaking, it is 'about' a group of people within a set of institutions and events in another time and place. But the crucial thing is that it is within the same cultural continuum" (13).

O'Neill saw a link between the protesters in the play in a square in Moscow in 1927 and "Sewell and other protestors in a square in Brisbane 1977" (15); but this political link – Sewell was to O'Neill "a fellow socialist and activist" (6) – was not explored further. In its place O'Neill identified "what is falling apart still" as the sphere of personal relations: he wrote of "the same smashing apart of personality," of "compulsive and heartless sexuality," and the "looming fear of there being no solution" amongst other continuities (16).

Sewell's play is not Brechtian, nor even pseudo-Brechtian, and in that respect it refuses to acknowledge even the most assimilable tendency amongst all those available in the multiplicity of alternative theatres and practices of its own time. It is a naturalist, episodic drama about members of an increasingly fragmented, marginalized, suspected, and finally persecuted Marxist opposition to Stalin within the Communist party in the later 1920s in the Soviet Union. The party in power is a totalizing system of suspicion and the alienation of each from each, a system that destroys principles as it destroys people. The

state of society it presents, in characters with a conscious involvement in the effective possibilities of systematic power, is akin to paranoia. The factions of opposition may be historically obscure to those not imbued with inter-Marxist polemics, but the systematic operations are plain as day.

Isolation and fear accompany the central heterosexual union between a male secret-service agent and a woman of the opposition. The play then relentlessly shows the subversion of this relationship in two modes. The agent is compelled to torture a male comrade, and enters an explicitly homoerotic, violent relationship with his victim. The woman is drawn into an educative and sexual relationship with another woman. The worlds divide: the agent commits suicide, as an inevitable consequence of his corruption into violence by compelling structures of power, and the women leave Moscow. The play is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, a repeated scene in which the two women meet fourteen years later, in a village south of Moscow as the German army advances.<sup>6</sup>

Sewell's dialogue is so redolent of the material and political concerns of his chosen period that it is easy to pass over the slight but palpable sense of an "Australian" frame of reference. Cockroaches in rented rooms, the experience of a young woman coming alone to a big city, a man who returns from England, the impetuous friendships: Sewell's writing lends these generic events an unmistakably Australian resonance.

ANNA: Yes, alright. [EKATERIN *begins to move away.*] What's your address?

EKAT: I'm – staying with friends.

ANNA: Where?

EKAT: Oh – all over the place.

ANNA: Where do you work then – I'll get in touch with you there.

EKAT: I don't have a job.

ANNA: On the dole?

EKAT: Yes.

ANNA: How long for?

EKAT: Six months – they cut me off on Monday.

ANNA: Cut you off? Why?

EKAT: It's a long story – oh, I was staying with a male friend of mine and an inspector came round and – you know – he reckoned we were living together – we weren't – you know – sleeping in the same room or anything like that – and apart from that he's homosexual – but the dole office has been trying to get rid of me for a while – so they cut me off.

ANNA: Aren't they bastards. What are you going to do?

EKAT: I don't know. I thought ...

ANNA: What?

EKAT: No – it doesn't matter. It was nice seeing you again Anna ...

ANNA: Is there anything I can do to help?

[Pause.]

EKAT: I wondered if maybe you could get me a job in there. I can make tea and clean – you know – jobs like that. I'm not fussy.

ANNA: I don't know – I'll ask. Why don't you have lunch with me and I'll be able to tell you. (*Traitors* 60–61)

The scene registers its European setting in the language of Sewell's audience, but references to the dole, the sticky-beaking of the visiting inspector, and the like, frame "naturalism" in an Australian demotic, as a thoroughly Australian parable of systematic corruption, realized through an oppositionist's sensibility. The play is implicitly a kind of Marxist allegory. Fitzpatrick rightly implied that there are many variations on the concept of traitor within the play, but critically he did not press hard upon the frame.

In one sense, *Traitors* uses the fear of homosexuality as an image for the apparent breakdown of social values; at the same time, in the play, all sexual relations – heterosexual and homosexual – seem to be corrupted. Even the women's relationship is disfigured by the intrusion of a heterosexual affair, so that sexuality itself becomes the vehicle and metaphor of the wider social treachery of the play. This rupture of social bonds extends, in a sense, even to the play's naturalistic style, itself ruptured in the repetitions-with-a-difference of the play's framing prologue and epilogue, in which the women seem to seize control of their own interpretation of the events.

