
UNIT 1 AN OVERVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Pre-Lawler Australian Drama
 - 1.2.1 Burn, Melville and Harpur
 - 1.2.2 Birth of the Archetypal Australian Male and the Indigenous Element in Drama
- 1.3 Australian Drama in the Nineteenth Century
- 1.4 Post-Lawler Australian Drama
 - 1.4.1 The New Wave
 - 1.4.2 Theatre in the 1970s
 - 1.4.3 The Second Wave
 - 1.4.4 Aboriginal Theatre
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will see how Australian drama has gone through various phases of development from the colonial times. We will attempt to trace the dominant themes and techniques as also look briefly at the major dramatists. This should help you to place David Williamson's works in their context. We shall only be considering drama written in English and, obviously, since this is a history of the theatre in a settler country, the history of the drama will basically deal with that of the settlers. The performative culture and history of the Aborigines does not form part of this history except in later, more recent, interventions in this theatre.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We in India hardly get to hear of Australian dramatists and hence I would not be surprised if Williamson is the first Australian dramatist you have heard of. Further, considering the fact that Australian drama came into its own only in the 1950s and that you may not even know many English playwrights who have written after that, given the nature of our academic curricula and our theatrical experiences, it should not surprise anyone if you cannot name a single Australian playwright other than Williamson. It is a curious coincidence that contemporary theater in both England and Australia were able to establish themselves roughly around the same time in the mid-fifties. If John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* took the London stage by storm in 1956 and seemed to usher in a new era of English drama, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* had already done that in Australia in 1955. In both cases it was an initiative to discover new dramatists that provided the breakthrough. The beginning of Australian play-writing/drama can be fixed at 1955 with the premiering of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Despite the fact that Australia's first professional theatres operated from the 1830s, as H.G. Kippax in his Introduction to *Three Australians Plays* says, it "was one of inspiration rather than achievement." The reasons why theatre did not receive an impetus before 1955 (p.7-21) are many and could include one more of the following:

The Removalists

- theatre suffered a setback during the Depression,
- it was faced by stiff competition from the world of cinema,
- Australian audiences refused to watch local talent, until the plays won acclaim abroad,
- there was a marked distrust between local writers and 'commercial theatre'
- most of the playwrights went abroad in search of artistic sustenance,
- the myth of the great Australian legend, made the playwrights turn towards the Bush for inspiration, furthering leading drama into the wilderness.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll premiered in Melbourne in 1955 and by the time it was taken to Sydney to rave reviews it had already been acknowledged as a theatrical event. It was hailed as a truly authentic Australian play of international caliber. The London Times reported on 30th November 1955 that Hugh Hunt, the executive director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust had called *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* "the best play ever written about Australia – purely Australian but in quality to be compared with the work of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Sean O'Casey". This play which was one of the two to share the first prize in the competition held in the previous year by the Playwrights' Advisory Board seemed to mark a watershed in Australian drama. What this allows us to do is to demarcate the history of Australian drama into two phases – pre-Lawler and post-Lawler.

1.2 PRE-LAWLER AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

It is logical to expect that the first plays on a settler colony like Australia would try to depict the different environment and lifestyle of the settlers. The most distinguishing characteristic of Australian life was that of life in the bush, an almost American wild-west kind of scenario. The bushranger, a desperado who fought the law, was the stuff that action heroes were made of. All the claimants to the position of the first Australian play deal with the bushranger.

1.2.1 Burn, Melville and Harpur

David Burn, who is often called the first Australian playwright on account of his considerable output, wrote his first play *The Bush Rangers* partly in Tasmania. A man who had a foot in both the mother country and in the colony, he completed the play in Scotland and presented it on stage at Edinburgh in 1829. Burn's play was not performed or published in Australia till 1971 when it achieved both distinctions. This play deals with the life of a real life bushranger, an escaped convict named Matthew Brady who was the leader of a gang in Tasmania. The real Brady was captured and hanged in 1826. In the play, Brady is shown as defiant of authority and a seeker of true liberty. He is a Robin Hood figure who saves a woman from being raped and a settlement from being massacred by "wild natives." An episodic play, its aim seems to have been to give an idea of life in the settler colony as much as to depict the adventures of an outlaw. Burn, whose other plays include a fair number of historical romances never wrote another play quite like *The Bush Rangers* which was written in prose unlike his other poetic plays. As Leslie Rees says in his history of Australian drama (see Suggested Reading), Burn must be given "full credit for being the first playwright to present an Australian subject from first-hand knowledge." (p. 15)

However another play called *The Bushrangers: or, Norwood Vale* was printed and performed in Hobart, Tasmania, in 1834. This was written by Henry Melville, a newspaper publisher, who printed the play in his own *Hobart Town Magazine* in April that year. It was performed in Hobart in May 1834. A three act play, *The Bushrangers* is a made up of a tableaux. The play depicts a party of bushrangers attacking a settler's house in the bush; the settler is saved by his daughter's lover

whom he disapproves of, and a native Australian. Perhaps this is the first Australian play staged in Australia.

An Overview of Australian Drama

In 1835, Charles Harpur published a poetic play, which was later known as *The Bushrangers*, in the Sydney Monitor. This was in serial form and was then called "*The Tragedy of Donohoe*". This was however never produced and Harpur seems to have revised the play time and again. Though the credit for the first published Australian play should perhaps go to "*The Bandit of the Rhine*" written by Evan Henry Thomas, which was published in 1834 in Hobart by the author himself with the help of prior subscription from buyers, it is of interest to note that the other three early plays we looked at have all dealt with the subject of bushrangers.

1.2.2 Birth of the Archetypal Australian Male and the Indigenous Element in Drama

The bushranger seems to have inspired a certain respect and admiration among the early Australian writers. This was because the bushranger seemed to typify the Australian spirit as well as appear a romantic figure. The highway robber was a romantic figure in England in the eighteenth century and the early Australian settlers seemed to have regarded the bushranger in similar light. The distinctive Australian ethos that developed also had a lot to do with both the convict and working class attitudes. Thus the bushrangers were perhaps seen as more Australian than others. They were defiant of law and authority and thus 'free'; they had to be resourceful and loyal to each other. Further they had the image of being Robin Hoods stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, of being essentially kind people. This gave them a romantic aura as well. In their defiance of authority and their comradeship you can already see the birth of the figure of the archetypal Australian male.

I must also mention that in Burns' play the aborigines perform a corroboree – a dance drama rooted in their rituals and traditions. While Burns may have been breaking new ground in including the Aboriginal corroboree in a 'white' English play, it would have provided exotic local colour and entertainment to its audiences. Very often the corroboree itself was performed for the entertainment of early Australian settlers. In fact the earliest available entertainments in Perth (which was founded in 1829) were corroborees. The interest in corroborees has lived on and like folk forms all over the world, the corroboree too is now decontextualised and performed for the entertainment of audiences across Australia.

1.3 AUSTRALIAN DRAMA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The state of drama in Australia in the nineteenth century was not anything to write home about but it was not anything very much at 'home' in England either, as we know. There were specific historical reasons for the lack of good dramatists in England in the very century that theatre actually established itself but this lack translated into a similar lack in Australia as well. In contrast the latter half of the century saw great dramatic and theatrical activity in Europe. Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov and company did not find any immediate answering echo in England or Australia. In Australia what ruled the stage were conventional melodrama and light comedies and domestic plays just like in England. You also had verse drama on historical themes that claimed a literary status.

Among the various pioneers of Australian drama was Walter Cooper who wrote *Colonial Experience*, *Foiled*, or, *Australia Twenty Years Ago*, *Sun and Shadow*, and *Hazard*. He wrote in the late 1860s and 1870s. A Sydney based playwright, Cooper wrote popular plays and perhaps his play *Foiled* contains the first instance of what

Indian film goers are so used to – a person being tied to a log in a timber mill and moved towards a mechanical saw, only to be saved at the last minute.

By this time Australia had many established playhouses in Melbourne and Sydney. Further there were also established actor-managers on the scene. Thus the theatre was alive if not flourishing and the most successful playwright of this era, Australia's first successful playwright, emerged on the scene at that time. This was Bombay-born Francis R. C. Hopkins. His plays were however, not particularly Australian, being adapted from European novels. The actor-manager Alfred Dampier had a great role to play in his triumphant career. Hopkins' *All for Gold: or, Fifty Millions of Money*, an adaptation of a French novel by Eugene Sue, was their first major hit. It premiered at the Victoria Theatre, Sydney, on 10th March 1877 and then toured the rest of the country, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, and England.

Another successful play by Hopkins, *Good for Evil* (published as *Clay and Porcelain*), was set in London, Paris, and Venice. In his dedication, Hopkins talks of the central character as a Mephistophelian Iago. He gives his reason for both the settings and the Mephistophelian Iago character by saying that the play was inspired by a popular novel by Ouida. Hopkins adapted Alexandre Dumas' *Chicot the Jester* as *Only a Fool* in 1880. His other plays, *L.S.D.*, and *Russia as It Is: or, Michael Strogoff the Courier of the Czar*, were also adapted from European sources. The last play was based on Jules Verne's novel. This play is remembered chiefly for a scene depicting a fight with a bear, a trained animal being used on the stage.

The question is not whether Hopkins had any originality or not. He does seem to have written in new characters and done more than re-arrange incidents in his adaptations. What is of interest to us is that the first successful Australian playwright saw his work as an extension of and heir to European literature and culture. The sources as well as the locales of any significance lay in Europe, not in Australia. Hopkins continued to write in the twentieth century and was the author of an anonymously published play in 1909. This play called *Reaping a Whirlwind* is his Australian play. It exhibits Hopkins' fear for the future of Australia. This fear is the fear of the Asianisation of Australia. In the play, Mother Britain lets Australia down by first signing treaties with Asian countries and then again when under invasion herself issues a proclamation suspending the Aliens Exclusion Act throughout Australia. The play's last line is, "The Asiatics will enter this country without firing a shot. Oh, my God." When the sources of Australian culture are seen as white and European, any significance the Australians derive has to be from the umbilical cord that joins them to Europe. Obviously the threat then is from the proximity of Asia. Hence the first successful Australian playwright sets almost all his plays in Europe and derives them from European sources and in the play he sets in Australia, which is born of his own fears and emotions, he writes of the possibility of racial and cultural pollution from the Asiatic menace. The Australia of high culture had to maintain its connections with and derive its sustenance from white Europe and the biggest threat to this was its proximity to its Asian neighbours.

What we must remember is that Hopkins had literary ambitions. Other playwrights who wrote for the public had no qualms about setting their plays in Australia. The foremost among them was George Darrell. He too wrote in the 1870s and 1880s and was a hit with the box office even if not with the critics. Some of his more popular plays were *Transported for Life* (1877), *Back from the Grace* (1878), *The Sunny South* (1883), and *The Soggarth* (1886). *The Sunny South* was the biggest box office earner of its times, even having a triumphant production in London. The papers of the day ran down these home brewed plays as of no literary merit. But plays about convictism and other plays set in Australia contributed to the self-image of Australians, especially the construction of the notion of the Australian male.

When we talk about nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian drama we have to mention the people who controlled the theatrical spaces. The most famous of them and the most powerful was J C Williamson who along with Tallis and Ramaciotti

owned almost all the theatre companies in Australia. J C Williamson did not believe that there was any Australian drama worth presenting on stage. His was a commercial empire and he did not see any reason to encourage untried and hence potentially unprofitable local talent.

Hence the Ibsenian revolution in Europe happened without affecting Australian drama. Independent theatres came up in Europe and England in the 1890s without finding a successful echo in Australia. The notion of an Australian nation came into existence in other genres of literature and other cultural forms but did not find expression in Australian theatre of the first decades of the twentieth century. There was no Henry Lawson in theatre. Australian theatre was so caught-up in the grip of commercial interests that in such a short introduction to the history of Australian drama one could safely skip the first half of the twentieth century. But I shall lead you through this period briefly mainly to show you where Lawler's *Seventeenth Doll* came from.

Almost throughout the nineteenth century the stage seemed to be available to Australian comedies. This was not the case in the early decades of the twentieth century. Bert Bailey's success with the adaptations of Steele Rudd's novels was a rare exception. It would seem that even home-spun humour had gone out of fashion. A few alternative sites did exist and soldiered bravely on – like, e.g., in Melbourne where you had Gregan McMahon's repertory (1911-1917), William Moore's Annual Drama Nights where only Australian plays were performed (1909-1912), and the seasons of the Pioneer Players (1922-1926). The Pioneer Players performed five plays by its founders Louis Esson, Stewart Macky, and Vance Palmer. The music hall tradition was flourishing as was cinema. In fact Australian cinema was very popular between the two world wars. So there was an audience for Australian essence in Australia but it could not be found in the theatre. The lack of support, which would have enabled the dramatists to work with repertory companies and sharpen their craft, meant that there were no unperformed masterpieces from that era either. Peter Fitzpatrick (see Suggested Reading) actually finds the Australian plays that belong to the first half of the twentieth century "more interesting for their flaws, or their marks of potential, or their reflections of their society, or their evidence of the problems confronting the playwright, than ... as dramatic achievements." (p. 6)

Expectedly these plays are preoccupied with defining Australian-ness, their difference from Europe and the European dramatic tradition. This meant merely the adding on of local colour to some playwrights but more importantly it involved the construction and establishment of Australian characters and the exploration of their problems. The dramatic tradition and idiom remained European but the land and the lifestyle that it imposed that needed to be depicted in a manner as un-European as possible.

