

TRAVELLING NORTH TO AVOID MARSUPIALS

by Suzanne Spinner

Currently at two of the Melbourne Theatre Company's many and ever-expanding number of venues, there are premiere productions of plays by writers who are fast becoming part of the old guard or the first wave, depending on your optimism. David Williamson's latest work *Travelling North* is playing at The Athenaeum, and Barry Oakley's *Marsupials* is playing at the Russell Street Theatre.

Both plays quite consciously address questions to Australian identity, and both were written in the last year. *Marsupials* is set in the present, while *Travelling North* covers the period leading up to the Labor victory, from 1969 to the 1972 election.

Marsupials takes place in the comfortable but disquietened mortgaged splendour of South Yarra, but its theme is expatriatism and Fleet Street and the West End are the locus of its interest. *Travelling North* alternates between the geographical and metaphorical implications of cold suburban Melbourne and lush-semirural Coffs Harbour. Williamson's play could only have been written now, both artistically and politically, whereas Oakley's feels in its form and concerns as though it should have been written ten years ago.

In August at a conference on Recent Australian Drama at the Australian National University, Jack Hibberd argued that Australian theatre is devoid of deep significance and bedevilled by an inability to confront important issues. He might also have added that it has so far been unable to move beyond rather passe stereotypes, or create valid or interesting roles for women. Hibberd's general diagnosis is most applicable to *Marsupials*.

What could have been serious questions about the changing nature of cultural identity; the disenchantment of the middle-brow intellectual; the motivations for expatriatism and the



Max Gillies and Carol Burns do a good job in dodging marsupials.

marital tensions arising out of unemployment and their effect on dual-career families — all of these issues are swamped by a series of not particularly scintillating one-liners, which serve to keep the audience awake and occasionally laughing. But they also mean that nothing ever becomes too serious or too confronting.

The plot is simple, but not uncompromising: married couple living in South Yarra (he has just been retrenched from a publishing firm, she is a freelance journalist) have his best friend (and her old lover) to stay during friend's return visit to Melbourne on an assignment for a London newspaper. Friend is writing a series of articles on the 'real Australia' — wife decides Australia is a 'cultural billabong' — friend finds her an indifferent job in London. Husband doesn't want to leave — marriage splits up — friend and wife go. Husband stays on believing that he will eventually find the heart of Australia in the vicinity of Carnegie railway station.

The possibilities were there even if the theme of ritualistic xenophobia is a well flogged one, but Oakley refused to face the issues and instead

leered about on a pair of very blunt skates. The play suffered from a particularly tired and remorseless form of naturalism, peopled with characters as forgettable as the jokes they made. Apart from asides about the multinational takeovers of Australian publishing and protestations that the typical Australian was no longer a bronzed, beer-swimming Philistine, Oakley did not connect with contemporary reality or life as we know it.

While there are clearly valid grounds for a critique, or at least an analysis of the dynamics of expatriatism, Oakley cast his critique (such as it was) in terms of neurotically-defensive jokes about chinless Pommy wonders and bouts of maudlin, drunken Les Pattersonesque rambling on the state of our "artz". The play was further burdened by Oakley's inability to make credible the connections between the characters and the issues and values they represented, so that by the end the most profound question posed was: Did she leave her husband or Australia?

In welcome contrast to *Marsupials*, Williamson's *Travelling North* is not devoid of deep significance

