

THE Pram's NEW Push

1979: The Year of The Thaw — or motels in China and Shakespeare at the Pram.

A discussion between Suzanne Spinner and Fay Mokotow (Chairperson) John Hawkes, Bill Garner, Max Gillies, Wilfred Last, Terry Maher and Richard Murphet of The Australian Performing Group at The Pram Factory.

The January 1 issue of *The Perambulator* celebrates ten years of theatre by The Australian Performing Group and announces a new line in seventy-nine. It consists of a 'new economic policy' and a thematic cum ideologically based programming criteria for the coming year. Whether it is — as Len Radic diagnosed in his *Age* article summing up the year in Melbourne theatre that "old recipes no longer work" — the



Bill Garner

consensus from within and without is that 1978 was not one of the APG's best years. However the most productive approach to the successes and demises of last year is to reflect upon the contradictions, problems and new directions which became evident.

Of the stable of writers whose names have been associated with past APG successes d'estimes, Barry Oakley's *Ship's Whistle* was the only production emanating from that formerly fecund seed bed. However audiences 'stayed away in droves', whereas five years ago it may have drawn in equal droves those same people. Indeed it was an old recipe and one which the APG pioneered — a nationalist, historical subject given a fond, naturalistic warts-and-all interpretation, replete with broad physical comedy and lively vernacular expression. Leaving aside the merits of it as a piece of writing, why didn't it grab the APG audience of today? Largely I think because the APG has carried out its original brief and has had a profound if unquantifiable effect on local theatre.

The new Australian play is no longer their embattled province — David Williamson has moved up if not on. Local directors and actors have broken the former subservience to Anglophile models and everywhere they speak in the round and not in the voice of Eric Pearce. Where does this leave the group — impaled on their own rusty spearhead? Not at all, rather back to their fundamentalist role as innovators and disseminators of radical theatre in form and content. Having hacked their way through the bourgeois debris the march can begin in earnest.

Ship's Whistle was staged in the Front Theatre and in Pram Factory terms had high pre-production costs, so the fact that it generated small audiences exacerbated the end of year financial ailments. On the other hand two smaller scale, and hence more cost-effective, productions directed by women in the Back Theatre — Kerry Dwyer's *The Bitter Tears Of Petra Von Kant* and Fay Mokotow's *Voices* attracted capacity audiences and considerable critical acclaim. Similarly Richard Murphet's excellent, shoestring production of *A Light Shining In Buckinghamshire* did well in the Back Theatre. All three productions could have sustained the move to the larger capacity Front Theatre as *Back To Bourke Street* had done earlier in the year. Clearly there were lessons to be learnt from these experiences.

1978 also saw the emergence of two new writers — Barry Dickins and Philip Motherwell. Dickins could be described as an outsider when



Ship's Whistle

he won the first Literature Board sponsored APG playwriting competition with *Foolshoe Hotel*, while Motherwell is a collective member who has worked with Nightshift. Both writers had had a number of shorter works produced at La Mama (Dickens' marvellous *Rotten Teeth Show* was put on independently in the Back Theatre earlier in the year) an indication of the role played by the APG vis a vis La Mama.



Fay Mokotow

Lindzee Smith's Nightshift group produced Motherwell's *Dreamers of The Absolute* and Fassbinder's chilling *Pre-Paradise Sorry Now* in the Pram Factory as well as other readings and events outside the environs of the Pram. Nightshift is one of the many sub-groups which the APG has spawned over the last few years. Of these Stasis is still operating but independently of the APG; and the Circus Oz recently joined forces with students from the Victorian College of The Arts in a mammoth Big Top event in the grounds of the National Gallery. In addition there are autonomous groups operating under the umbrella of the APG in film (Pram Factory Productions — *Dimboola*) and radio (3CR and 3RRR) all of which attests to the vitality and diversity of the group as a whole.

Well that was seventy eight — a year that got better by fits and starts, and in August with *Bitter Tears* in the Back and *Foolshoe Hotel* in the Front really looked as if it was going to take off but finally founded at the end of the year with *Ship's Whistle*.