The dominant dramatic form then was **naturalistic** well-made play, which in Europe dealt with the lives of characters in almost claustrophobic interiors in the cities. The life that the Australian dramatists portrayed on stage was that of the outback, of the attempt to tame nature. Naturalistic plays looked for causality and psychological understanding and examined the individual. The Australian playwrights were attempting to forge the myth of nationness. They were less interested in individuals and more interested in depicting the Australian. There is an obvious mismatch here. Further, designing sets for the great outdoors and depicting catastrophic natural events would have been almost impossible then. Hence most events would have to occur offstage and reportage would have to fill in for action.

Among the major dramatists of this period, Arthur Adams overcame these problems by not facing them at all! His Ibsen-influenced three act plays were set in the towns. Even the other playwrights wrote other than outback plays but their significance is in the number of outback plays that they did write. Foremost among them was Louis Esson. His outback plays include one-acters like *The Drovers* (where a man is mortally injured after a stampede) and *Dead Timber*, and a three-act play *Mother and*

Son. It may interest you to know that one of Esson's town plays called *The Sacred Place* is about Indian muslim hawkers. Even Katherine Susannah Prichard, prize winning novelist, wrote plays set in the outback. *Pioneers* was a one-acter adapter from her prize winning novel of the same name, *Brumby Innes* won a prize for itself in a three-act play competition held by the Triad magazine. Another major playwright who set his plays in the outback was Vance Palmer. There are other playwrights and plays (Douglas Stewart's *Ned Kelly* for instance) which you could read and/or read about, including the trend in the forties to writing verse drama, but I am afraid that we have to move on in our history to the formation of the Australian Elizabethan Theater Trust in 1954. This was set up to encourage Australian drama and the first new Australian play that it staged was Ray Lawler's *Seventeenth Doll*.

1.4 POST-LAWLER AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

Though this section is called Post-Lawler, what we really mean here is the theatre after the successful staging of Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1955. You must read this play for it is a watershed in Australian drama in more ways than one. If it seems to be the starting point for a truly Australian and energetic theatre, it is also the culmination of earlier efforts to forge the myth of the outback, to create the authentic Australian character with his ideals of mateship and other macho characteristics.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll is a well-made play and its three-act structure is extremely well crafted. It is a naturalistic play and it overcomes the problems faced by earlier playwrights in wedding this form to life in the outback by presenting the action within the living-room, a space more attuned to the form. The characteristic conflicts of outdoor life, the conflicts in the bushman image are thus acted out indoors. The play allows the examination in a changed setting and allows time to think of the values that Australians had lived by and prided themselves on. The play's characters though stereotypical have achieved the status of independent figures – Roo, Barney, Olive, and Pearl are almost people you know and sympathise with. This is a play that looks hard at the ideals of male bonding (mateship) and physical prowess within the confines and needs of domesticity and societal stability. The romance of the bush fails and while it may be a question of youth Vs age the play does enough damage to the ideals themselves.

Thus the *Doll*, which is a watershed in Australian drama, marks the culmination of the earlier period and efforts rather than the beginning of a new era. You will have to go through the suggested reading before you can know enough to agree or disagree with me but for now you will have to take my word that no significant movement came out of the *Doll*. We have to wait till the late-sixties and seventies and the New Wave dramatists before anything of equal significance takes place in Australian theatre. Not that nothing was written or produced till then. Lawler himself wrote other plays including two others on the *Doll* characters to eventually complete the *Doll* trilogy. Two significant plays that followed the *Doll* were Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* (1956) and Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (1959), both of which are naturalistic plays about characteristic Australian concerns and characters. These and other plays of this era examine the notion of Australianness that was yet to be redefined in the wake of post- World War II immigration.

The generational conflicts that had come into being because of higher education becoming available to hitherto deprived classes also provided subject for drama. Beynon's play is about the acceptance of immigrants while Seymour's is about generational conflict that flares up around the 'venerable' institution of Anzac Day, the celebration of the Australian participation in World War II that is marked by the battle at Gallipoli. Playwrights like Patrick Wright, who is more famous as a novelist, Patrick Kenna (who along with some other playwrights forms part of the group called

the lonely playwrights because they wrote outside the institutional framework of established theatres), and Dorothy Hewett also lend some weight and importance to this period.

1.4.1 The New Wave

The New Wave that followed this period broke free of various dramatic conventions and theatrical spaces. This radical period saw plays performed in alternate venues like converted factories and warehouses, and streets and other public spaces. This was the time of the Vietnam War and conscription into the army and this saw a politically aware and committed generation taking to the boards. This was 'rough' theatre at its best – anti-establishment, anti-tradition, anti-pomp and anti-pretence. This theatre identified itself with the working class. But the audience was not very different or more democratic in class composition. These were plays for educated, young, middle class audiences. Politics took centrestage over aesthetics and audience intervention was a welcome part of the performance. These plays demolished earlier stereotypes and the Australian male was satirised instead of being mythicised. The 'ocker' figure, which came into being now, was actually questioned and critiqued rather than romanticised. These plays were urban and less masculine than the earlier plays even though the influence of feminism was yet to be felt. They contested received social values and were heavily influenced by American writing and politics as well as European theatrical practice (e.g. that of Brecht).

The received aesthetics of Australian theatre – the three-act play, various traditional forms, the demarcation of high and low drama, and accepted language (the anglicised upper class accent) – came under attack. Not that earlier writers had not employed Australian speech patterns in their plays (see e.g. Esson) but now the attempt had a political basis. A new Australian generation was defining and representing itself on stage. Older, popular forms like **vaudeville**, and stand up comedy, were deployed in this theatre and deployed usually to satirise the icons of the older generation. Melbourne was an important centre of this activity and the dramatists who learnt their craft during this period were Jack Hibberd, David Williamson himself, John Romeril, and Barry Oakley in Melbourne, and Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis in Sydney.

We must also look at the figure of the 'ocker' (the etymology of this term is obscure). The 'ocker' is pushy and crude; he asserts his masculinity through his heavy drinking and tough talking and boasting about his female conquests. The 'ocker' is aggressively articulate in opposition to the earlier taciturn stereotype of the outback hero. He does not want to make any effort mental or physical and lives for material pleasures. Nothing or rather nothing else matters to him. This is the figure that comes to typify a certain kind of Australian who is the product of the era of national affluence and complacency.

Patrick White and Dorothy Hewett, both important though not popular playwrights, had already moved away from stage **naturalism** to experiment with **expressionism** and **surrealism**. Poetic speech, symbols, and music, as well as the expression of the inner life of the characters moved their plays well beyond the limits of **realism**. The New Wave, with their political commitment and community oriented theatrical practices changed Australian theatre even more radically. Along with alternate venues came in a more intimate theatre where audiences learnt to interact with the actors.

1.4.2 Theatre in the 1970s

But this politically committed theatre had a natural end when a reformist Whitlam government came to power in 1972. The need for continued funding also governs the life cycle of such theatrical movements. Earlier, in 1958, the National Institute of Dramatic Art had been established at the University of New South Wales by the Theatre Trust. The trust was replaced as a funding body by the Australian Council for Arts in 1968. The Council decided to support state theatre companies rather than a

The Removalists

national company. It also decided to support the Australian Performing Group (APG) in Melbourne and Sydney's Australian Drama Foundation. This ensured an expansion of theatrical activity in the 1970s.

The reputation of the APG was established by plays like Jack Hibberd's *White With Wire Wheels*, Alex Buzo's *The Front Room Boys*, and Jack Romeril's *The Man From Chicago* (later called *Chicago, Chicago*), all of which were performed at the Festival of Perth in 1970. 1970 also saw the first performance of *The Legend of King O'Mailey* in Sydney. This is a comic musical play, and along with other plays like Barry Oakley's *The Feet of Daniel Mannix* (1971), and *Beware of Imitations* (1973), and Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola* (1969), *A Stretch of Imagination* (1972), *Les Darcy Show* (1974), and *A Toast to Melba* (1976), it developed what has been called the historical pantomime. These are political satires which use music hall techniques and devices. David Williamson also had his first full length play, *The Coming of Stork*, premiere in 1970 but we shall look at his plays in the next unit.

Of this first wave only Williamson, John Romeril, and Alex Buzo continued to write plays in the 90s. And among them, only John Romeril shows the same political commitment to working class values, and to the collaborative process of play production that characterised the New Wave. Romeril has gone on to engage with the Asian experience. Romeril's *The Floating World* (1975) is a classic (of the same status as the *Doll* and Hibberd's *Stretch of Imagination*) and is a frequently performed play. This play is about the disastrous re-encounter with the Japan of Lee Harding, an ex- Japanese prisoner of war. Romeril defines the Australian character in an international context and this links him to the second wave of dramatist like Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra. His community theatre work is another important strand in contemporary Australian theatre.

You would have noticed that there is a dearth of women playwrights in the short history sketched above as well as the fact that Australian drama's explorations of Australian-ness is in terms of the white male. The two facts are quite obviously interlinked. The predominantly male authorship of Australian drama including the New Wave ensured that the demise of the bush stereotype was succeeded by the emergence of the 'ocker'. Buzo, Hibberd, and Williamson, among others, portray negatively the rituals of male bonding, and establish the alienation, the meaninglessness of the lives of essentially overgrown unpleasant boys. But what this endorses paradoxically is the strength of the male stereotype and its importance in the construction of their Australia. While they struggle to break out of the earlier constructions they never move out of this territory. This caused the formation of various women's groups in the 1970s and 80s. For instance, The Women's Theatre Group separated itself from the APG in 1972 and produced *Betty Can Jump*. This was a group devised play as was the more successful *The Hills Family Show* (1975). Feminism had a later impact in Sydney and other theatre centres. Now there are feminist theatre groups in all the states. Adelaide's Vitalstatistix (est. 1984) is a performance group, while Sydney's Playworks (est. 1985) is a national organisation committed to nurturing and developing women writers.

While speaking of theatre of this period we must also take note of the work done by Circus Oz. The development of the circus as an area of Australian performative excellence was due to the efforts of some members of the APG. The Circus Oz's distinctiveness derives from its politicisation of the circus. It not only lampoons politicians, it also makes an ideological point about not using animals. We must also remember that the circus in Australia has from its very beginning, two centuries ago (in the 1840s) exploited the Australian liking for athletics, horsemanship, and clowning. There are many such circus groups in Australia now.

The first wave's long lasting influence has thus been in the area of alternative and experimental theatre. It was also responsible for the cultural confidence that has since then characterised Australian theatre. Since the theatre companies formed then were quite often associated with universities and were funded by the Australia Council,

they not only were professional, but, they also had a higher survival rate than earlier companies.

1.4.3 The Second Wave

The second wave of dramatists who emerged in the late 1970s gave new directions to Australian drama. Their plays are characteristically complex and deal with important issues. These theatrically ambitious plays do not look to the masculine stereotype for their exploration of Australian-ness. The Australian-ness that they chart is in terms of a quest. But the playwrights who began to write now, like Stephen Sewell, Michael Gow, and Louis Nowra, like their older contemporaries Dorothy Hewett, Patrick White, and Alma de Groen, have been largely unsuccessful in terms of popularity.

Sewell began his career as a Marxist and his early plays are intensely political and international. They are deeply moral plays that show a wide range of theatrical influences. *Traitors* (1979), *Welcome to the Bright World* (1982), the first set in Russia and the second in Germany, deal with revolutionary history. *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea* (1978), *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1983), and *Dreams in an Empty City* (1986) explore contemporary Australian politics. These are apocalyptic visions of the resurgence of **fascism**, the collapse of **capitalism**, and the power of multinational companies. *Hate* (1988), *Sisters* (1991), and *The Garden of Granddaughters* (1993) are family psycho-dramas. Sewell's plays are very different from Williamson's who is an extremely popular playwright because Sewell's plays are demanding and obtuse, using structures of myths, classic archetypes, and symbolism.

Louis Nowra's early plays are also internationalist and vast. *Inner Voices* (1977), *Visions* (1978), and *The Precious Woman* (1981) are set in Russia, Paraguay, and China respectively. Nowra's break with naturalism is more in terms of form than Sewell's. He frequently uses the play within the play and like **Pirandello** draws attention to the artificialities of the theatrical representation as well as the narrative. His postcolonialist ideology is evident in his representation of the Aboriginal Australians. He dramatised Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia* in the Bicentennial year (1988). The predicament of the Aborigines is present in other plays of his as well – *Inside the Island* (1981), *Sunrise* (1983), *Crow* (1994), and *Summer of the Aliens* (1992). *Summer of the Aliens* is a semi-autobiographical play as is *Cosi* (1992) and interestingly Aborigines are present in both. Apart from these visions of displacement and alienation, Nowra has also a farce satirising corporate greed, *The Temple* (1993), and a play on the recent history of Queensland, *The Incorruptible* (1995).

Among the other playwrights we would like to introduce you to the works of Dorothy Hewett. She was one of the first playwrights to write challengingly about female sexuality. All her plays (other than *The Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, which was written in 1966) are anti-naturalistic. They make interesting use of music and pageantry, caricature and comedy. Her plays including the semi-autobiographical *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), and *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1972), *The Tatty Hollow Story* (1974) and even *The Golden Oldies* (1967) focus on women's lives and deconstruct the conventions of feminine attractiveness. She weds the popular and high culture and in her later plays – *Catspaw* (1974), *Pandora's Cross* (1978), *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), and her radio play *Swannah's Dreaming* (1981) – focusses on the Australian landscape with a poetic intensity and concerns herself with environmental issues as well.