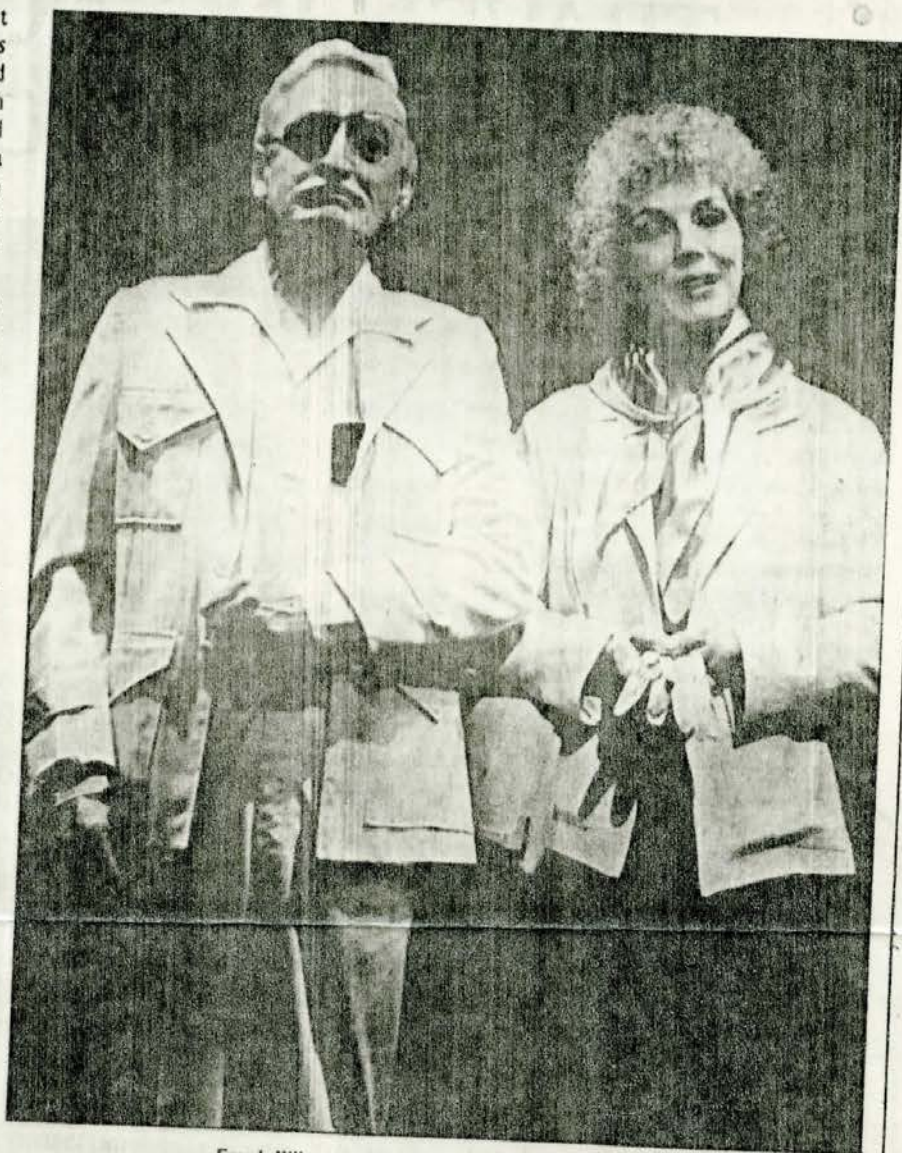
and is able to confront important issues. Together with *The Removalists* it is his best work. In a fragmented diachronic structure of thirty-seven short scenes it follows the doomed romance of Frank and Frances, a middle-aged couple who run off to the steamy north to live together, free of the demands of their grown up children.

Williamson, who in the past has been guilty of some of the sexiest writing for Australian theatre has, in this play, not only transcended his own stereotypes but has managed to create convincing and resonant men and women. Moreover, he poses serious and thoughtful questions about the possibilities of romantic love; the relationship between parents and children; the process of aging and death and — to a lesser extent — he probes the personal matrix of the political climate in which the Australian Labor Party came to power.

It is rare enough to find an Australian playwright dealing with love — let alone death and contemporary politics — all in the one play. In this play he does what they say they've been doing all along; he shows the dynamics of sexism within a relationship without being sexist. In the character of Frank he has created an unmistakably Australian man who is not an Ocker, but rather a cultured, radical, emotional man who is afraid of dying but who is no weakling.

Frank is also a domineering bully who expects to rule the roost and keep his woman in line. Similarly Frances is a strong, independent woman who has brought up her two daughters single-handed, and yet she is still periodically susceptible to guilt about the strength of her own decisions and is still prey to Frank's wilfulness. What is so remarkable about many of the characters in *Travelling North* is that they are all capable of reflection upon action and subsequent change, which is not to coat the play in a saccharine progressivism, but merely to point out how rare it is to see people on stage appearing to think about their lives.

Williamson's exploration of politics in terms of the generation and value gaps between Frank and Frances and their children is suggestive



Frank Wilson and Carol Raye in *Travelling North*.

and challenging, particularly as is fleshed out by the emotional undercurrents of their relationships. In the minor characters, the neighbour and local doctor in Coffs Harbour and the couple's children in Melbourne, regional differences in Australian values are alluded to in telling images.

Travelling North is not only Williamson's most mature piece of writing to date, it is the most serious and dense piece of naturalism since *The Summer Of The Seventeenth Doll*.

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