It can hardly be doubted, in the light of the scripts that followed, that one of the challenges facing Sewell was to translate this essential set of perceptions about power into Australian terms. The sensibility that had explored the fragmentation of opposition with the standard myth of Marxism, but had done so without going outside the systematic power of Marxism itself, offered an extraordinary opportunity to apply those tortured and torturing perceptions to two familiar and relatively transparent structures, those of Australian politics and the contemporary political party, and of business and finance, exposed and explored in *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* (1983) and *Dreams in an Empty City* (1986). That this choice was to some extent inevitable is due to the absolutely Australian quality of Sewell's play *Traitors*. Sewell's anguish had found the myth of Marxism an immediate means to work through his sense of disillusion in the context of the late 1970s, in the turbulent aftermath of the dismissal of the Labour prime minister, Gough Whitlam, by the governor general, John Kerr, in 1975. His play is powerful because Marxism is a totality of experience for his characters. In the terms I am using here, Marxism is at once a system of power and an alternative to the system that shaped Sewell's vision, the system of colonial cultural hegemony operating on him and his audience. The Marxist structure is inherently allegorical as a mode of composing, and the allegory will return the insistent problematic of the Australian play back to its thematic core, which is that of systematic power and corruption.<sup>7</sup>

The components of the masculinist dramaturgy that is exploited so fully in *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* and *Dreams in an Empty City* are almost all present already in the allegory, along with its major thematic characteristics, which both the subsequent plays inherit. So we find in *Traitors* the dramaturgic topics of the pointless but instrumental murder, the compulsion of authority and career, the would-be “Knight of the Round Table” who is corrupted, the additional suicides, and even minor elements such as the debate over whether to have and to use a gun. What vanishes from the overtly Australian context of the two later plays is what vanishes from oppositionist fervour in the political realities of Labor mateship in the 1980s: women’s activism. Heterosexual disillusion in these plays is rife, because it is for Sewell an index of corruption, and women are at their strongest merely as destroyers. In *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* this destructive female profile is achieved either by the threatening phantom of lesbian satisfaction haunting the male ego, in the characters of Louise and Jane, or by an appearance as the deceitful sexual gratification offered by a devil, in the character of Rose. The supposed lesbian relationship between Louise and Jane only becomes thematically explicit in the revised script of the play, developed from the slightest suggestion in the original.<sup>8</sup> The women in both these plays can and do make no impact on the tragic vision of systematic and even apocalyptic corruption and catastrophe. But they are allowed to be good listeners and dialogic confessors to the male trauma, standing their ground in numerous scenes even where the exchange can only be one of abuse, their histories puzzling and hard to construe, obscured by the grand narrative of internecine male struggle and despair.

In this respect, Sewell’s work conjures into recognition another potential forebear in the strange teasing of the sexual profile of the Australian play. In Alexander Buzo’s *Macquarie*, the male protagonists are versions of a liberal, accommodating interpretation of the immediately colonial existence on the foreshore of Port Jackson, readily understood by audiences as portraying an urban sophistication confronted by the agricultural productivism of the country districts. Buzo’s vision of Sydney was presented to a Melbourne public in 1972, and it apparently conforms to that modern rubric of “understanding the past,” incorporating as it does scenes with a contemporary lecturer in Australian colonial history assessing the significance of the governor, Macquarie, at the same time as his own significance is being tested in the present. This conjunction finally slides into continuity as Macquarie is brought into the present, to be questioned as a liberal “trying to mediate between revolutionaries and reactionaries,” as the lecturer Polski puts it to him (Buzo 72).

Liberal angst is undoubtedly Buzo’s subject, but his Australian play is also a play for men, whose purposes are shaped in conjunction with or opposition to other men. Floating through the play, Maquarie’s second wife constantly supports her husband, but is shown to us as possessing a consciousness that denies her soul to him. “Do you recall my ever undermining your will? Are



you able to recollect any incident in which I faulted your reasoning or questioned your decisions?" she reads to him from a letter, allowing such opposition to have occurred only "on some petty matter" (58). She in herself longs for Scotland, but admits that she is "far too mindful of my status [...] even to complain about my lot, let alone suggest an alternative, much less come right out and scream it" (58). In the preceding moments, Polski's liberal stance on history and his interventions in university politics have been distantly viewed by one of his female students, who regards Macquarie as a "wishy-washy liberal" and leaves Polski to contemplate eating "shit sandwiches" while she burns her essay on the lawn (56–57). In *Macquarie*, the grand narrative of the Australian play is that of the constant futility of liberalism, but it is a drama to which women will only superficially subscribe, distancing themselves from the male trauma through the medium of writing.