Patrick White is also a revered figure in Australian theatre. Though he began his theatrical career quite early with *The Ham Funeral*, written and set in London in 1947, which was produced in 1961, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962), *A Cheery Soul* (1963), and *Night on Bald Mountain* (1964), his career received a boost only in the second half of the 1970s. His plays, which are characterised by an intense **symbolism** and poetic speech, attack what is seen as Australian **philistinism** as they

explore the spiritual side of human character. Not very successful on stage, it was director Jim Sharman's production of *The Season at Sarsaparilla* in 1976 that revived White's theatrical career. He wrote *Big Toys* in 1977, a play about political corruption. Sharman also directed *Netherwood* (1983), and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987), while *Signal Driver* (1982) was directed by Neil Armfield.

Alma de Groen has a lot in common with Dorothy Hewett, mainly because both are women playwrights sensitive to their position in a male dominated industry. Her plays have developed from an exploration of alienation to enunciate a feminism that looks at women's problems as tied to that of men's. The first theme can be seen in *The Sweatproof Boy* (1968), *The Joss Adams Show* (1970), *Perfectly All Right* (1973), and *The After-life of Arthur Cravan* (1973). Her feminist philosophy is present in *Vocations* (1982), *The Rivers of China* (1985), and *The Girl Who Saw Everything* (1993). These are extremely challenging plays. For example, in *The Rivers of China*, which has two time-scales and plots, the personality of the writer, Katherine Mansfield, is grafted into the body of a young man. According to Helen Thomson "De Groen's complex theatricality, her explorations of a variety of non-naturalistic modes, places her firmly in the experimentalist group of playwrights who continue to define a national drama in terms that transcend the national."

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, American popular culture made steady inroads into Australia as elsewhere. What happened was an internationalisation of popular culture. The idea of national identity gave way to that of various special interest groups. When we look at the 1990s, the main characteristics of the decade is its theatrical diversity. The Arts Festivals held in all the major Australian cities has ensured that quality drama is accessible to all but that at the same time it rubs shoulders with the experimental and the alternative performing arts. These huge tourist attractions have a truly international ambience in both their audiences and their productions. The commercialisation of theatre has led to its funding by private enterprises and its promotion by the tourism industry. One positive effect it may have had is that in the bid to cater to tourist interest, the indigenous Aboriginal theatre received a big boost.

1.4.4 Aboriginal Theatre

This may have sounded like a pejorative comment about Aboriginal theatre but it was meant to show up one of the ironies of life. Aboriginal culture has always been a performative one with a narrativising impulse. Thus the emergence of Aboriginal theatre should be seen in terms of using that cultural energy to conquer traditionally white spaces and audiences, to rewrite Australian history. Jack Davis, a Nyoongah Aborigine from Western Australia, is a pioneering Aboriginal playwright. Davis has lived in both cultures and when he began to write his plays, which address both white and aboriginal audiences, there were no Aboriginal actors to play his roles. The situation has changed since then with the establishment of many Aboriginal theatre companies.

Aboriginal drama is expectedly political in its need for self-definition and assertion. Jack Davis's *Kullark* was for example written and produced because of the omission of Aborigines from Western Australia's sesquicentenary celebrations in 1979. It is an Aboriginal version of Western Australia's history encompassing the times before and after the arrival of the whites in Australia. *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*, which depicts black deaths in custody, was a protest against white bicentennial celebrations in 1988. The major danger for Aboriginal drama is that of appropriation, for after all it is written in the language of the oppressors. Such protest also calls for realism in terms of characterisation and style. Even so, Aboriginal drama contains disruptive elements like indigenous music (the use of didgeridoo, and click-sticks, for example), Aboriginal dancing and storytelling, and the use of untranslated Aboriginal language.

Aboriginal theatre's very existence is to contest white values. These plays contrast white and black cultures making use of comedy subversively. Aboriginal characters

are individualised in contrast to white stereotypes. White bureaucracy is shown to be destructive, while the Australian counterparts of the American "Uncle Toms", 'coconuts' (black on the outside but white on the inside!), are denigrated. You will also find the audacious trickster figure who outwits the whites. Expectedly Aboriginal theatre has come to portray the complexity of the formation of the Aboriginal identity and performance styles – moving away from a sense of being victim to confident self assertion.

Some of the other Aboriginal dramatists that you may come across are the pioneering Kevin Gilbert, Jimmy Chi, whose musicals *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) and *Corrugation Road* (1996) have been highly successful, Mudrooroo (whose status as an Aboriginal has been under debate in recent years), and John Harding. Aboriginal drama is addressed to both blacks and whites and hence has a potentially larger audience. This theatre because of the very resources it exploits and the urgency of the issues that it raises seems to be one of the most exciting sites in Australian theatre. Hence, Aboriginal theatre seems poised to assume a bigger role in Australian theatre in this century.

One area of theatre that receives least attention in theatre history is community theatre. There is a very strong community theatre movement in Australia and various special interest groups organised in terms of locality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, different abilities, etc, have their own theatre groups. These groups obviously address social concerns and give a lower priority to aesthetic values. This can be read as a questioning of the notions of High Art. In any case what this community theatre ensures is the representation of as large a cross section of the Australian population as possible. This plurality and democratic inclusiveness can be seen as an extension of the contemporary contestation of any unitary homogenised Australian identity. By the end of the twentieth century Australian theatre had moved away as far as it could from its earlier notions of Australianness as well as its conception of theatre.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In the nearly two centuries since the first performance of plays in Australia, Australian theatre has struggled to establish its distinct identity. Various forces including those of its cultural links to Europe hindered its full development till nearly the middle of the twentieth century. But the final decades of the twentieth century saw the flowering of Australian drama into a more representational space to carry further the task that Australian theatre has seemed to have accepted for itself – that of defining Australia and Australianness.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write down in point form the history of Australian drama till 1955. Name some major dramatists, identify their concerns, and note the dominant dramatic forms and techniques.
2. Write a short note on the figure of the 'bushranger' in Australian drama.
3. What was the tension between form and content in early 20th century Australian plays. Which plays tackled it successfully and how?
4. Write a short note on the New Wave.
5. Who are the major playwrights of the Second Wave? What are their theatrical concerns?

6. Comment on the masculinity in Australian drama.
7. Write a short note on Aboriginal drama.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Apocalypse:

the showing of hidden things, especially the telling of what will happen when the world ends.

Capitalism:

represents a development of meaning in that it has been increasingly used to indicate a particular and historical economic system rather than any economic system as such.

Expressionism:

the term refers to a movement in Germany early in the 20th century in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world. The term can be applied to literature as well but, only judiciously.

Ibsen:

Henrik (1873-1906), Norwegian dramatist, generally acknowledged as the founder of modern prose drama, who came to fame at a time when the theatre in Europe was at a low ebb. He deals largely with the relation of the individual to his/her social environment and particularly the case of women in marriage;

Lampoon:

the term derives from the French lampon, said to be from lampons 'let us drink', used as a refrain. It dates only from the 17th century. The verb lamper means 'to swig' or 'to booze'. This suggests excess, coarseness, a rough crudity; a lampoon in fact is a virulent form of satire. It is more likely to be found in graphic caricature than in writing.

Naturalism:

a term used to describe marks of literature which use realistic methods and subjects to convey a philosophical form of naturalism, or a belief that everything that exists is a part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes - and not by supernatural, spiritual or paranormal causes.

Pantomime:

(GK'all imitator') it may be merely a synonym for mime, but its principal modern meaning is an exotic and spectacular entertainment particularly suitable for children. It first became popular in England in the 18th century, when it was a variation on the Harlequinade. By the 19th century, it

had established itself. Modern pantomime is based on fairy tales, and includes popular songs and topical comedy. Tradition requires the hero or principal boy to be played by a girl, and the comic older woman, the dame, to be played by a man. The term has also been used to describe mine plays, dumb show, melodrama and 18th century mythical ballets. In ancient Rome actors sometimes performed a kind of pantomime, with the aid of masks, in the dramatisation of fabulous tales called *fabula Atellana*.

Philistinism:

the Philistinisms were an alien and aggressive tribe who inhabited the southern coast of Palestine. From there they continually raided the Israelites. Mathew Arnold, criticised those whom he regarded as the Philistines of England - namely the bourgeois classes who accepted wealth as the measure of greatness.

Pirandello:

Luigi (1873-1935) - Italian dramatist and novelist born in Sicily, who challenged the conventions of naturalism and greatly influenced European drama. He was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in 1934.

Pirandello anticipates the theatre of Brecht while probing the conflict between reality and appearance, self and persona, actor and character, face and mask.

Realism:

realism is a difficult concept to define. The old doctrine of realism was an assertion of the absolute and objective existence of universals, in the Platonic sense. 'Realism' was first used in French from the 1830s and in English from the 1850s. It developed four distinguishable meanings: (i) as a term to describe, historically, the doctrines of Realists as opposed to those of Nominalists; (ii) as a term to describe new doctrines of the physical world as independent of mind or spirit, in this sense sometimes interchangeable with Naturalism or Materialism, (iii) as a description of facing up to things as they really are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be - 'let us replace sentimentalism by realism, and dare to uncover those simple and terrible laws which be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern'; (iv) as a term to describe a method or an attitude in art and literature - at first an exceptional accuracy of representations, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist.

Surrealism:

this movement originated in France in the 1920s and was a development of Dadaism. The surrealists attempted to express in art and literature the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesise these workings with the conscious mind. The surrealist allows his/her work to develop non-logically (rather than illogically) so that the results represent the operations of the unconscious.

Vaudeville:

a form of variety entertainment popular from about 1880 to 1932, by which time films and radio had driven it into decline; a stage play on a trivial theme interspersed by a satirical or topical song with a refrain. The term is still used in France and England to describe light, theatrical entertainment of a knockout kind, with musical interludes.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

We would suggest that you read as many of Australian plays as you can get hold of. You must read *The Doll*. Given below is a list of secondary readings.

Fitzpatrick, Peter. *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama since 1955*. Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1979.

Holloway, Peter (ed). *Contemporary Australian Drama*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1987.

Rees, Leslie. *A History of Australian Drama* (2 Volumes). Sydney: Angus and Robertson Publications, 1978, rept. 1987.

Thomson, Helen. "Drama since 1965" in Bruce Bennett, et al (eds) *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Auckland: OUP, 1998.

UNIT 2 DAVID WILLIAMSON'S DRAMATIC WORLD

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Williamson's Early Plays (1970s)
 - 2.2.1 The Coming of Stork
 - 2.2.2 Don's Party
 - 2.2.3 Jugglers Three
 - 2.2.4 What if You Died Tomorrow
 - 2.2.5 The Department
 - 2.2.6 A Handful of Friends
 - 2.2.7 The Club
 - 2.2.8 Travelling North
- 2.3 Williamson's Later Plays
 - 2.3.1 Celluloid Heroes
 - 2.3.2 The Perfectionist
 - 2.3.3 Sons of Cain
 - 2.3.4 Top Silk
- 2.4 An Approach to Williamson's Plays
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Glossary
- 2.8 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at the entire range of Williamson's plays. Williamson has also written for movies and has directed plays as well. In this unit we will look closely at his early period (1970s, the period to which *The Removalists* belongs) and refer to all his plays in chronological sequence, and try to identify his principal themes and concerns, and mark out the parameters of his theater.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

As we saw in Unit 1, David Williamson is one of the few Australian dramatists of the First Wave to have a long and successful career. Williamson is important not just because of his success in commercial terms but because of his continued success in representing the contemporary concerns of white urban middle class Australia. Predominantly satirical of his chosen territory, Williamson's plays over the last thirty years of the twentieth century chalk out the social history of white middle class Australia.

Williamson was born in Melbourne in 1942, and thus grew up during the 'permissive' sixties. He graduated in Mechanical Engineering from Monash University and lectured at the Swinburne College of Technology, Melbourne, on Thermodynamics as well as on Social Psychology. The latter was to be a major preoccupation in his plays.

Williamson started writing plays in the 1960s but the early plays were mostly **revues** and a couple of short plays, which he himself does not think much of. He gained

prominence as a dramatist with his first full-length play in 1970. Given below is a list of his plays:

The Coming of Stork (1970)
The Removalists (1971)
Don's Party (1971)
Jugglers Three (1972)
What if You Died Tomorrow (1973)
The Department (1974)
A Handful of Friends (1976)
The Club (1977)
Travelling North (1979)
Celluloid Heroes (1980)
The Perfectionist (1982)
Sons of Cain (1985)
Emerald City (1987)
Top Silk (1989)
Brilliant Lies (1993)
Dead White Males (1995)
Sanctuary (1995)
Heretic (1996)
Play a Life (1997)

2.2 WILLIAMSON'S EARLY PLAYS (1970s)

2.2.1 The Coming of Stork

Williamson's first full-length play, *The Coming of Stork* (made into a film later), was performed by La Mama Company, which revelled in taking on censorship in 1970. They had performed Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* a year earlier and had received much publicity. *The Coming of Stork* seemed to be tailor made for them and their audiences, it was after all full of four letter words. Fitzpatrick says that the dialogue of the play "has all the subtlety of footballers in the showers" (p.113). Those were heady times for theaters around the English speaking world, when dramatists experienced a sense of liberation, having their characters speak and behave with complete abandon. Williamson uses this freedom to shock but to shock into a sense of recognition. A satirist, he chronicles the life and times of urban Australia.