What then of seventy nine? A commercial company faced with the same situation could easily have decided that the only rationalisation possible would be to prune the excess at the expense of the actual and potential diversity. Fortunately for all of us the APG is not a commercial company and while finance or the lack of it absorbs a lot of the group's time and energy, real viability for them resides in political and aesthetic considerations as well as financial survival. Their solution is to spread the available funds as widely as possible to encourage and maintain diversity while simultaneously ensuring that the economic failure of one project cannot jeopardise the chances of others.

Fay Mokotow explained that the New Economic Policy (NEP) entails a strategic decision that no show whether in the Back or Front will exceed a specified deficit. She said that the choice was between a small number of fully subsidised shows or a larger number partially subsidised —

Even within that parameter we've decided to subsidise some shows to a lesser extent and

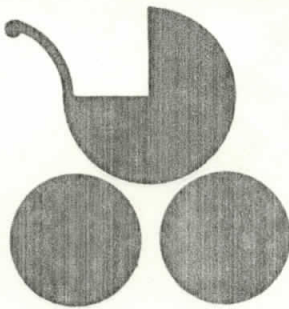


Bitter tears of Petra Von Kant

some to an even lesser extent, which correlates with the use of the Back and Front Theatres, but means that there is unlikely to be as great a gap in resources — people, sets, advertising etc between the shows in these places.

This means that there will be two categories of shows — fully-funded and semi-autonomous. John Hawkes added that the policy is about reducing the risk that the group as a whole takes and the real difference will be in terms of people's personal incomes. Funding in effect will only cover the cost of a show to get it in progress. This means that once any show is put into motion and the project group sees that it is going to cost more than the amount allocated or stands to lose more than that, then the risk will be taken by the people actually working on it rather than by the APG itself.

The difference between the fully-funded shows and the semi-autonomous projects is that the APG is providing greater setting-up costs in return for which they place a ceiling on the amount of money anyone working on them can



earn — Equity minimum. Whereas in the semi-autonomous projects where the APG has provided less money, there is in theory no limit on what people can earn. This scheme not only suits the self-management goals of the collective but is common practice in Fringe and Experimental groups. Richard Murphet added:

The project groups themselves take the larger responsibility — choosing the shows and selling it to an audience, which gives them more control over their work and a greater interest in the outcome of that work.

When the APG began it necessarily worked in this way because the collective was small, but in recent years it has grown to the potentially unmanageable size of between fifty and sixty members so the only practicable political solution is the cell structure. Max Gillies added that since the collective became so large it has taken the group a long time to find a centre. However Bill Garner explained that the APG still maintains the overall control and the power to decide which shows get the go-ahead. "For example this year the collective has decided to provide more employment opportunities to women and we are in a position to do what we can to enforce it."

Richard and Fay explained that this year women's consciousness would be the criteria informing the choice of scripts. While this may at first seem a limitation on programming, Richard added that the very circumscribing of a theme has led in fact, to more creative choices being made: "You find you look deeper and further for material, and equally, once confronted with a number of possible scripts it is



Stasis

both easier to choose and makes for more imaginative choices". Wilfred Last explained that the bias or positive discrimination criteria means that there not only has to be ample opportunities for women as directors and actresses but also that the writers must not present women in a sexist or stereotypical way. Fay added:

It is a positive and creative step as well as a real ideological step. Suddenly it brings a lot of plays to the forefront of our consciousness which weren't there before. For instance to be able to give our visiting director Aarne Neeme that brief has meant that he has unearthed a number of exciting possibilities — and one thing which he may direct is Edward Bond's *The Women*.

Among the plays the APG has accepted for presentation in 1979 are Stephen Sewall's *Traitors* and John Romeril's *Mickey's Moomba*. *Traitors* is about Stalinist Russia and *Mickey's Moomba* is a musical about US cultural imperialism and while both deal with universal political experience they also explore the consciousness of women within these themes.



Sue Ingleton

Productions of *The Taming Of The Shrew* and *Rosme sholm* are planned with Jonathon Hardy directing Shakespeare's prescient treatise on the position of marriageable women and Sydney filmmaker Jane Oehr directing Ibsen's reflections on the psychic conflicts of women of intellect and politics. Other possible shows as yet not finalised are *We Can't Pay? We Won't Pay!* by the Italian socialist writer and director Dario Fo which recounts the battle between housewives and the supermarkets over rising prices which has taken place in Italy in recent years, and a promising song and dance show by local musician and writer Jan Cornall, called, *Failing In Love Again* (sic).

