Who's Afraid of the Working Class?

trash                   money
ANDREW BOVELL           PATRICIA CORNELIUS

dream-town             suit
MELISSA REEVES          CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

requiem
(musical score)
IRINE VELA

edited by Julian Meyrick
ANDREW BOVELL has received numerous awards for his work in stage, film, television and radio. His stage credits include Speaking in Tongues, Distant Lights From Dark Places, Scenes From A Separation (co-written with Hanneli Rupert), Ship on Foot, After Dinner and The Ballad of Lois Ryan.

PATRICIA CORNEilius is a founding member of Melbourne Workers Theatre. Her plays include Lilly and May, Jack’s Daughters, Max, The Aftermath, Taxi, No Fear, Last Drinks, Opa—A Sexual Odyssey, Home of a Stranger, Platform, Hogs Hairs and Liceies. Patricia also works as a director and dramaturg.

JULIAN MEYRICK is a freelance director. His previous work includes Grace Among the Christians, St Rose of Lima, Fun and Games with the Oresteia, all by Luke Devenish; Garcia Lorca’s The Love of Don Perlimplin; Reinhardt Goering’s Dreadnought; Douglas Stuart’s Ned Kelly (adapted by Pam Leversha); Barry Collins’ Judgement and Quarter Hour Stories for Melbourne University. In 1998 he received the Victorian Green Room Award for Best Director on the Fringe.

MELISSA REEVES is a Melbourne playwright. Her plays include In Cahoots, The Girl I Love (co-written with Margaret Mills, Maude Davey and Nicki Redlich), Sweettown (awarded the Jill Blewitt Playwrights Award in 1993), Great Day, The Emperor’s New Clothes, The Sign of the Phantom, Storming Heaven and Road Movie.

CHRISTOS TSIOUKAS is the author of the novels Loaded (filmed as Head On by Ana Kokkinos) and The Jesus Man and has published with collaborator Sasha Soldatow the dialogue Jump Cuts. He directed the short film Thug with Spiro Economopoulos. His plays include Viewing Blue Poles and a contemporary adaptation of the Electra myth.

BRINE VELA has worked as a composer on dozens of music theatre productions with companies such as the Melbourne Workers Theatre, Playbox, Canto Coro, IRAA, Arena, the Victorian College of the Arts, Deckchair Theatre and Circus Oz. Some of her credits include The Ballad of Lois Ryan, Opa—A Sexual Odyssey, Black Cargo and Kate ‘N’ Shiner. She is a founding member of the Greek-Australian music group the haBiBis.

INTRODUCTION

So seamless was the evolution and production of Who’s Afraid of the Working Class? that it is impossible to separate out individual achievements from the impact of the show as a whole. Born from anger, tempered by craft, it is also hard to believe that such a significant piece of work could be fun to produce. Yet it was. The lead in this, as in the form and content of the show, came from the writers. For me the conventional image of the playwright as the person at the back of the auditorium squirming in pain as ‘their’ play is murdered in performance, was buried forever by the patience, skill and flexibility of the four writers and composer who together made up the Who’s Afraid…? creative team. It was the creative team who advised my employment as director; who set deadlines for drafts and gave advice on re-writing, cuts and scene order; who assisted through an excruciating casting process; who understood when things went wrong, applauded when things went right, and provided practical help when things hung in the balance. Working with such a group is like riding a rocket: you go where it is fired, hanging on as best you can. Once or twice you kick your ankles and steer a bit. But right from the start you know that an extraordinary creative unfolding is taking place and the job of the production process is to give it the fullest possible stage expression.

The script reproduced here marks the end of what in effect was a three-year development period. During this time many forces came together to realise the original scripts and in turn to influence them. Not the least of these were the cast themselves who, comprising only six actors, had to portray nineteen different characters in eighteen separate scenes. The first months were spent in researching the project and agreeing core values. By the time I came on board these had been settled and the significance of the creative team’s artistic and political direction was apparent. It flowed from one key experience. Early in 1997 the writers and composer went to a pub in West Melbourne famous for its vibrant, resistive, blue-collar atmosphere. What they found was a commercial shell, rattling with cable TV and pokies. In its hollowness and vulgarity it seemed to sum up the vast betrayal the Kennett Government had perpetrated on all Victorians. Here indeed was an answer to the question the writers had been briefed with: who was afraid of the working class—no one.

The choice of the aesthetic entailed considerable risk. It meant breaking with the upbeat, celebrational mood of so much Australian community theatre, a style with which the commissioning company, the
Melbourne Workers Theatre, was partially identified. There was always the fear of being negative, regressive even, painting things as worse than they were. But how could they be any worse than what we saw, daily, around us? As rehearsals for the first season got underway it was easy to research the characters in the play. All you had to do was walk down the street. The most frightening thing was that the notion of poverty itself had changed. What was once simple deprivation is now beggared about by the torments of a hundred concocted consumer needs. Not to be able to afford a certain style of clothes, or car, or level of service, is to spiral down into a social void where traditional notions of class and consciousness give way to a broader experience of loss and devastation.