The Coming of Stork is a play about three young men who share an apartment and an interest in scoring with the opposite sex. The three – Tony, Clyde, and West – are pursuing different careers and dreams. Tony is writing his doctoral thesis, Clyde wants to make money and live on a cattle farm, and West is a salesman. There is a girl, Anna, who comes and goes, willing to sleep with whoever, though she seems to be Clyde's girl. Stork, a beer swilling graduate who works as a gardener, the first of Williamson's larikins, enters the scene and wants to be part of it all including sleeping with Anna. He succeeds in his ambition when Anna, having fought with Clyde, picks him up and takes him off to bed. But Stork is not about to have the full relationship with her that he had earlier dreamed of because she has been 'kind' to other men as well including an older married man.

To cut it short, Anna gets pregnant, and the older male friend of hers, Alan drifts off to his family. Clyde is to marry Anna, and Tony is to marry another girl. Stork and West, who are the best men, flush the rings down the toilet, continue to drink and decide to clear out. The play ends with this gesture against the institution of marriage.

This is a raucous comedy, played out in short scenes strung together in the absence of any attempt at plotting (this absence of plotting is something that David Williamson is constantly accused of). The women are referred to less than politely throughout the

play, as 'chicks' and 'tarts' and 'molls', and their only purpose seems to be to give the males some sport.

David Williamson's
Dramatic World

In this ripping take off, Williamson shows the pressure on the Australian urban male to 'stoop' to a low register in their speech. It is almost as if they have to deny their sophistication and other ambitions and lives and play out the roles of adolescent vocabulary deficient males. Other aspects of their lives are sources of embarrassment and have to be referred to if at all in a parodic tone.

Peter Fitzpatrick says that "*The Coming of Stork* anticipates *The Removalists* not only in its vigorous crudity, but in the presentation of masculine roles and the rituals, insecurities and competitiveness that surrounds them." (p 114) Others have traced the influence of Jack Hibberd's *White with Wire Wheels* in the play. This may be so but it only proves that *The Coming of Stork* was a play about its times written by a playwright who was aware of other contemporary Australian plays.

The major criticism about the play is that it has no alternate world-view, it does nothing but caricature and parody. This is true of all early Williamson plays where he shows things as he sees them but without pontification or bitterness. His are plays of great wit and to be approached as such. Williamson himself has this to say about the play:

The *Coming of Stork* is played out among graduate technologists, a group known for brazen and rather awkward openness as far as sexual matters are concerned, but an almost complete lack of communication concerning ambitions, fears, hopes and joys. (Introduction to *Three Plays* by David Williamson, Currency-Methuen, Sydney, 1974)

Perhaps this is time for you to pause and think about the play in your course, *The Removalists*. Is it also a play that lacks structure? What are the issues that the play deals with? What can you say about its language? *The Coming of Stork* is accused of having no rounded characters. Can you say that of *The Removalists*? Does the playwright go beyond satire and parody? Is more than the surface of the social life depicted in the play? What role does humour play in *The Removalists*? Does the play shock you? Is the shock intended by the playwright? These are some of the questions you could ask yourself.

2.2.2 Don's Party

His other play, *Don's Party* (1971), is perhaps the most successful of David Williamson's plays. It is an all out comedy and the lack of violence makes it quite different from *The Removalists*. This seemingly light comedy depicts the state of middle class Australia. Once again Williamson explores the institution of marriage even as he looks at the state of politics and Australian democracy.

Williamson uses the device of a party to bring together on stage a number of people with common interests and backgrounds. Don and Kath who are in their thirties are the hosts. Don is a teacher and an author (though a failed one). Their guests are friends from Don's university days and their women. This is election night and they have also come to celebrate a Labour victory that does not happen. Each of the randy men has been asked to bring a pornographic object to be displayed to others (one of them brings a nude photograph of his estranged wife). Thus you almost see the protagonists of *The Coming of Stork* a decade or so older.

In this mix, you have two of Kath's friends who are Liberals, the pigeons among the cats. While the main ambition of the men seems to be to seduce the women, what we see is the dissatisfaction of both sexes with each other and the state of the nation. In this wicked comedy, Williamson shows the complete lack of any redemptive values, the men do not even succeed in their acts of seduction and the Labour party loses and the only non- University person complains that the graduates are uncouth.

The life of the party is Cooley of the foul mouth, who has a reputation to protect, that of being an honest, straight talking philanderer. He nearly succeeds in taking two of the women to bed but one of them is his own wife who is a part-time stripper. Cooley who is a lawyer by profession is a larikin like Stork. He carries the play with his 'crude' energy. The only way the graduates can bond still is through low talk and sex exploits. The others cannot keep this up for long stretches and have to fight their middle-aged material comfort orientation through their identification with the Labour party and their denunciation of marriage, a denunciation both sexes agreed up on. This is a discontented and bored Australia, but an Australia that yearns for a different way of life.

This is again a play that does not show great deal of plotting or any major differentiation of characters in terms of speech or concerns. But what should be clear to the reader by now is that Williamson's intent is not to shock but to portray things as they are. The number of characters could be quite a problem in production (an overcrowded stage hardly ever makes good viewing, when the characters are to be perceived as individuals), but Williamson seems to have the pulse of his society in this party.

2.2.3 Jugglers Three

Williamson's next play *Jugglers Three* has the Vietnam War as its background. The play was written and first performed during the War years, in 1972. This is a play that Joe Orton, the anarchic British playwright, would have been proud of. A Vietnam War veteran, Graham is back to find that his wife, Keren, is living with a University teacher, Neville. Neville tries to set things right between himself and Graham but only succeeds in upsetting Graham even more. There is a table tennis game between the younger Graham and the older Neville, which must take some doing on stage. If Graham is the foul mouthed University educated Williamson character who is out to shock, Neville is not too far from Williamson's usual cast either. He is not only having an affair with Keren, he is married, has a child and he and his wife are expecting another.

The next character who we see is Neville's pregnant wife, Elizabeth. Then two other war veterans arrive. The first, Dennis, has just robbed a service station. He too has found out that his wife is having an affair with another man. The next, Jamie, is a medical practitioner who is now involved in a project concerning Aboriginal children. Jamie is Keren's ex-lover! Keren arrives and almost predictably dumps Neville who finally returns to his wife and family. A policeman arrives to arrest Dennis but finally ends up sharing the spoils with all the men. Keren and Graham it seems will stay together.

The play shows once again the topsy turviness of the moral universe of middle class Australia. Marriage is a dead institution and nothing else has taken its place. Gender relations are fraught with problems. Language has to be fashionably of the lowest common denominator. It is the University graduates who have to establish the anti-intellectual atmosphere of Williamson's world. Graham claims to have failed in English, spouting lines like "Shakespeare is a shit of a writer." But again like other successful plays by Williamson, this is a thoroughly entertaining and fast moving play full of characteristic verve in dialogue. Adding to the entertainment in performance, for the actors and the audience, is the fact that Williamson not only has his characters playing pin pong on stage, he has them drinking beer throughout!

2.2.4 What if You Died Tomorrow

What if You Died Tomorrow (1973) was first performed nearly a year and half after *Jugglers Three*. In this curious hotch potch of a play, which has been seen as autobiographical by some critics, Williamson explores the world of writers and agents and publishers. Andrew is a successful doctor turned author, who has walked out of his marriage and left his children to live with another woman, Kirsty, and her

three children. He does not get along with Kirsty's children and even his relationship with Kirsty seems to be on the downward curve. His agent wants him to publish his next novel with a new publisher, but the old publisher, Harry Bustle, arrives on the scene to lend it great verbal vigour. Bustle is the Cooley-like Williamson character we have learnt to expect.

Curiously, others lack the same vigour. Williamson adds some complication by introducing Andrew's parents, Ken and Irene, who end up discussing the sexual problems they have had. Ken has intimations of his mortality because of his bad heart and this enables the play to make a point about our transitoriness. But the point gets emphasised later in the play when Gunther, a European who has arrived with Andrew's parents, tries to commit suicide. The agent is a homosexual and this adds to the sexual diversity that is examined. Andrew and the proposed new publisher, Carmel, attempt to make love but are discovered by his parents and Kirsty. A suitably chastised Andrew is shown playing with children's building blocks at the end of the play.

In a play that does not maintain the usual standards of energy, Williamson tries to do a bit more than denigrate marriage. He also makes known his point of view about literary works and their modes of circulation, but as Rees puts it,

The play is about the transitoriness of life, of the fragility of our hold on life, the difficulty of seeing what it is all about, of reconciling self-realisation and social or moral responsibility. It's about the muddle of life... (p 134)

There is also an attempt in the play to go beyond Williamson's own generation, in the portrayal of Andrew's parents and his relationship with them.

2.2.5 The Department

Williamson's next play, *The Department* (1974), is a wonderful expose of manipulative politicking that finds a place of pride in universities across the world. The play is set in the thermodynamics lab of a university and takes the form of a staff meeting. So once again in Williamsonish manner we have the dynamics of interaction among a group of people as the material of a play.

Robby, the manipulative head of department, has called the meeting. The setting of pipes and tubes dominates the stage where the human characters play out their petty power struggles. We are told that an enormous and expensive tank has been built by mistake in the mezzanine floor and nobody had had the temerity to fill it. The department jokes about this folly even as Robby tries to manipulate getting another building constructed. He tries valiantly to keep the staff together even as they take offence at each other's behaviour. Present in the meeting are all shades of academics: a resident radical, a scholarly embarrassment, a prickly lecturer, and a pious liberal.

Almost everybody needs the college and if manipulated, they become willing participants. Only the mechanic, Gordon, seems to be an individual in his own right and that is because he is indispensable. As the play roars to its end Gordon has filled the tank and it has miraculously held. A satire that mirrors the world of academics and public service people, the play is a good read and lends itself to successful staging. This is the first of the plays that does not lambast the institution of marriage even if one of Robby's motivations may be the sad state of his marriage. But Williamson is more a dramatist of the surface than of psychological depths.

It must have been clear to you for a while now that Williamson's plays could be classified as **comedies of manners**. His plays seem to be based on reality – the audience surely recognised their upper middle class Australia in them, and yet have laughed at him on his way to the bank. That to me is where his talent lies. Like all great writers of comedies, he takes the familiar and even as it is recognisably familiar makes it comic and different. This has to be a meeting like any other meeting or the

points about manipulative institutional politics would be lost, and yet the play succeeds in making the situation engagingly different. This is Williamson's strength.

2.2.6 A Handful of Friends

His next play, *A Handful of Friends* (1976), is again set in Melbourne. In a play that deals with the world of films (Williamson knew this world intimately by now, having written film scripts) and the academia. The stage is used interestingly – it is divided into two spaces, one depicting the house of Russell and Wendy, who have just returned from the United States of America, and the other depicting the flat that Jill, Russell's sister, lives in. Russell is a historian and Jill a journalist. Their 'handful of friends' include Mark and Sally, who are soon to arrive. Mark is a film producer and Sally is an actress. Mark is making a film and has put Russell in as a character. Sally wants the leading role in the film.

As usual with Williamson, things are quite complicated as far as relationships go. Russell is established quite early to be a philanderer. He seems to have encouraged Mark to sleep with Wendy. Jill seems to have a crush on her brother, but she has had a crush on Mark as well, and perhaps an affair with Sally. Wendy is the one character who does not have much to say in this play whereas much is revealed as is concealed. Everything ends in shambles mainly because Jill publishes a scurrilous article about Sally in a cheap tabloid. Wendy leaves Russell, Sally no longer wants to play the leading role, Mark is happy to pillory Russell in the film... The end of the play has the return of Jill with a casserole and the news she imparts to Russell that people have liked her article.

Marriage is again a non-starter. People feed off people especially in the creative world. What kind of a society is this? "A pleasant little society we live in, isn't it" says Jill at the end of the play. Relationships are tangled by definition. But for the first time Williamson does not feel the need to shock with his language!

2.2.7 The Club

The Club (1977), his next play, resembles *The Department*, and is equally well written. By now Williamson is a master of comic structure and *The Club* is a neat demonstration of his abilities. This play explores the goings on in an Australian Rules Football Club in Melbourne. It is an all male play with six characters. Ted is the president of the club and Gerry the secretary. Laurie, the coach, has just announced to the papers his intention of resigning because the team is not doing well, helped in no way by being forced to pick Geoff, a star player, for every match. Ted had backed Geoff, going to the extent of adding his own money to Geoff's salary. Naturally he speaks of Geoff's bad patch. Danny, a player, threatens to organise a strike if Laurie resigns. Then there is Jock, an ex-leading player of the club who wants to be president.

Williamson is all about surface as we have seen in play after play and *The Club* is no different. We see the hilarious unfolding of petty politicking, which ends in the defeat of the board room manipulators by the players who simply play to win now. Even Geoff, a spaced out non-trier, joins the rebellion realising that playing is easier than not trying. Thus the machinations of Gerry and Jock are defeated while Ted walks out.

This is slight play, slighter than the rest so far. But even here, Williamson's comic genius ensures that the reader/spectator has a rollicking time. There is a hilarious confrontation scene between Jock and Geoff literally on the board room table where Geoff explains himself by "confessing" to making love to his legless sister and then his mother and thus driving his father to suicide!

2.2.8 Travelling North

Williamson's last play of the seventies, *Travelling North* (1979), is quite different in tone and temper in comparison to the other plays. In it he looks at the migration to

sunnier climes in later life that many people in many parts of the world dream about. Does retirement make for a happier life? What happens to relationships in later life? These are some of the questions that run through the play.

