

Gabrielle Wolf. *Make It Australian: The Australian Performing Group, the Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre*. Sydney: Currency P, 2008, xvi + 288pp.

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<http://www.currency.com.au/search.aspx?type=author&author=Gabrielle+Wolf>

This is an important addition to our contemporary theatre history publications, and will be welcomed by a general readership as well as cultural historians. It is true that it wears its origins as a PhD thesis fairly obviously, not least in its plethora of Endnotes, but they are significant in more than one way. They are, of course, important signposts to fellow-scholars, but they also reflect one rather surprising aspect of this important counter-cultural and iconoclastic social phenomenon: the obsessive recording and collecting of evidence of its sometimes disorderly processes on the part of the participants. The archives of the Australian Performing Group (APG) 'retain virtually every document it generated'. This 'conviction that it had a destiny to fulfil' as Wolf puts it, may be called 'conceit', but we owe a debt of gratitude to her for trawling so conscientiously through this material.

Wolf also draws upon ten interviews with former members of the APG: Peter Corrigan, Peter Cummings, Kerry Dwyer, Bill Garner, Max Gillies, Suzanne Ingleton, Geoffrey Milne, John Romeril and Margaret Williams, thus covering the gamut of designers, actors, directors, writers, technical staff and academic historians. These are supplemented by many other contributions from former members, and there are a number of photographs from various productions that speak volumes as well.

The book begins with a sure sense of authorial voice, established in a recollection of Wolf's 1999 first encounter with the work of the APG in the form of a revival of Jack Hibberd's 1967 play *White With Wire Wheels*. A sense of authentic shock comes through the graphic description of Hibberd's gross tribute to Australian manhood. It is a pity there is not more of this unmediated personal experience, but the fact that Wolf is too young to have 'been there', while potentially a strength in offering some critical distance, also weakens her analysis at some points. Nevertheless, she offers a fresh perspective in the wake of participant studies such as Tim Robertson's *The Pram Factory: The Australian Performing Group Recollected* (2001), and Liz Jones and Helen Garner's earlier *La Mama: The Story of a Theatre* (1988).

It is true, however, that, well aware of the potential shortcoming of her generational difference, Wolf has used the voices of the APG originals, particularly her ten interviewees, to evoke a solid sense of the present occasion in their recollections. Her considerable background reading also compensates for her lack of personal experiences of performances and provides a persuasive intellectual framework for what otherwise might have been just a record of times past as remembered by the participants. Whether the book succeeds in its early claim to challenge 'the mythology' of the APG is a moot point, but it does ask a series of important questions as part of this challenge. The employment of multiple voices and sometimes conflicting opinions serves to de-stabilise orthodoxy. The other significant contribution to her analysis is the practice of quoting generously from contemporary theatre criticism, giving voice to informed, and presumably not partisan, eye-witness accounts of productions.

Best of all is the fact that Wolf tells the story clearly and well, without the distraction of academic jargon. She charts the collective's development, signals new directions taken, and suggests explanatory causes for them, as well as embedding it all in a historical context that sketches in the wider issues. Structurally, however, the book is top-heavy in that it raises the most interesting questions in its first chapters, while the later ones begin to sound like annotated production lists at times. But there is a great deal of material to cover, many writers and many significant productions.

Certainly extravagant claims to the revolutionary nature of the APG are attenuated, at least, by Wolf's careful chronology of outside influences, particularly international cultural movements, which were being enthusiastically 'discovered' by university dramatic societies. Authors such as Ionesco, Arrabal, Pinter, Brecht, were being explored by students who were to develop uniquely Australian ways of challenging theatrical naturalism, which Kerry Dwyer recalls was considered 'boring' by the APG group, claiming the highly physical, comic, symbolic, aggressively vernacular theatre they were creating was the beginning of a form of postmodernism. There were later to be significant Australian influences on the group as well, notably the nineteenth-century melodramas to which they were introduced by academic Margaret Williams. Australian vaudeville was also a major stylistic influence.

The earliest performances in the shirt-factory-turned-theatre, La Mama, were crude and often confrontational, 'excruciating . . . to watch' according to Peter Cummins. Yet the audience members, many living in Carlton, or attending Melbourne University (and Wolf notes that many of them had probably read *Offending the Audience* by Austrian playwright Peter Handke), enjoyed this improvisational and anti-illusionist theatre. Bill Garner claims 'It was the zeitgeist', and Wolf agrees that the actors were documenting the mindset of their generation. Nevertheless, she identifies a key weakness in a group that aimed to produce popular theatre, in line with Peter Brooke's linking of anti-bourgeois theatre and social change in *The Empty Space*: 'Beyond their work in the streets, they never entertained a broad, general, cross-class audience'. And 'there were few working-class people in their audiences'.