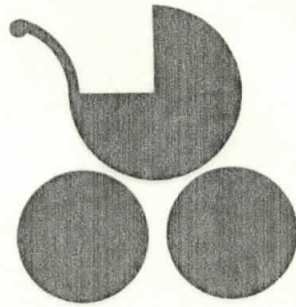
Richard Murphet explained that this year the group is making a concerted effort to search out overseas scripts, whereas in the past it has had a tendency not to think of buying rights unless a decision had been made to do a play, often by which time it was too late.

We are moving away from dealing naturalistically with stereotyped views of Australian society and history — moving on the one

hand into the grotesque cosmic comedy of Barry Dickins and on the other dealing with international political issues of the sort Phil Motherwell and Stephen Sewall explore. The young and up and coming writers aren't as sold on literary nationalism.

Bill Garner contended that the choice of programmes for 1979 make it one of the least comic years, reflecting the seriousness of the current economic and social situation. The group recognise that in the past the public has had some cause to see the APG as insular and aesthetically and ideologically monolithic and this year they intend to use *The Perambulator* as a vehicle to raise to a public and conscious level, internal and group criticism of one another's productions. This is an idea which they say they have often supported and sometimes done something about but which they believe should be pushed "because if it is not brought out into the open and discussed and seen as a productive artistic dialectic, it is repressed into resentment, suspicion and mutual hostility which has in the past been an aspect of some of the internal politics of the APG."

This trend toward an opening up the practise of the collective is also reflected in their desire to provide opportunities for outside actors to work on APG productions. Richard and Bill said that until the recent auditions for *Mickey's Moomba* it was rare for down-town actors to attend unless they were specifically invited — "the fact that they now feel the doors are open can only be a good thing". Unfortunately this year's stringent cost cutting may mean that it will be difficult to attract actors from outside who are currently working successfully, since coming to the APG would mean a considerable drop in salary. Though John Hawkes added that there are some people in the industry who are prepared "to work in an industrially idiosyncratic way and



who have the desire to work here even to the extent of taking Equity minimum. The push toward working more with outside actors comes from people within the Pram", added Bill Garner, and went on to say that the group thought that there was so much they could learn from an actor of the calibre of Jonathon Hardy, that they would have been happy to work with him on virtually anything.

A further indication of the group's desire to become more publically visible is their plans to initiate a series of theatre seminars early this year. Bill Garner said that at present —

there is no forum in Melbourne for theatre companies to discuss artistic policy — and the Ministry adopts the attitude that it shouldn't interfere with the artistic decisions of the companies it supports, which means that the theatre companies go ahead programming often competitively. The play readings that the APG, Hoopla and the MTC put on separately on a shoestring could be, if co-ordinated, made far more effective for everybody. We need to get rid of artificial competition, particularly in our case in relation to Hoopla, as we're probably competing for the same miniscule audience.

John Hawkes disagreed that it was a matter of competing for the same audience but rather that it was competition for the same miniscule funds.

John Romeril writes:

Straightened circumstances, the iron laws of economic necessity, will change the APG but what will the changes mean and how will they surface in production?

Already the budgetary restraint evident in the APG's New Economic Policy (NEP) is as draconian as a monetarist's dream. Will the liquidity crisis pass? What role will SAP (semi-autonomous projects) play in the process? Will they prove a viable survival technique in an era of cultural stagflation; an era in which too much culturally productive capacity (people and plant) is chasing an entertainment dollar that shrinks faster than you can get a book back from Hong Kong or transport a hit from Broadway?

Are those who claim the theatre isn't dead simply evading the proposition that this is as dead as the theatre ever gets?

If so is there something about working with the APG — working in a medium that is un- and anti-popular, a medium that is being brought back from the dead — is there something about that which is akin to working the early days of Australian television, working a medium that was new, that was improvised into existence every transmitting hour, a truly popular medium that had begun its long march into 97% of the nation's households?

Is an understanding of capitalism essential to an understanding of the madness and misery, but above all the productivity, of both the Carlton theatre and early television in Melbourne?

If what they both have enacted in their disparate ways is the fate of the entertainment industry under capitalism — What Is To Be Done?

NEXT ISSUE: John Romeril: Playwright To Run Stock Exchange.