David Williamson's
Dramatic World

Frank, in his seventies, and Frances, in her fifties, have decided to live together and have left Melbourne for the north. They seem to be happy in spite of their age difference. Frances would like to be married if only to please her daughters who live in Melbourne. Frank is the one who does not want marriage. The daughters want their mother back, even if it is for taking care of their children. Frank is not too well and is increasingly irritable. Frances leaves for Melbourne only to return. As Frank grows worse he too makes a trip south, but returns to die on the verandah listening to classical music. Frances decides to travel further north.

In a nuanced examination of the tangled webs that we weave in our relationships, Williamson seems to present a more universal picture than he has done so far. This could have something to do with his experiment with rewriting Shakespeare. After *The Club* Williamson had been commissioned by the Alexander Theatre Company at Monash University to adapt *King Lear*. Williamson's brief was to make Shakespeare more accessible to contemporary audiences in terms of language and dialogue. There is an interesting direct reference to *King Lear* in *Travelling North* – Frank calls Frances' daughters "Goneril and Regan". Like *Lear*, *Travelling North* is about perennial subjects like love and relationships, old age, decay, life and death. Brian Kiernan points out in his study of Williamson's plays that the constant scene changes in *Travelling North*

draw attention to the structure as expressive: as the play develops, the audience sees a significant pattern, and a view of life that is not articulated by any one character, emerge. Structure becomes form, a metaphor for life.

(Southerly, 1986, 1, p11)

This is not to suggest that the play lacks a socio-historical specificity. The geography, seasons, and politics are all clearly marked in the play. But it seems to say more than just depict the socio-political history of Australia.

2.3 WILLIAMSON'S LATER PLAYS

In this section we shall look briefly at some of Williamson's later plays, plays from the next two decades of the 20th century.

2.3.1 Celluloid Heroes

Nimrod's tenth anniversary was celebrated with a commissioned play by Williamson in 1980. This was *Celluloid Heroes* (1980), a farce about the world of films with which Williamson was increasingly familiar. In this a producer plans a film which will be a tax write off, i.e. a guaranteed box office disaster! This satirical look at the commercial aspects of the film industry immediately after *Travelling North* perhaps signalled that Williamson was not going to desert the local for the metaphoric universal. He was also going to work within a broad range of comedy.

2.3.2 The Perfectionist

His next play, *The Perfectionist* (1982), is back to Williamson's favourite patch – the state of the modern marriage. This is the subject matter of the play foregrounded throughout in the battle of wits that the play deals with. Feminism, Utopian Marxism are all on view but finally they are seen to offer no solutions in the here and now. Stuart and Barbara are the couple who fight over the terrain. Stuart's father, Jack Gunn, who is a successful lawyer, is the defender of faith in the traditional marriage with its fixed gender roles, while Stuart's mother, Shirley, is an example of what the

frustrations of such a marriage can do. Early in the play, Shirley, who had to give up a stage career to marry, states that "Women of ability and intelligence have only one option, and that's never to marry and never to have children", but the play does not take that any further. Any revolution is in the future, and the play ends with Barbara willing to come back to Stuart hoping to balance family life and career. A wonderful comedy, it again offers a slice of life, even as it examines gender relationships.

2.3.3 Sons of Cain

Sons of Cain (1985) is about a newspaper office but it is also about the stuff of headlines – corruption and the nexus between the government, the police, and big business houses, and their implication in drug trafficking. The journalists of the *Weekly Review* discover that the Minister of Justice and the Prime Minister are involved in drug trafficking. The issues raised then are of a moral as well as a practical nature – how are the management and the journalists to approach the matter when the political establishment uses the laws of libel to silence the press. Obviously a play such as this is more political than Williamson's other plays. Just as *The Perfectionist* allows the audiences to debate issues of social engineering, however disappointed some may be with his positions, *Sons of Cain* allows the audience to debate issues of good governance and corruption. It raises many intriguing questions – for example, would you rather have a corrupt government that works for the welfare of the people or have a government which has never had people friendly policies even if it were the model of probity?

Obviously, *Sons of Cain* was a topical play when it was staged but given the nature of human greed and hunger for power and the nature of hierarchical structures, the situation that the play examines will recur time and again in every democratic society. If the newspaper proprietor allows journalists to do stories that are against those in power, is it out of altruistic motives or is it because the proprietor is striking a deal with the opposition? A host of serious issues are raised in what is a typical Williamson comedy. Williamson plays around with stereotypes (is this one of the ways in which he constructs his famous recognisable characters?) – Kevin, the macho investigative journalist, hard drinking and hard working; Crystal, the feminist radical; Nicole, the hardened careerist; Bronwen, the dedicated reporter who still has to learn the ways of her profession and of the world. Why does Williamson make Kevin hire three women reporters – is it only for the jokes on women and feminism, or is it because Williamson wants to investigate the challenges to what had traditionally been male dominated professions? He of course typically does both!

The play has forty one scenes that cut from one to the other. Williamson merges documentary realism (many in the audience tried to guess who was who in Australian public life) with elements of farce, and much like the Hindi film *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*, the play shows public life itself to be a farce. Brian Kiernan says that *Sons of Cain* is more like Williamson's early plays in its "combination of realistic, satiric and comic elements" (p. 15).

2.3.4 Top Silk

In *Top Silk* (1989), Williamson tackles corruption of law, and political correctness in universities provides him the subject matter for *Dead White Males* (1995). In *Heretic* (1996), where Williamson moves away from stage-naturalism, he tackles the 'nature versus nurture' debate attacking Margaret Mead the famous Anthropologist, while supporting David Freeman.

2.4 AN APPROACH TO WILLIAMSON'S PLAYS

identify with the characters and situations in his plays. He raises in his early period all the pertinent issues that middle class white Australians faced in that period.

David Williamson's
Dramatic World

We must warn you that this classification of Williamson's early period is completely arbitrary. The aim here was to chart his course through the first decade of his writing to trace his growth as a dramatist through a description of his plays in order to highlight any changes in his craft and concerns. Can you, on the basis of your reading so far, suggest how the plays of this period itself can be divided?

John McCallum thinks that the following plays constitute Williamson's early period, the period that established his reputation: *The Coming of Stork*, *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, and *Jugglers Three*. Why do they form a group? They are all satirical comedies that explore, in Williamson's memorable phrase, "the awful Australian uniqueness". Williamson defines this uniqueness as

composed of an abrasive cynicism on the surface, and a rather mawkish warmth underneath. Even the warmth must be expressed negatively: hence the Australian (male) habit of greeting each other with abusive, four-letter expletives. It is also a celebration of Philistinism, and the rejection, ultimately, of cultural values drawn from Europe. It is anti-intellectualism, and a frantic materialism; and a recognition that there are class differences in the sense of material wealth, but no substantial differences in lifestyle.

(Sydney Morning Herald, 3.7.1972)

If the early plays seem to poke fun at this Australianness, they also seem to celebrate it. As Helen Thomson says about the plays of Buzo, Hibberd and Williamson, "the sheer exuberant energy and excess of the depictions ironically... [serves] to celebrate what was being satirised." (p. 192)

This also explains why critics talked and talk of objectivity in his early plays. Williamson's exuberance ultimately makes it difficult to talk about good or bad characters. Stork may be obnoxious but audiences/readers cannot condemn him or dislike him. The play seems to construct a sympathy for him. This is true of both characters as well as other plays. What about Kenny in *The Removalists*? What is your opinion about him? And the other larrikin, Cooley, in *Don's Party*? Cooley is the star of the play, but he is everything – crass, insensitive and vulgar. But audiences like the rich, successful, honest Cooley. But nobody would like to live with him, or would they?

Thus Williamson seems to explore the male world of educated ockerdom, the world of low language and heavy drinking and sexual aspirations. *Jugglers Three* is no different in its concerns. But how different are the other plays? In terms of characters, they get older and more gentle, and the emphasis seems to be more on relationships and the power games that people play. The two themes have always been there in Williamson, only they take centre stage now. We see this exploration of relationships and the games people play in *What if You Died Tomorrow* and in *A Handful of Friends*. The power struggles are the subject matter of both *The Department* and *The Club*. *Travelling North* is still about tangled relationships and motivations.

Another element that unites all these plays is Williamson's comic flair. Even his most serious play, *Travelling North*, is full of gags. From his first play onwards, Williamson has been famous for his one liners and gags straight from revues. But he is also known to have written naturalistic plays. The gags are obviously theatrical, so how does that jell with his naturalism? How does his humour survive his so called objectivity? The answer is best heard from Williamson himself. This quotation also tells you why his plays lack plots of even complex stages:

I'm not experimental. As far as my own writing goes, it's naturalistic with – in the earlier plays – some farcical overtones in the writing, but, I hope, not in the playing style.... I don't use purely theatrical devices. I can't even bear on

stage now a first-act, second-act type format. I think partly because film does it so much better, it just looks clumsy to change scenes on stage and go from scene to scene, so all I find myself able to write for stage now is an ongoing social situation, where people come on stage and interact for two hours and then the play ends. So they're not theatrically innovative at all. They're an attempt to study a social situation.

(Talk at Monash University, 1974)

In the same talk Williamson identified as the strength of the theatre its ability to make audiences feel intimate with the characters on stage and identify with them. This affords him the opportunity to take what he calls a "total social situation, a tight social situation" and explore it naturalistically. This, he feels, implicates the audience, making them part of the situation.

These plays have also been seen as chronicling the political life, the hopes and the despairs of middle class white Australia. As John McCallum puts it:

In his map of Australian society we have seen the transition from what Donald Horne has called the 'Time of Hope' (up to the late sixties), through what Frank Moorhouse has called the 'Days of Wine and Rage' (in the early seventies), to the disillusionment of the late seventies...

(McCallum, p.354)

McCallum is referring to the hopes raised by the Whitlam-led Labour government that came to power in 1972 (the election after that of the *Don's Party*, which belied earlier hopes), and the growing disillusionment with it.

What we have discussed so far is the extraordinary first decade of an extraordinary playwright. As we have seen Williamson carried on from here in his comic journey, exploring issues of relationships and social structure.

As we have said earlier, Williamson's career maps the social history of middle class white Australia. As Helen Thomson puts it, "Williamson has grown, along with his audiences, his plays changing from undergraduate ockerism to the polished self-examinations of an educated middle class living thorough numerous social changes." (p. 293) His plays have mirrored his own life – leading at times to the airing of dirty linen in public. This autobiographical element has actually meant that there is a certain directness and sincerity in his writing and this is what has led to recognisable characters and engaging issues. His concerns are those of his audiences.

Five of his plays have been successfully filmed – *The Coming of Stork*, *Don's Party*, *The Removalists*, *The Club*, and *Travelling North*. He has also written numerous other film scripts. If his mid-career move from Melbourne to Sydney seemed to signal to his contemporary Melbourne writers his betrayal of Art for Money, he has actually played a major part as the myth maker of the suburbia. Sure he moved, but he continued his theatrical quest – the staging of the drama of middle class life, its concerns, its politics, its daily life. And his audiences have always been mainly people like him.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Williamson has worked with the idea that people should identify with the characters on stage (is this why his plays are dismissed as conservatively naturalistic?), and that audiences should feel intimate with the characters. A play then is the interaction between characters/actors and audiences which leads to the exploration of a social situation. Williamson is highly successful in all his aims and if there is any reservation about him it is based on the maxim that good serious writing cannot make

money! His comic genius should not obscure the fact that he is making serious explorations of a specific social territory and that it is entirely possible to extrapolate a set of values that forms the core of his moral assumptions. His plays can after all be read as crusades against corruption, against disloyalty, against institutionally sanctioned but meaningless relationships, against petty rivalries within organisations, against blindness to the dynamics of personal relationships.

David Williamson's Dramatic World

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. What are the themes that recur in Williamson's plays?
2. Write a note about Williamson's dramaturgy, his ideas about theatre and the techniques he employs.
3. Why is the larikin/ocker figure important in Williamson's works?

2.7 GLOSSARY

Comedy of manners:	this genre deals with the behaviour and the lives of men and women living under specific social codes. It tends to be preoccupied with the codes of the middle and upper classes and is often marked by elegance, wit and sophistication.
Nimrod:	a theatrical group founded in 1970. Nimrod developed its women in theatre group; also popularly known as the Nimrod theatre.
Revue:	light theatrical show with songs and dances but no story. A revue normally contains jokes about the events and fashions of the moment.

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

These works are in addition to the works already cited in Unit 1.
We do think that you should read as many of Williamson's plays as you can access.

Fitzpatrick, Peter. *Williamson*. North Ryde, NSW: Methuen Australia, 1987.

Kiernan, Brian. "The Development of David Williamson", *Southerly*, 4, 1975.

Kiernan, Brian. "Comic-Satiric-Realism: David Williamson's Plays since *The Department*," *Southerly*, 1, 1986

Kiernan, Brian. *David Williamson: A Writer's Career*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1996.

McCallum, John. "A New Map of Australia: The Plays of David Williamson", *ALS*, Vol. II, No. 3, May 1984.