Tellingly, Wolf provides a revealing comparison of the programming of both the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) and the Australian Performing Group in the late 1960s and early 1970s, noting the rather surprising similarities and the fact that there was a shared core audience. Geoffrey Milne notes that 'cross-over audiences . . . tended to dress down for the Carlton experience!' Further undermining the APG's anti-establishment self image was the theatrical experience and training in the MTC (or the Union Theatre Repertory Company in its earlier form) that some members of the group had shared. Certainly Wolf's program comparisons at this point make it clear that the APG was by no means the only experimental theatre company in Melbourne at the time. There was an element of self-delusion—'We fondly pretended we were inventing the entire thing from scratch', Milne states—yet paradoxically this may itself have enabled the group to push the theatrical boundaries further than they may otherwise have gone.

Perhaps the most enduring stereotype celebrated in so many early APG plays was that of the Ocker. This was by no means their invention, of course, but the many literary precursors that celebrated a unique Australian mateship such as Lawson and C. J. Dennis had not produced it

for the stage. It was Ray Lawler in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1955 that had, in the characters of Barney and Roo, presented the first full-scale examination of Australian masculinity in these terms. Wolf discusses the profound and unresolved ambivalence behind the stereotypes, the simultaneously celebratory and critical stance that saw Australianness most typically promoted through self-deprecation. The APG, in plays such as David Williamson's 1971 *The Removalists*, or Jack Hibberd's 1969 *Dimboola* or Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* (1969), raised disturbing questions about Australian violence, racism and sexism. But ambivalences remained in the question, for example, of whether the performers in *Dimboola* were laughing at or with the play's characters.

Many questions about how the APG conceived of itself are raised and sometimes answered by Wolf's careful perusal of the APG newsletters, in which 'from the end of 1969, the company's growing pains had been expressed in formal statements about its goals'. The 'self-appointed nationalist mission' was summed up in statements such as 'Home-made, that's the motto'. There is perhaps a degree of ambiguity hovering over this assertion, given that by this time the group began to be subsidised by the Australian Council for the Arts, which had developed a fund specifically to support experimental and Australian theatre, as Wolf points out.

Several events in 1970-71 were important milestones. The triumphant 1970 Perth Arts Festival appearance was one, raising the APG to national prominence. Another was the shift from the cramped La Mama to the larger Pram Factory in Drummond Street. Encouraged by John Romeril, one of the Monash University individuals in the group, Margaret Williams joined the APG and shared her research on Australian melodrama and vaudeville in the 1880s and 1890s. Its influence was immediately apparent in the production of *Marvellous Melbourne* at the end of 1970, marking the opening of their new home in the Pram Factory.

The next decade saw the flowering of the APG and what, in retrospect, seems like its inevitable demise, marked by the sale of the Pram Factory in 1981. Writers such as Jack Hibberd, Alex Buzo, David Williamson, Barry Oakley, John Romeril, Stephen Sewell, Barry Dickins, and many others, all made their mark. A list of their most successful plays from this period represents much of the canon of Australian drama in any historical assessment: *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *Stretch of the Imagination*, *Bastardy*, *Beware of Imitations*, *The Floating World*, *Traitors* are just a few. Yet the APG was never just a writers' theatre; indeed in the ebbing and flowing of influence and opinion in the collective meetings the underlying questions of whether it existed as an actors', directors' or writers' theatre never went away. In 1972 *Betty Can Jump* raised the question of whether or not it was a male-only project: making fun of the male ockers was only one way in which the burgeoning Women's Liberation movement made its influence felt, its timeliness made obvious in the huge box-office success the female-devised and performed show enjoyed.

The book's Epilogue tries to estimate the permanent effects of the APG phenomenon in Australian theatre. This is a balanced and relatively modest assessment that certainly attenuates some earlier claims, part of the 'mythology' this book tackles. In fact by the end of *Make It Australian* it is clear that there has been a consistent and strong argumentative structure of questioning and counter-claiming throughout, proof of the value of Wolf's relative detachment from her material. If the APG was less revolutionary than it claimed, it nevertheless had both a

high impact while it existed, and left some important legacies. Wolf reminds us that Circus Oz is one of these, quoting Jon Hawkes who claims that Oz continues to embody the spirit of the APG particularly in the importance of its performers in developing shows. Wolf also suggests that La Mama Theatre has been helped to survive and thrive for more than 40 years, programming new Australian work, because of the ‘naturalising’ of Australian work in theatre repertoires. Geoffrey Milne claims that ‘we Australianised theatre practice as well as repertoire’. This can be seen in the encouragement given to other Australian theatre practitioners to take risks as well as the stylistic shift that made comic self-derision a tradition. The relative modesty of these claims should not disguise their significance, and this book represents an important contribution to cultural debates that will certainly continue.

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