Australia has indeed become a more ‘open’ and ‘flexible’ society. Now anyone has the right to be marginalised.

Touched, crushed, frustrated, full of hate and pain, the men and women of Who’s Afraid...? are demonstrably not working—or working, at best, in the dark pockets of an urban world. Only six of the characters we meet are employed, and of these two are prostitutes and two police. They are not potential revolutionaries waiting for a Great Red Dawn to sweep the way to a better world order. They are, if not ‘ordinary’ people, then certainly average. They focus on themselves because the pressures under which they labour are so unmitigating they have little energy for anything else. Sometimes this is expressed in behaviour towards others that is angry, cruel or self-destructive. Sometimes despite outward circumstances, generosity, kindness and sympathy assert themselves. But it is always touch and go. These are lives balanced on a knife edge. A great deal of rehearsal was spent trying to understand the emotional complexities of compromised lives and feeding the results into the structure of the production. As in all important theatre experiences, the journey was both an inward and an outward one. The more we struggled to realise the play, the more we were forced to look around at the world we imagined we were speaking about.

There were many conversations about who these characters represented. New-style underclass or old-style lumpen proletariat? As the latter did they deserve our sympathy since they were—without exception—entirely lacking in traditional notions of class consciousness? Indeed, they hardly seemed to be political at all. It is highly unlikely that any of them would do anything as positive as join a union picket line. Instead, they present an entirely different side of political oppression: its cost. These are men and women who struggle not politically, heroically, resistively, but baldly, personally, in anguish. They struggle not to overcome but simply to stay alive. If they had a choice perhaps they wouldn’t be political at all. But they don’t have a choice. They have had, as it were, politics thrust upon them. Or rather, they have had visited on their ordinary but nevertheless coherent lives, the costs of an economic and political system which doesn’t seem to care anymore how many families still need, lives it smashes or careers it destroys as long as it can achieve its increasingly abstract goals.

The play opened on 1 May 1997 at Trades Hall, smack in the middle of the MUA wharf dispute. The building was alive with the comings and goings of officials and pickets, with news about Patrick Stevedores, workers’ rights, employers’ duties and political resistance. It was a galvanising moment for many people, including some who until then had thought of themselves as non-political. The play, with its message of structurally induced personal pain, appeared in the right place at the right time. For any show to touch a nerve it needs more than the skills of the artists producing it, however talented. It needs the sympathy and understanding of its intended spectators and it is hard to say at the end of the day which was the more amazing: the fact that Who’s Afraid...? was produced in the way that it was, or that Melbourne audiences heard it.

The form of the plays is ‘cool’ and realistic. This was the choice of the writers and it suits the subject matter. The ultimate goal, simply stated, was to put stories on stage which would not otherwise be heard. Theatre can do this. In the current passion for mixed-media and performance-style events, it can be forgotten that theatre, a public medium, operates not only visually and physically but intellectually, as a vehicle for ideas. With courage and skill these ideas can make a leading contribution to contemporary debates. The challenge this presents theatre artists is not only one of style but one of truth. How to say what must be said yet stay true to the experience of putting it on stage? In this respect, the audacity, even savagery of the writing, deserves comment. The late critic Harry Kippax once called theatre the home of old ideas. And so it often seems when show after show paraphrases what has been said earlier and to greater effect by television and film. Over the years and without much of a struggle, theatre has gone onto the back foot, more afraid of what it stands to lose by tackling accepted stereotypes than what it has to gain by breaching fresh perceptions. As a result, it has often compromised its immediacy, lucidity and emotional force.

This is not the case with Who’s Afraid...?. Grappling with the dark underbelly of contemporary urban living, the writing pulls no punches in showing the resulting conflict. This is not a desire to shock for its own sake. It is a considered choice, one which saw everyone involved in the development of the project examine their consciences before committing themselves to material whose reception might well be very negative (and on occasions was). The costs of representing threshold material are high, both for artists and audience. In the words of Augusto Boal: ‘the image of the real is real in so far as it is an image’. The courage of the writers had to be matched by the courage of everyone involved with the production, and it is to the credit of the actors especially that they so
willingly engaged with the frequently painful task of portraying complex and troubling behaviour on stage.