UNIT 3 READING *THE REMOVALISTS*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Act I
 - 3.2.1 The Author's Note
 - 3.2.2 Comic Beginning
 - 3.2.3 Establishing "Mateship" through Authority
 - 3.2.4 Women as objects of Desire
- 3.3 Act II
 - 3.3.1 The Removalists
 - 3.3.2 Tragic Ending
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Questions
- 3.6 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will familiarise ourselves completely with the text of *The Removalists* and try to arrive at our own evaluation of the play. We will look at the plot, trace the manner in which the action builds up and identify the themes and study the characters in action.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know *The Removalists* is one of Williamson's early plays. It premiered in July 1971 at Melbourne's Cafe La Mama with Williamson playing the removalist. Within three months it had travelled to Sydney and to its London performance at the Royal Court theatre and then to the United States. This, the second of his plays, established Williamson's international reputation. The play won the 1971 George Devine Award in Britain. It was the first time that this award was presented to a playwright from outside the United Kingdom. It also won two Australian Writers Guild Award Awards in 1972.

But it proved offensive to many people in the various audiences and even if the shock of the language has worn out over the years, the violence of the action can still leave us disturbed. Is that all that one can say about the play – that it is shocking? Does it have any other values to recommend it? Why do critics like Fitzpatrick call it Williamson's strongest play? These are some of the questions we will ask ourselves as we read the play.

It may help you to write down whatever you feel about the play at this point. Do you like it? If so, why, if you do not like then too, why is that so? What do you think the play attempts to do? What is its major theme? What are its other themes? What is Williamson's dramatic technique? Do you have any other comments to offer? But first, what is the action of the play? Try and recollect it sequentially.

3.2 ACT I

Before we begin delving into the play itself, let us take a look at the question of violence in Australian society. No doubt you must have read the play by now and the violence in the play might also have struck you. We hope it has, because the violence

depicted through the language certainly provided us with ample food for thought! If you happen to get hold of the Currency Play Press Publication of 1984, you would have noticed three articles before the actual play begins, entitled, "Reflections on Violence", by Ian Turner, "Authority and Punishment, The Australian Inheritance" and the third, "Police: Authority and Privilege", by Frank Gellsally and Kerry Milte. It is alright if you do not have this publication. It will be included in the reader, but we would like you to read them before you begin, reading the rest of this unit. What does Turner talk about in the first article? He says, *The Removalists* raises three questions: one socio-cultural (is Australian society violent of its essence?); one political (do not forces of "law and order" rest on violence?); one psychological (do all of us have the kinds of aggressive instincts or behaviour pattern which Williamson depicts?) (p.7). This has also been discussed in unit 4 later.

Having reached the end of the VIII Blocks on Australian Literature, we shall not hesitate to presume that you do know something about the history of this island nation. Needless to mention, we are all aware that Australian society was born in violence - the convict system bears testimony to this fact. On the face of it, Ian Turner mentions, that Australian society is relatively more peaceful than most, "but that is all at the public, surface level." (p.9) He feels that violence lies latent in this society and finds various means of release. He gives various instances from the play, where violence is depicted, be it against women or against men, and the process through which violence is accorded - physically, mentally and verbally. He concludes by saying that such violence can end only when "a new society is created, one which would recognise the unique rights of all individuals, and generate ways of living in which now the aggressions which pervade our community would simply not be needed any longer." (p.12)

Stop for a while and reflect on what is being said and on what you have read. Is violence prevalent in our context - the Indian context, what about police brutality and domestic violence? Have you heard of such occurrences or are you aware of any such incidents? Now read the second article carefully, does it shed any light on the matter or contribute to your understanding? In the final article, we find reasons behind the brutality of policemen. They cite two main reasons that help such brutal policemen, one being that the other members of the police force do not or have failed to take action against their colleagues and two, that the courts do not take such charges against the police force seriously. After having read these three articles, you should now proceed towards analysing the play. Actually, before you start reading the rest of this unit, pick up a pencil and a notepad and quickly do the following exercise. Given what you already know about Australia and her literary history, start jotting down relevant details or points, about the First Fleet's landing at Botany Bay, the people that were transported, what Australia meant to Britain then, the crimes that were inflicted upon the convicts, the bushrangers, work your way slowly to 1972, when this play was written. You must have already jotted down relevant points as you read the above mentioned articles and from your reading of the play. Now keeping the play as the centre of focus, do not hesitate to tear the play apart, then put it back together again. When we say 'tear the play apart' we mean, try and see if any of the historical events or incidents are echoed in the play - how would you explain the brutal nature of the two policemen - Ross and Simmonds, the class struggle, between Kenny and Fiona's family, what about gender roles? What sort of picture of Australian society do you get? Stop and reflect on your findings for a while, then continue reading the rest of the unit.

3.2.1 The Author's Note

Even before you read the play there is a prominent 'Author's Note' that you could not have missed. In it, Williamson states that the play is not "an attack on the police forces as such" and that the "play is paramountly about authoritarian behaviour and the processes whereby ordinary individuals are drawn into it." This is a statement of intent by the author, but one that has to be corroborated by our own reading of the play. How then does the action of the play unfold in Act I?

3.2.2 Comic Beginning



Don Crosby as Simmonds

The first characters we meet are the policemen – Sergeant Dan Simmonds and Constable Neville Ross. The setting is a new but already decrepit police station. The Sergeant is trying to pump the Constable, who is new to the job. What do you think is the purpose of this scene? Is it merely to raise some laughs? What happens before other characters come in and why? If the ‘why’ bewilders you, what is being said here is, what does the author attempt to establish in the interchange between Ross and Simmonds?

Simmonds is obviously trying to assert his authority, to take charge of Ross. He is making sure that Ross, the younger man, is no threat to him. This is a classic case of power play, the defence of territory and assertion of supremacy by the older male. Notice how his references to others who preceded Ross at the station rises to a crescendo with the ejection of a younger male from the police force itself.

The stage direction at the beginning of the play states that Simmonds is surveying Ross “as if he were auditioning him for a crucial role in some play.” The long pause that begins the play is finally broken by Ross asking for instruction. Simmonds has already scored a point, already asserted his supremacy. He now acts the old seasoned policeman who is willing to extend his patronage to the young constable if the constable is willing to play by his rules. The first question he asks is about Ross’s father. He has already established that Ross is a callow youth and now checks out on the father whose place of authority he has taken over in Ross’s workday world. Ross is embarrassed to talk about his father and this immediately provides Simmonds with enough sport.

Simmonds has begun the scene by emphasising the essentially corrupt nature of the world of the police in a very matter of fact way – “The money could be good if you happened to be in the right places but this isn’t one of them. No pay-offs here, boy. A few perks but no pay-offs.” He speaks of incompetence in the world of carpenters, having been told that Ross’s father is a carpenter of sorts. He then talks of his daughter and the trouble she has because her husband is a Catholic (“mick”). Simmonds’ wife is a Catholic too, but Ross is not. Since Ross is not Catholic, Simmonds gives up that line of conversation because it has no profit for him. So he moves on to talk about the money that he has made without too much effort. He advises Ross to ‘organise’ himself. This entails not working by the rulebook, “Life’s

got its own rules." What you have here is the attempt by a seasoned campaigner to browbeat a younger male into accepting his authority and worldview. While breaking down Ross's defences, the Sergeant is also recruiting him and ensuring his personal loyalty.

Reading *The Removalists*



Gordon Glenwright as Simmonds and Max Phipps as Ross in the Playbox Theatre season, Sydney 1972, produced by Harry M. Miller and directed by John Bell

Hence, when Ross once again tries to be pro-active in the conversation, and asks about the station he is told that it is in the "city's geographical centre of crime." Simmonds leads him a catechism of inaction saying that since there are only two of them in the station they cannot handle anything big and anything small is not worth handling. Hence their workload is pretty much what they decide it to be. Simmonds says he does anything that looks interesting and then insults Ross by saying that he is not interesting enough. Then he makes his first reference to Ross's predecessors, to one that was "a young smart arse." He asserts that "There's only one person in authority here and that's me." He follows this up with questioning Ross about his father's profession again and Ross resists actively, in what seems a final show of defiance. Simmonds is reduced to threatening him, to reminding him about his complete lack of experience, and to taunting him about his educational qualifications. So far we have had a comic flux of action, when even while the joke has been on the

younger man he has withstood his ground with intermittent resistance against the older man.

3.2.3 Establishing "Mateship" through Authority

Ross is then warned to be smart, to think on his feet. He is told that he has a lot to learn before they can become a team, and that first he has to unlearn what he has been taught at the academy. Simmonds is then sarcastic about the kinds of violence taught at the police school, "They teach you how to shoot people then beat 'em up as well?" He is proud of the fact that in his twenty three years in the force he has never drawn a gun or made an arrest. When Ross asks aggressively what he does then as a policeman, Simmonds pulls rank, seniority and age and when Ross still does not tell him what his father does, Simmonds narrates the story of the constable whose sister had been raped. His over-reaction to another case of alleged rape costs him his job in the force. Simmonds thus seemingly proves that he needs to know everything about Ross and asks him again about Ross's father who turns out to be a coffin maker. Simmonds insists that Ross is embarrassed to talk about his father because he deals with the dead. The two sisters, Kate and Fiona, arrive at the station almost immediately after this. Thus, begins a different movement in the action of the play. Simmonds has Ross where he wants him, subservient to his authority.

3.2.4 Women as Objects of Desire

The arrival of the two women seems at first only another opportunity to test Ross. By the way, have you noticed that the play refers to the two men by their surnames while it refers to the two women by their first names? Simmonds begins with a double entendre – "(Grinning lecherously) Let's have it." The sisters have come to report marital violence, Fiona has been beaten up by her husband. Full of homilies – "It's pretty terrifying when the family unit becomes a seat of violence" – Simmonds goes on a fishing expedition to find out more about the sisters. He is also investigating whether there are any possibilities for sex with the two women.



Peter Cummins as Simmonds, Kate Fitzpatrick as Kate and Jacki Weaver in the film *The Removalists*, produced by Margaret Fink and directed by Tom Jeffrey

As the scene proceeds Simmonds inspects Fiona's bruises lecherously. Kate encourages this almost in a conspiracy with the Sergeant. It is already evident that there is some kind of sibling tension regarding Fiona's marriage and that Kate is trying to assert her authority over her sister. Simmonds is soon sitting with his arm

around Kate while Ross takes polaroid photographs of Fiona's bruises. It is clear that Kate would like Fiona to divorce Kenny but Fiona herself is not too sure about what she ought to do next. Kate is masterminding Fiona's separation from Kenny and has even fixed a house for her. Fiona is to shift the next day but Kenny does not know about it yet. It turns out that the next night is the perfect night because it is Kenny's drinking night and thus the coast would be clear for Fiona to remove the furniture that Kate seems to set such store by. Simmonds suggests that he could arrange a removalist to move the furniture and that he and Ross could be there to help as well as to warn Kenny off. Simmonds then offers to keep an eye on them in the future as well.

The arrangements are finalised though not without a hiccup, because Ross is unaware of the sexual possibilities in the arrangement. When the women leave, Simmonds puts it to him bluntly that they are in for a sexual treat and that Simmonds is pairing up with Kate. Ross's only reply is that he hopes his girlfriend does not find out.



Max Phipps as Ross, with Don Crosby, Jacki Weaver as Fiona and Carole Skinner as Kate in the Nimrod Street Theatre production, 1971. Photo by Robert Walker

This is the end of Act I and by the now Ross has been completely co-opted by Simmonds, and Williamson has managed to establish that human life is full of intricate moves to dominate others. This is not just the pastime of males but women indulge in it as well. If Simmonds dominates Ross who in turn tries to resist, Kate tries to dominate Fiona who too resists her. Every encounter between men and women is one of sexual possibilities and every reference to women in the play so far has been in terms of their looks or sexual behaviour – including the references to Simmonds' wife and daughter. Women are to be hunted and the older male ends the act by asserting his authority by taking first choice of the 'kill'. By the end of the act we are even expecting a sex comedy, a bedroom farce, in the second act. We seem to have travelled quite a distance from the comic act between the two men that began the play. Or is this play about all kinds of corruption in the police force and the other by-plays are just that?

3.3 ACT II

Again, the first stage direction is of interest to us. As an alternative to intermission, Williamson suggests that slides of the family life of Ross and Fiona be shown. This scene begins immediately after Ross expresses hope that his girlfriend Marilyn not

The Removalists

find out about him and Fiona. Ross is thus looking forward to a liaison with Fiona who in turn is walking out on her husband with the child and the furniture. The slides to be shown are of Ross with his family and with Marilyn and of Fiona with Kenny and their baby and of Kate with Fiona's baby. The idea of a slide with Kate holding Fiona's baby serves as a visual reminder that Kate wants to take over Fiona's life. The slides demonstrate and destroy any ideas we might have of a happy family life.