In the general context of an evaluation of Sewell's work as a committed and impassioned realization of the Australian play, it may be helpful to sketch in some final details of the continuing pretensions of cultural hegemony. The reviews of Sewell's *Dreams in an Empty City* in its 1988 production in London make depressing reading.<sup>9</sup> The immense and ponderous complacency of the English theatre and its apparatus is thoroughly apparent in two startling omissions even in the description of contents: there is no mention of the thematic role of the theatre in Sewell's play, the suggestion of its futile and pathetic doubling of reality, and there is no mention of American bankers. Instead, we are repeatedly referred to existing British exemplars of satirical achievement on supposedly the same subjects: Churchill's "witty" *Serious Money*, to which the Thatcherite yuppies flocked in droves, and Brenton and Hare's *Pravda*, a satire-without-a-sting, as Carol Homden confirms in her clear-headed study of Hare's plays.<sup>10</sup> In a remarkable circle of complacency, *Pravda* was granted the accolade of awards from the London *Evening Standard* and *City Limits* for its exposé of spineless British journalism, and ran with a massive cast at the National Theatre, which like the Barbican has the revolving stage so needed for Sewell's play. The hegemony that still instructs the thematic quality of Australian theatre, in its reactions to determining structures of power, also determines a strictly delimited place for the permitted reception of that theatre in Britain. While the censorship has been lifted, of course, we might wonder whether a kind of cultural and political censorship remains in force, expressed in a distaste for plays that represent a perspective arising in opposition to British dramatic and political conventions.

Recent history suggests that even such an indigenous concept as "the Australian play" may end up being re-exported, as bizarrely occurred with Timberlake Wertenbaker's dramatization of Keneally's *The Playmaker*. The novel's male fantasy of the artistic and sexual satisfactions of producing Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in the early years of the penal settlement had pleased critics of all shades of political opinion in Britain. Transformed by

Wertenbaker from narrative into dramatic script, it was subsequently recycled to Australia as an appropriate form of theatre for the bicentennial contemplation of identity, alongside a production of Farquhar's comedy. A judicious criticism might recognize ideological elements in the belief that an Australian novel about the performance of a comedy in the early colony might have missed its true form, with that narrative structure cancelled and *Our Country's Good* given back to Australia as a curious, post-colonial phantom of the "Australian play."<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *Traitors* was first performed in 1979, *Blind Giant* in 1983, and *Dreams* in 1986. The Currency Press edition of *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* reflects the revised version of the script prepared for the revival of the play in 1995.
- 2 For more details of *Australia Felix*, see Richardson.
- 3 For an excellent study of the later consequences of the parameters that were drawn for British drama, even after Shaw's radical posture of the 1890s, see Nicholson.
- 4 Helen Gilbert's assertion of "the role of the present in *all* historical reconstruction" in relation to recent Australian drama provides a different emphasis here: there is surely a shifting reflection between past and present, as I shall suggest in my reading of *Traitors*. See Gilbert 4.
- 5 For an esoteric account of the environment at the Pram Factory, see Robertson. *Traitors* was produced towards the end of a decade of feverish activity by the APG, as a semi-autonomous project (a profit-share) (Robertson 109).
- 6 The two scenes have a central portion in common: the prologue (in a barn) includes some dialogue before, and the epilogue (in a hut) some dialogue after, the common portion. Whether the distinction in the stage directions between the barn and the hut is meant to be noticed, or is a casual difference, is hard to say.
- 7 Helen Gilbert interestingly makes allegorical claims for Sewell's later play *Hate*, notably in the context of the bicentennial celebrations in which it was first produced in 1988; Peter Fitzpatrick had been content with the idea of metaphor. Yet in terms of *mise-en-scène* and dramaturgy, *Hate* is the most conventionally structured of Sewell's political plays (Gilbert 105–11).
- 8 The revival took place at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, in 1995, twelve years after the original production at the Playhouse in Adelaide; both productions were directed by Neil Armfield. For Armfield at work on the revival, see Fewster.
- 9 The reviews are collected in *The London Theatre Record*, September 1988.
- 10 See Homden 87–101.
- 11 The staging of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* by convicts occurred in June 1789 in Sydney: it is the first event of "European-style theatre in Australia" chronicled in Love's *Documentary History* (1), and forms the first document of the volume (13). Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* was published in 1987; Timberlake Wertenbaker's adaptation of the novel, *Our Country's Good*, was first

produced at the Royal Court Theatre in London (alongside *The Recruiting Officer*) in June 1988; the production was hosted in Australia by the Sydney Theatre Company in June and July 1989.

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