Once Who’s Afraid...? started touring conventional theatres for audiences who did not share the frame of local awareness of their Melbourne counterparts, the meaning of the show changed. From being a play for Victoria it became a play about Victoria. From being a cry of anger it became a cry of warning. Though the form of the show remained the same, the thinking behind it was reshaped. The creative team used to say that if a play is political then it must be better in every way than a non-political one or else it will simply be dismissed as propaganda. Likewise, the production had to work hard to seamlessly adapt to the different physical circumstances and expectations of mainstream theatre. Again history came to the rescue, 1999 was not 1997. By now serious doubts about the political and economic agenda of the New Right were making themselves heard all over the country. Once again, the show found itself in and of its time.

Born from Jeff Kennett’s Victoria, it was fitting that the first production of Who’s Afraid...? ended at the same time as the political regime which it so trenchantly criticised. If the popular reaction to the show was a surprise, who could have guessed that a government tipped for another eight years in office could be so unceremoniously cast aside? It is too much to hope that any theatre can ever be directly responsible for such a reaction. But if it helps focus thoughts and feelings marginalised by the major media, then the place of the art form in society at large is now more important than ever.

The Who’s Afraid...? project aimed to serve its immediate community at the highest level of skill and imagination. If it represents anything it is less a perfect product than a perfect process. It was the outcome of a team of dedicated theatre professionals who proved beyond all doubt that achievement in the theatre is always the result of collaboration. The scripts were part of a living whole, the DNA structure by which the body of the production was brought into existence. This is how they should be read now: not as words on a page, but as voices in the head; as an indication, an invitation, a resolution, a world waiting to happen.

Julian Meyrick
Director and editor
Melbourne Workers Theatre production

Who’s Afraid of the Working Class was first produced by Melbourne Workers Theatre at the Victorian Trades Hall, Melbourne, on 1 May 1998 with the following cast:

- O’MANNEY, COP 2, LEON, David Adamson
- MAN IN BED Glenn Shea
- MAN, JAMES Daniela Farinacci
- STACEY, TRISHA BRIONDA, WOMAN IN BED, PROSTITUTE, GINA, COP 1 Eugenia Fragos Bruce Morgan
- DANIEL, ORTON, YOUNG BOY MAN, TRAIN GIRL, KATINA Maria Theodorakis
- WOMAN, TRAIN GIRL, KATINA

Musicians: David Abiuso (bass) and Helen Moura (cello)
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CHARACTERS

SUIT
BOY
JAMIE
CLAIRE
MR O'MANNEY
GINA

MONEY
MAN
WOMAN
DANIEL
GIRL
MUSICIAN
OLD WOMAN
WOMAN
MAN

DREAM-TOWN
KATINA
TRISHA
LEON
COP
COP TWO

TRASH
ORTON
STACEY
JAMIE
RHONDA

The program was originally presented by an ensemble of six actors.

SUIT

KENNEDT BOY MONOLOGUE

A YOUNG BOY in his mid-teens comes onto the stage.

I love Jeff Kennett. I think he's a good guy, a sexy guy. I like it that he's tall. I like it that he's smart, I like it that he doesn't give a shit about anyone. He's an arsehole, I know that. He's a cunt. It's obvious. He's a silver-spoon-up-his-arse cunt, he can't hide that, but I don't care. He's not whinging all the time, not whinging, not making excuses. He's got style; he looks good and he knows it; he's got class. It's written all over him. But, he's not soft. He's not soft at all.

Not like my dad. No, not at all like my dad. My old man is one of those guys who's wasted his whole fucking life. He works a shit job, has for thirty fucking years, since he was a kid, pouring concrete. And, man, you should listen to him, listen to him go on about it. 'I'm so tough, we brickies are so special.' Yeah, right. Hasn't done a fucking thing with his life. Hasn't seen the world, hasn't had an original thought. Nothing tough about him except his mouth and his forearms and even they're going to fat. My mant's no different. She's brain-dead as well.

My father hates Jeff Kennett, calls him scum, says he's destroying the unions and the working class. But I can tell that deep down inside he respects him. You've gotta. Kennett doesn't give a shit about anyone, does whatever he likes. He even stands up to that ugly piece of shit, Howard. And that's the leader of his fucking party! Kennett is a legend.

But my old man wouldn't mind being like that, instead of following orders all his fucking life. Weak cunt! Just a day, just one day, I'd like to see my father be like Kennett. Just fucking once.