3.3.1 The Removalists



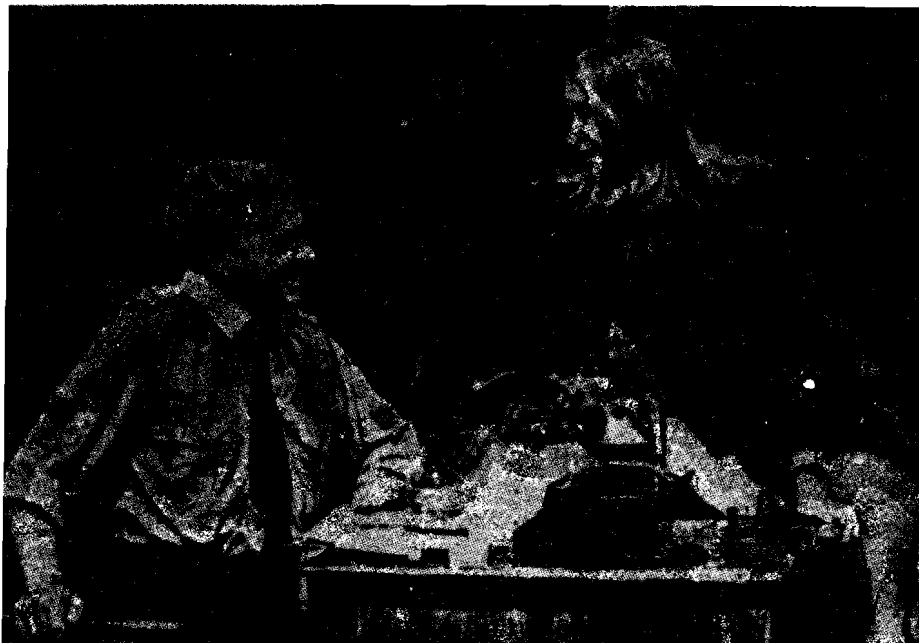
Ed Deveraux as Simmonds, Carole Mowlam as Fiona, Struan Rodger as Ross, Mark McManus as Kenny and Dalene Johnson as Kate in the Royal Court Theatre, London, directed by Jim Sharman. Photo by John Haynes

The setting is Fiona and Kenny's flat. It is the next evening and Fiona is getting ready for the move. The scene opens with Kenny coming in unexpectedly and giving Fiona "a long gropy kiss which he evidently enjoys more than she does." Fiona is obviously taken aback by his appearance on the scene and tries to shake him off. His immediate suspicion that she must be seeing someone else and his examination of underwear sizes provides humour but the scene also sets up various facts about their household. Kenny is a macho male, uncouth in behaviour and speech. The gender roles are fixed as far as he is concerned and he is doing the right thing by his wife simply by walking in to drink at home instead of with his male friends and he thinks that his wife should be happy to fix him a meal. He is after all the master of the house.

It is soon obvious that he has come back home because he is in the mood to make love and in the ensuing conversation it is made clear that they had made love even the previous night, the night after which she had made up her mind to leave him, and the night he had beaten her up immediately after making love, because she had not emptied the "kitchen tidy". He feels that a wife and a mother should have done it by herself and the punishment he had meted out was just. It is also established that Kenny resents the role played by Fiona's family in his life. Obviously there is a class difference at work here, and as much as they look down on Kenny's ways he resents their posh behaviour. Kate's arrival now allows him to put on a show for her of the lower class brainless uncouth male. Because Williamson wants us to see him playing a role to the hilt, Kenny's native wit is demonstrated early in the exchanges between him and Kate. When Kate asks him what he is watching, he replies, "Television. It's a new electronic wonder that's just filtered down to the lower classes. Keeps their brains nice and soggy." He deliberately stuffs himself in front of Kate and glaring at her, asks her, "Don't you like my manners?"

How do you picture Kenny at this moment. Are you more sympathetic to him or not? It may be useful to note down for yourself here what your views about Kenny are at this moment in this play. You have already read the entire play and have a certain reading of his character but we are asking you to do something different, to give your reading of his character at this point of the play, in order to show you how Williamson manipulates/constructs the action, and how this is reflected in our reading of characters and the situation at various points. If you had expected to see a boorish wife-beating character, do you feel that Kenny lives up to your expectations? Is he more intelligent than you expected? Do you feel that he is as much if not more sinned against than sinning?

When Kenny decides to go after all to the pub and his friends, the Removalist arrives. It is clear already that the women do not want to confront Kenny at all and that they desperately want him out of the way. When the Removalist arrives, they retreat into the kitchen, leaving the situation to play itself out. There is a funny little scene played between Kenny and the Removalist which ends in Kenny threatening violence but the Removalist standing his ground. The women pretend they have not heard this exchange at all but when Kate offers to go and talk to the Removalist, the plot and the action get a major push forward with the literal gate crashing entry of the two policemen.



Ed Deveraux and Darlene John in the Royal Court production. Photo by John Haynes

Simmonds springs into action immediately in order to take control of the situation and succeeds after a couple of initial hiccups to get Ross to handcuff Kenny to a table, and later to the door handle. Kenny is told that he is being arrested for beating his wife, then for resisting arrest and assaulting the Removalist, and then for using indecent and abusive language. We realise at once that the whole episode is a frame up and that the policemen are abusing their authority. Simmonds kicks Kenny in the thigh, and while Kenny complains that "You can't walk into a man's house and kick him", you realise that not only has the Sergeant done so, he seems to feel that he has a right to do so. The level of violence escalates inevitably because Kenny's anger comes out in vituperative language directed at everybody, but especially at Kate, Simmonds' prospective date. Kenny also discovers the plot now, and realises that Fiona has planned to walk out on him.

While Ross becomes the de facto assistant to the Removalist, Simmonds punches Kenny every time he steps out of line in the way he speaks to the five of them. Williamson's stage direction reads, "THE SERGEANT punches KENNY in the gut. He is in command of the situation and enjoying it." Punching a handcuffed Kenny is an assertion of his authority. It is also made clear that Simmonds takes pride in the fact that he can hit without leaving tell tale bruises on the victim. The Removalist is the only one that he has no control over but otherwise controls everyone else's actions. He keeps his cool even when Kenny taunts him to have a fist fight because he realises that he does not stand to gain anything but trouble in a brawl. In the arguments that follow between Kenny, Fiona and Kate, various skeletons come tumbling out of closets. It turns out that Kate has not only a "healthy" sexual urge but that she had propositioned Kenny himself. She calls for a taxi to leave and the Sergeant is left with the prospect of a lost opportunity.

To make it worse Kenny finds the perfect provocation – talking about his own sexual prowess. He says that Fiona had five orgasms with him the previous night – "She came five times in one grapple, Sergeant." When Simmonds loses control and beats him up ferociously, Kenny exults that now he would have bruises to show. He provokes the Sergeant again by speaking to Fiona and asking her to say how she cannot get enough of him sometimes. Simmonds loses control again but then he makes an important statement. He claims that the test of manhood is self-control. His wife had developed medical complications when their son had been born and that he had not been allowed near her for five years after that because his wife was not to become pregnant. His wife he has already informed us is catholic, and hence against family planning. Thus it seems that the Sergeant is a sexually frustrated man who tries to find other women and, further, is insecure about his own prowess. There is a lull after this outburst, a lull in which, while the furniture is still being moved, Kate and Simmonds talk about their families. By this time Kenny is genuinely afraid of the violence that Simmonds can unleash. This particular movement in the action ends with the Sergeant castigating Kate for her extra-marital affairs. Having been denied by circumstances from more intimate relations with her, he ends up talking of her immorality. This is a clear indication of the ultimate hypocrisy practiced by the male.

The Sergeant and the women go off-stage during the Sergeant's tirade and there is a revealing bit of interaction between the three other characters. Kenny tries to get the Removalist to ring for the cops while Ross has gone out to ask for further instructions on behalf of the Removalist. The Removalist refuses to get involved, for after all, Simmonds and Ross are cops themselves. When Ross comes back he is in a rage because he has obviously been ticked off for interrupting the argument. He ticks both the Removalist and Kenny off, and he reprimands Kenny for speaking sarcastically saying that he is not the one who has hit him. But Ross is still the follower, not the authoritative figure and this is illustrated by the Removalist obeying Simmonds rather than the former (Ross) in removing the same dresser that both of them had suggested he move next.

It becomes apparent to Kenny now that not only has his wife's family ganged up on him – his mother-in-law is giving money for the flat – but that he will be expected to pay for the maintenance of his daughter. He complains that "In the old days if a man didn't give his wife a thrashing every week or so she wouldn't respect him. Nowadays you give 'em a love pat and they shoot right through on you." No male in the play ever contradicts his position. Simmonds tries to proposition Fiona, now that Kate has decided to leave, in front of Kenny and enjoys their discomfiture. While Kenny warns her, Fiona is completely confused by the turn of events. Kate comes back to ask Fiona to accompany her in the taxi. By now Simmonds wants to help Fiona shift in order to cover his losses but Kate takes charge and marches Fiona off after warning the Sergeant not to go over either to or near the new flat. Kenny tries to get Fiona have him released but Simmonds is not going to be denied some sport at least. He says Kenny's offences have been against the policemen and thus the women go off with Kenny still handcuffed to the door and at the mercy of the two policemen.

3.3.2 Tragic Ending

Now Simmonds starts ragging Kenny and involves Ross in the action. Ross refuses to let Kenny be beaten even though Kenny has been made to speak against him. Simmonds knees him anyway. The next piece of action is actually initiated by Kenny because the policemen finally release him writhing on the floor and begin to walk away when he threatens Simmonds. Ross is ordered to arrest him but Kenny threatens him with a chair and also abuses him calling him a coward among other things. This is the final straw for Ross who launches himself on Kenny in a ferocious assault which continues off-stage.

Ross comes back convinced that he has killed Kenny. Simmonds continues to give him 'valuable' lessons in beating up people without leaving any evidence as also about writing reports. He finally goes to have a look and he too thinks that Kenny may have died. The seemingly still comic play suddenly changes track. When Ross suggest they cover it up, Simmonds has only objections to it all and says that Ross has to take the rap for what he has done. It is then that Ross, who is increasingly anxious, says that he could pin the murder on the Sergeant because there have been witnesses to the Sergeant's assault on Kenny. They are both hysterical about what has happened and its probable consequences when Kenny staggers in. They do not even notice him till a little later. For the moment comedy seems to have returned and we can actually sit back and relax in our chairs. While Ross is relieved and wants to get a doctor for Kenny, Simmonds does not want any evidence to be recorded at all and vetoes the idea of a doctor.

When Kenny states that he is going to have his wounds certified by a doctor any way, Simmonds offers him a quid pro quo – female companionship. Kenny negotiates with Simmonds about the call girls and they both agree to the terms. Kenny wants his by-weekly free visits to the call girls to continue even if Fiona comes back to him. Ross is bewildered by it all and even as they drink beer, Ross gets further lessons in police work. This is pure satire at work – you are not allowed to feel any sympathy for Kenny or even for Ross. But just then Kenny actually dies and the two policemen are back in their hysterical state. They blame each other again and Simmonds once again tries to pin the responsibility on Ross who, in turn, advocates collective responsibility. Ross begins to hit Simmonds saying that if they hit each other sufficiently they could make it look as if Kenny had gone berserk. The play ends here with the stage direction stating that "the fight almost takes on the air of a frenzied ritual of exorcism." The play begins with a verbal skirmish between an older and a younger man, with the older striving to assert his authority, to defend his territory, and ends with a ritual fight between them. This is a fight called for by the young man not so much to displace the older man as to defend his own sense of security.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

We can see that the action of the play consists of a series of dramatic movements. The initial 'interrogation', the verbal skirmish between the Sergeant and Ross, is almost petering out when the women arrive to move the play forward. The Kenny-Fiona scene is getting nowhere when Kate arrives. We do not want to argue this out completely but the play moves forward again with the arrival of the policemen. The verbal and physical violence that ensues is again acted out in units which are interconnected by small catalysts of action. You can identify these units easily. The play is prolonged to its final conclusion because of Kenny's taunting of the policemen. The penultimate unit is caused by Kenny staggering back and the action takes on a surrealist comic hue when they discuss the call-girl scheme. The final unit is the result of the actual death of Kenny. Every time you think the action is going to flag, the play gets a push from someone's arrival or something that is said. This, in a way, is a fair reading of the way in which the action of the play is constituted, i.e. the structure of the play.

This allows the play to use the readers'/audiences' reactions or expectations, playing them off against what actually happens in the play. Since the action is broken up, and we cannot be sure at any point where the play is going, we end up reflecting on the action, evaluating it and the characters, noting the by play between characters, and wondering where it will all end. We are not caught up in the rush and tumble of unitary action that moves inevitably and inexorably towards a conclusion, however unexpected. What we see is almost a series of accidental interactions between characters who feel forced to behave in a certain manner. We see a society where sexual prowess, physical strength and stamina play a great role in the lives of men, and, because of the gendered hierarchical nature of society, in the lives of women as well.

3.5 QUESTIONS

1. Identify the discrete units of action in the play. How are they joined together?
2. How expected is the ending of the play? Substantiate your answer.

3.6 SUGGESTED READING

This is essential reading obviously:

Williamson, David. *The Removalists*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1972, rept 1984 by Currency Methue Drama Pty Ltd.

UNIT 4 THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Themes
 - 4.2.1 Concerns
 - 4.2.2 Characters
 - 4.2.3 Violence in the Play
 - 4.2.4 The Marriage Motif
- 4.3 The Title of the Play
 - 4.3.1 Language
- 4.4 Techniques
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will explore the various themes of the play, see the concerns that Williamson exhibits in this play, analyse the characters, examine the language and identify the dramatic techniques that Williamson employs.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

What are the major themes of the play? Now that we have had a close look at the action of the play can we agree with Williamson that the play is not simply an anti-police play? Take a few minutes and write down what you think are the major themes dealt with in *The Removalists*.

Does your listing look like this – police brutality; violence of various kinds, marital, authoritarian, and macho; the state of marriage; sexual morality and/or behaviour and its impact on society; all kinds of social degradation in contemporary Australia.... Our aim is to identify the major themes and concerns of Williamson in this play and the manner in which he expresses them in this play. This means that not only do we have to examine our list of themes but also examine the text of the play closely in order to see how Williamson employs language and other theatrical devices.

