

***Radical Visions 1968-2008: The Impact of the Sixties on Australian Drama*, by
Denise Varney (Rodopi: Amsterdam & New York, 2011)**

By Julian Meyrick

Summing up her penetrating and timely book, Denise Varney comments, 'The politics of freedom, liberation and emancipation central to the social movements of the sixties and seventies flowed through the Australian Performing Group [...] The mobile, educated, opinionated and confident group of artists who came together in Carlton, Melbourne [...] were empowered by the youth effect and emboldened by collective action. Members enjoyed the heady feeling of being at the vanguard of a new modernity in Australian theatre and of taking a receptive public along for the ride' (269).

But when the heady moment is over, what then? How should we regard the New Wave now that it is neither new nor an extant formation? Venerable relic? Outmoded approach? Embarrassing silo of nationalism for a country grappling with the intercultural implications of 'the Asian century'?

Varney's book is that rarest of things: a revisionist account of Australian drama, one that looks to inflect and inform the established narrative, drawing out its deeper implications. In Australia, where such reflection on the past is *ipso facto* a radical act, this is a political project as well as a scholarly one. Her argument is both provocative and plausible: that the New Wave is not a reliquary for past forms and values but a living seam of thought, an arc of fidelity, embodied in practitioners who have gone 'all the way in art' (35) and still provoke today. 'The artists whose later work is analysed in this book either continued to challenge the anti-intellectualism and provincialism of its ruling establishment or contributed to representations of a more global Australia' (76). Not gone, just working under different conditions; yet still true to their resistive roots, the dream of freedom that 1968 embodies.

If this is Varney's theme, her exploration of it in 270 short pages is necessarily more bounded: the work of six playwrights/performance-makers, all Melbourne-based, all ex-APG, who are currently in the latter part of their careers and still writing (though not always getting produced). This restricted focus is off-set by treating them as general types, teasing out the representative aspects of their individual approaches: David Williamson, 'most successful and controversial'; John Romeril 'standard-bearer'; Alma De Groen, 'feminist drama'; Stephen Sewell 'political engagement'; and Jenny Kemp and Richard Murphet, exemplars of 'the turn to performance'. Each chapter follows the same trope. The early work of the artist is reprised. Their connection with the APG or one of its factions is then established. A key show is summarised as a jumping-off point. Then the remainder is dedicated to dissecting their latest work, viewing it in light of an ongoing commitment to an oppositional stance, broadly conceived. In other words, even though their politics changed – changed as the world changed – these artists retain a critical frame of reference and, unlike many of the characters in their plays, have not been absorbed into 'a weakened and subservient intellectual class [endangering] the values of freedom and individualism in western democracies'.

By way of a bigger picture, the book is headed by two chapters situating its subject matter in a broader historical vista. Here Varney's concern is to prise the New Wave

away from the seemingly nailed-on view that it was the seamless product of born-again 1970s nationalism. Reviewing the student insurrections of 1968 in Berlin, Paris and Los Angeles, she identifies the notion of 'unfreedom' as a key point of attack in the New Left's transnational sensibility and the consequent 'diversification of the radical movement into a range of oppositional cultural practices' (51). In the chapter on the APG that follows, she shows how these irruptive events were as influential as local ones in grounding the company's alternative sensibility, that the two axes of commitment, far from pulling in different directions, coalesced, politically and aesthetically. Protest against the Vietnam War in Australia was intense, but not *only* in Australia; and sloughing off the dead skin of English rep went hand in hand with the co-option of theatrical experiment abroad. Why, I found myself wondering, has it taken so long to assert this obvious and easily demonstrated historical fact? Why have the APG in particular, and the New Wave generally, remained imprisoned in one part of their persona, bottle-necking their legacy for future generations of artists who would profit by their example and their thinking?

Whatever the answer to this pearler, Varney's account is a mitigation strategy that makes the past available to the present in the right way. The guts of a book about plays and performances must comprise detailed analysis of the written component (drama as literature) and any on-stage presentations (drama as performance experience). *Radical Visions* is full of nifty accounts of both: sharp, clever observations that prompt the reader to think again – this is revisionist history – about the accepted status of the works in question.

It is a foyer-tattle truism, for example, that David Williamson has become more conservative as he has got older, that his dramatic voice has been recuperated by the System he once strongly impugned. It is also, as Varney makes clear, patently false. In her longest chapter (forty-six pages), she asserts the later Williamson's concern with 'corporate culture and the abandonment of the social justice agenda that characterises Australian late capitalism' (124) and evidences her claim on a play-by-play basis. Likewise, she shows the persistent audacity of Romeril in his exploration of Japanese theatrical forms. Commenting on the 'light and ironic touch' of *Love Suicides* she notes, 'Romeril pays homage to the integrity or internal logic of the [double suicide] genre without trivialising it in the service of an intercultural or cross-cultural theatre practice' (145). Just so. This is the remarkable aspect of New Wave work, even in its last phase of being: the honesty and courage of its vision, the inventiveness, the determination to engage with difficult truths. Even when pursuing particular agendas – gender politics (De Groen), commodity fetishism (Murphet), mental illness (Kemp), social collapse (Sewell) – its values feel never less than universal, its reach never less than inclusive.

There are limits to Varney's project, and a couple of minor flaws in the book. Much as she might defend her choice of territory – APG alumni writers – it is a small data set. What about writers who aren't Melbourne-based, like Louis Nowra, or who sprang from community theatre, like Hannie Rayson, or have roots in parallel political commitments, like Keith Gallasch (Troupe, South Australia) and Errol O'Neill (Popular Theatre Troup, Queensland)? While her account does good service for the six practitioners it discusses, the depressing reality is that, historically-speaking, most Australian theatre artists die in unmarked graves.

Though unfair to carp in light of *Radical Vision's* restricted scope, the lack of contextual commentary beyond the opening chapters is also a problem. Varney points out where and when productions occurred, but this is the tip of an iceberg of changing circumstances that demands further investigation. The demise of the APG did not lead to the rise of other, comparable collectives. Out went group meetings, in came top-down management structures, capitalised second-string theatres (like Playbox and its bling Sturt Street building), and cashed-up international festivals beholden to corporate sponsors and state Treasuries. A changed world indeed, and it is important to understand it impacted on different artists in different ways, leaving some produced but under-developed (like Williamson), some developed but rarely produced (like Romeril) and some ignored altogether (like De Groen, unforgivably so).

But these issues are easily outweighed by the good in the book. Especially informative is the chapter on Richard Murphet, a toiling, unsung hero of the performance writing school, whose early experiments in integrating film and theatre look astonishingly bold even today. Recognising there is a need to provide a general account of Murphet's work, Varney here gives more contextual detail. It pays off. Murphet is returned to the company he deserves to keep, alongside some of the best writing talent his generation produced, including his partner, Jenny Kemp. One degree of separation here – and further proof that the close affiliations of the APG milieu continue to enrich our theatre culture in surprising and enduring ways.

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