I want to go down on Kennett. When I do go down on a guy, when I come to that, it'll have to be someone like him. Tough. Arrogant. Knows what he wants. That's my favourite wank dream. I'm with school, an excursion to Parliament House. Somehow—I skip over this bit while I'm pulling off—Kennett and I end up in a lift. It's him and it's me. Sometimes there's this other guy, somesuit, young, woy guy I saw on the Channel Nine News, some woy guy who hangs around Kennett. Sometimes he's there, hanging away with us, sometimes he just watches. And then sometimes he's not there at all.
The lift stops. There's a moment that the light flicks off, then it flickers back on again. Kennett puts a hand on my shoulder. He's way tall, way taller than me. He notices I've got a stiffie in my school pants, I'm stretching the cotton. He's dressed real fine. Beautiful suit, slim tie. He winks at me and then it's on. Every time I wank to this, it changes. Sometimes he's hairy, blonde curls, all over his chest and stomach. Sometimes he's smooth. He doesn't take off his clothes, just opens his shirt, unzips the pants. I dream that his dick is squat and thick, and that when he comes, he comes in fucking buckets. Just pours the come over me, over the wog guy. That's my favourite wank.

Fucks! I could come now. Mum. I could come all over this fucking stage.

I wish I could tell my father about this dream. Maybe that would get the cunt alive. Poorer son, father, you've got a poorer son who wants to fuck a real bloke like Kennett, not some boring working stiff like you. He'd crack, I know he'd crack it. How to tell his mates on the job? 'My son's a faggott.' Gutless cunt. He could never do that.

Kennett, when he got elected, there was this big rally in the city. It was fucking enormous, about a hundred and fifty thousand people. He had closed down my old high school, that fucking waste of space. It was nothing but a factory churning out dole casualties. They should've torched the place long ago. But Mum and Dad, of course, Mum and Dad were angry. [Mimicking] 'You got to come to the rally, it's important.'

So I had to go, with Mum and Dad. Dad kept bumping into all his scuzzy alo mates; even the young ones looked sick from their shitty useless jobs. I liked the crowd, it was exciting. I loved being there in all that mass. I thought we could do anything, fucking pull apart this shit-hole of a city if we wanted. I wanted it to get angrier, I wanted it to get bloody, like it happens on the news overseas. The cops were there, waiting. I wanted it to get bloody, so I couldbash some cunt cop right in the middle of his fat, ugly face. I wanted to kill a cop, then go right off and torch fucking Chinatown. That would have been a fucking winner, man. Kill a cop and kill a gook. But it wasn't that kind of rally. It was [contemptuously, in an effeminate accent] political.

I managed to get up close, near Parliament steps, next to this really drugged-out feral chick and her dread-head, dead-head mates. I sat near the steps, bored now that the marching had stopped. Some union wanker was going on, whingeing about what everybody already knew. 'The government doesn't care about hospitals, Kennett doesn't care about education. This government sucks.' [Shouting] All governments suck, you brain-dead cunt!
I looked up. In the window there was Kennett, looking down. Some pensey guys around him were nervous, shifting their pants because of the crowd. But not Kennett. Nah, not Kennett. You know what he was doing, you know what the cunt was doing? Kennett was laughing. He was watching us and he was laughing at us.

That moment, that’s the moment I knew he was a God. That’s the moment I thought you are one smart mother-fucker. All around me people were singing union songs. Crap hippie shit. We shall bloody overcome for Christakes. I looked around, looked around, saw my old man. There he was, little Sammy Destanze, little Sammy who hasn’t done one thing of any note in his whole wasted fucking life. Little Sammy Destanze who is forty-six and fucking looks sixty-eight. There’s my old man, chanting along, doing the old Nazi salute to Kennett who doesn’t know who the fuck Sammy Destanze is and who will never know who Sammy Destanze is because Sammy Destanze is a big, fat nothing.

I couldn’t wait to leave this crowd of morons, these fucking sheep.

Dad says to me, do you want a job on a building site, and I just look at him. A real dirty look. He goes ape-shit, calls me a bludging cunt. I don’t listen. He wants me to work on a building site, he wants me to be like him. I’d rather sell my body for twenty bucks in St Kilda, I’d rather be a fucking whore. Work, grog, sleep. Work, grog, sleep. Work, grog, sleep.

That’s it, that’s my old man. Three lousy little words.

I’d like to fuck Kennett. That would be the test. I reckon he’s got a hairy arse and big red balls. I’d like to fucking ram 12 right up him. I’d like to do it again and again. That would be cunt worth fucking.

One day I’m out of here, I’m not going to be trapped in fucking Dandenong watching that dumb, plastic arsehole Ray Martin night after night. One day I’m going to have lots of money. I’ll steal it. I’ll beg for it. Fuck, to get out of here, I’d kill for it. I’ll get style, I’ll learn about the coolest places to be, I’ll have all the best-looking guys hanging on me, begging to have a go at sucking my dick.

One day I’ll be above Jeff Kennett. I’ll be above all of you, you’ll all be little spicks, little nine-to-five, seven-to-three-thirty little earthworms.

Work. Till you drop.

Drink beer. Till you rot.

Sleep. That’s the best part of your lives.

He spins on the stage.

I can’t wait to vote.

He exits.