4.2 THEMES

Other than the note that Williamson has placed in the beginning of the play denying that it is specifically targeted against the police, he has also written an article on the play which we shall refer to here. This was published in the *Meanjin Quarterly* in December 1974 (Volume 33, No. 4) and is called "*The Removalists: A Conjunction of Limitations*". In the article, Williamson argues that the play is not an anti-police play and that he does not "and cannot write from an ideological standpoint – at least not from a simplistic ideological standpoint." (p. 414) This misreading, he says, had led to arguments in the first production when some actors had wanted to toughen the play in its supposed anti-police stand. In his opinion the others had no actual acquaintance with policemen, while he knew some personally, especially his own uncle. Williamson's uncle had never punched anybody in his life and, interestingly,

"he proudly claimed to me once that he had made not a single arrest for fourteen years." (p. 415) (You can see how Williamson uses the last statement so creatively in the play.) Williamson's position is that ideology oversimplifies characterisation and the complexities of a given social situation. His interest here is in the interaction between the three major male characters in the play – Simmonds, Kenny, and Ross.

4.2.1 Concerns

Williamson had got the plot of the play from a story told to him by a removalist that he had used. The removalist told him about "the 'great day' he had had last Friday." (p. 415) He was shifting the furniture of a wife leaving her husband and a couple of cops had come to help the girl and her sister. When the husband had got 'stropky', the policemen had given him a beating. Williamson felt that what was interesting was that the removalist had identified with the policemen. He felt that the husband deserved a beating and that the policemen had every right to beat the man. This gave rise to the play where the situation is let to run to its ultimate conclusion. So obviously, the removalist represents the silently collaborating voyeuristic society that collaborates by acceptance in the violence. Not only is the violence accepted, it is admired as the natural and necessary expression of authority. Hence, the interaction of the characters is not only an expression of their individual personalities but also of societal structures and conditioning. Thus the play is a profound indictment or exploration of the way in which violence underpins Australian society and its mores.

The two prefatory articles in the Currency Methuen edition emphasise this. They, especially the second article, argue that Australia was constituted in violence and that its history has more than a dose of violent incidents. Galbally and Milte state that violence on behalf of the state, on the side of law and order, has always been a problem, its solution lies in education and a more, not less, permissive society where there is greater personal freedom. They also argue that violence against the state and other citizens is often the result of societal pressures. Some of the violence perpetrated by the police may thus be because the frustrated policeman has a sanctioned avenue to vent his individual frustration.

In the first article, Ian Turner says that

The Removalists raises three questions: one socio-cultural (is Australian society violent of its essence?); one political (do the forces of "law and order" rest on violence?); one psychological (do all of us have the kinds of aggressive instincts or behaviour patterns which Williamson depicts?) (p.3)

His answer to the first question is that Australia is "a more peaceful society than most." (p.5) But he feels that there is a deeper level of violence in Australian society but that this finds expression "in outlets which are socially approved or in mores which are unthinkingly accepted socially." The obvious example are the games that Australians love, Australian Rules Football in particular. The violence of the game is mirrored in the accepted behaviour on the grounds as well as in the expectations and approval of commentators. The mores which are unthinkingly accepted which are imbued with violence are those that relate to male-female relationships. Turner feels that this is so not only because of the anti-woman nature of the Judaeo-Christian culture but also because of the Australian code of masculinity which positively isolates women in their role as sex objects. The answer to the third question is that we are all capable of violence because of the nature of power and we will only change when social structures change enough to recognise the unique rights of all individuals.

4.2.2 Characters

How do these two articles help you in understanding and evaluating the play? While Australia may have its own unique history, is violence not endemic in most societies, in our own society? Is this because of inherent inequalities? Is violence an issue only

in Australia? Obviously not. But Australian history has given rise to certain values which may contribute in unique ways to a culture of violence. What we can see immediately is the Australian construct of masculinity, its valorisation of physicality, of stamina and strength, that gives rise to situations where violence is both the medium for and the expression of such masculinity. If you are a real man you have got to take it and dish it out too. The ocker can know or do no better than this.

The ocker figure here is of course Kenny. What are we told about him, what is he like in action, what do we make of him? In Williamson's own words, in the article we have already referred to, Kenny's "self-esteem is totally bound up with a conception of himself as a great fucker and a great fighter – a man who can absorb any amount of punishment without giving visible signs that he is hurt." (p 415) As pointed out in Unit I, the ocker is pushy and crude. He asserts his masculinity through his heavy drinking and tough talking and boasting about his female conquests. The ocker is aggressively articulate and lives for material pleasures. Nothing else matters for him. Does this define Kenny? The problem with the ocker figure is that even if you find him likable in his anti-authoritarianism, you will have to admit that he is no individual who respects the rights of another's unique individuality. The ocker who has to boast of his sexual conquests cannot imagine a world of gender equality. Further, almost by definition, he will have to bow to forces superior to him in their drinking, sexual, or physical abilities, an anathema to him. Hence, he has to keep proving his superiority in these fields.

This seems to explain quite a bit of the action. Kenny the stud cannot stomach the idea of Fiona leaving him because it seems to question his sexual prowess. This is why he keeps asserting how good he is in bed and how much she wants him. He has to assert his masculinity, he is not losing his wife due to any inadequacy of his. In a revealing outburst he tells his wife:

You think this's going to be one great big ball, don't you? You're in for a bloody great shock. One in every three men is a premature ejaculator. Did your sister ever tell you that? One in three's got a bloody weak back. You ask her. You've been dying to try it all out for years, haven't you? Well. don't come crawling back to me!....

As Williamson says, Kenny's "secret fear is that Fiona is leaving him because of some lack of sexual prowess." (p. 416) He runs down other men because of this, because he has to show himself as the better class of performer, as a stud. Obviously, he is not so certain of his prowess, or he would not have this particular insecurity. Just as contrast, consider his belief in his fighting ability – that never flags throughout the play. His secret fear is in that area where qualitative comparisons are impossible for him to make. But it is a crucial area because his self-esteem is not constituted by how many women he makes love to but his ability as a lover. Is this the major reason for the compromise that he is willing to work out at the end – his call girls visitation rights. He is after all a stud and needs more than his wife to satisfy him.

The very end of the play becomes inevitable because of his need to assert his physical superiority. He has lost his wife but he is not going to be a loser in all markers of his manhood. He has been handcuffed and beaten and he cannot allow himself to be released and left there. He has to stand up for himself, show the policemen that he is man enough to take them on. He taunts them back into killing him. When they are leaving he threatens Simmonds with retaliation:

Get out! Go on. Get out, you animal. You'll step out of your house one dark night and you'll get it, boy. Kenny Carter doesn't forget somethin' like this. Now piss off to your police station and crawl back into your woodwork!

He has mates who will help him get even. But when he is threatened with arrest again, he turns his anger onto Ross who cannot see that the abusive language directed seemingly at him is actually meant for Simmonds. But then he himself may also be

hitting Kenny as a substitute figure for the Sergeant. Simmonds is the coward hiding behind his uniform but poor Ross who has got it from everyone throughout the play finally loses control and attacks Kenny viciously. Even when Kenny staggers in later he talks of his ability to absorb punishment, he is still a man. And as pointed out, he is 'man' enough to negotiate terms and conditions for the call-girl racket as price for keeping quiet about the incident. Before he dies, he has done his bit for his image – he has shown that he can take savage punishment, that he is not afraid of authority, and that he is an extremely sexually active male. He is uniquely Australian.

John McCallum has a different reading of the action. He sees Kenny as the celebratory element in the play, "the lovable ocker... the scapegoat figure." (p. 347) While Kenny is violent, McCallum feels that his violence is acceptable, because it is within marriage. He notes "his humour and resilience and generally lovable vulgarity – resisting the nastiness of the institutional fools by his individualism." What McCallum finds problematic is then Kenny's enthusiasm for the call-girl scheme towards the end, "implying as it does his total complicity in the violent, inhuman system which is about to result in his sudden death." If this is in character, as we have argued, then the character lets critics like McCallum down. He writes that the "character that we have affectionately accepted as representative of the awful Australian uniqueness has betrayed us, and we are left with a very bleak view indeed." He feels that sympathy is built for this character, and while the end may question the sympathy, the reasons for the positive reaction are never explored. He finds the whole thing a dramaturgical trick. What McCallum does not examine at all is that sympathy is built in for other characters as well – Ross and Fiona in particular. So a reading which looks at Kenny sympathetically, even if only for a while, is totally flawed. But that is our opinion. You'll have to make up your own minds. In any case, do you find violence within marriage any more acceptable than outside the home?

This is not to deny that one has sympathy for Kenny – beer drinking, amorous Kenny who does not know what he has walked into or that he has caused a great deal of consternation to his wife and her sister by coming home unexpectedly. We do not expect him to die and the situation is full of comic possibilities. He is quite an energetic character who can cock a snook wonderfully at his wife's posh family whose disdain for his social he is well aware of. In Rees's view, if the play so far and later "manages to exhibit virtually all the meanest traits in human nature", it also offsets the darkness "with the noisy good nature of the larrikin Kenny" and Williamson's use of language (p. 121). It seems that it is not so much the "good nature" of Kenny that offsets anything but the comedy inherent in various situations including those involving other characters. The fact that the play finally ends in the death of Kenny cannot negate the comedy that runs through the play. It may not be necessary to read the play from Kenny's point of view, whatever that may be. Kenny does not need to be read as the only good guy, if only a rough diamond, in the play. There are no good guys here. If there is sympathy for Kenny, it is for a man who cannot know better. The same level of sympathy can be extended to Ross or actually even to Simmonds. They are all products of their society and even if Williamson provides some data for reading them individually, psychologically, they are ultimately characters who act out the values of a system. Williamson himself feels so.

He says that

To those critics who have suggested that I am unsympathetic to Kenny, the Sergeant and Ross, I can only answer that I'm not. I am deeply sympathetic. They are not horrific, but their conditioning is.

(Meanjin, P. 416)

Williamson goes on to give a reading of the characters and their conditioning and then says that the circumstances that lead to the end of the play could have been avoided if any of the three characters had been less constrained by their conditioning. He ends the article saying that "in a society which conditions its inhabitants in a primitive and violent way, you are sure to find primitive and violent behaviour."

4.2.3 Violence in the Play

Themes and Techniques

Kenny is as complicit in the system that finally kills him as the others who beat him up or watch it happening. For each of the male characters their notion of the self is bound up in performative terms, in terms of sexuality, authority, and approval. They have to find assurances about their manhood in these terms. We have talked about Kenny but Simmonds is no different. Simmonds, as we saw in our reading of Act I, is the older male safeguarding his territory from possible challengers from among the young. This territory is the police station. He is Simmonds the Sergeant. Notice how he is always referred to either by his surname or designation. It is the formality of his authority that defines his being. People had better respect him, he has his own police station. His examination of Ross in the beginning of the play is to assert his authority, to impress on the young recruit that he is dealing with a master of their vocation. He ensures throughout the action that Ross does not forget his position. Furthermore, he creates or grabs opportunities for sexual liaisons. The call-girl racket mentioned at the end of the play only confirms our opinion of him. He is full of prejudices, for example against Catholics. His anger with the Catholic faith's attitude to contraception is explained poignantly later when he says that he could not make love to his wife for five years because she was not allowed to get pregnant. Five years was all he could wait though! He has the same attitude to women as any true blooded ocker – they are game to be had at will. He acts the tough policeman for the benefit of the ladies, but quite enjoys it. His position allows him to hit without fear of retaliation. He too is a stud in his own estimation.

What is seemingly contradictory is that he is willing to castigate Kate about her sexual behaviour, calling her immoral. But this is not an inconsistency of character. Simmonds loses control first when Kenny shouts out his own sexual prowess. One can see immediately that Kenny's outburst angers Simmonds more than anything else till then. The man either does not like considering the competition that other males are capable of or he does not like talking directly about sex. The latter is incorrect because he has already talked about the possibility to Ross in the first act. Hence we have a scenario where every young male is a threat and every statement of performance an attempt at dethroning him. He truly feels insecure, perhaps even inadequate. Notice how he does not take on Kenny's offer for a straight fight. His sense of insecurity/inadequacy cannot stomach the fact that a woman has just walked out on him, a woman who, it transpires may have picked him up rather than the other way around. It was not he who was going to score, she was. This outrages his sense of order and authority, women cannot play the same games as men, not to the same rules. Hence his castigation of Kate. His value system is no different from Kenny's. She will not have him, she is proactive in sex, she is a whore who has to be castigated for her immorality. He is not inconsistent, he is only a frightened insecure man puffed up into a bully by the uniform.

Violence is thus an expression of power as well as its defence. This can be in any space including the domestic. Ross is learning valuable lessons in all this. He too sees his worth in terms of his competence as a policeman, in others approval. He is willing to go along with the sexual liaison so long as his girlfriend does not come to know about it, he willingly participates in the voyeuristic photographing of Fiona at the police station, and he can look away from all violence and does. And the final lesson he implements is in the use of violence to protect his domain, to cover up the consequences of his behaviour, of his violent behaviour. He is shown as willing to bask in "his new notoriety" when Kenny and Simmonds talk about his temper. His coy smiles also indicate that he could easily be persuaded to participate in the call-girl racket. As Kenny says, he has learned more about law and life in this one day than he could have in a whole year at College. He has also learnt a lot more about himself.

Even the Removalist with his "ten thousand dollars worth of machinery tickin' over out there" is party to all this. He is never referred to by his name, he is completely

identified with his profession. He is quite willing to exploit the inexperienced Ross, making him carry all the furniture, and he is quite willing to look away while the Sergeant is beating up Kenny. He does not only look away, he approves of the beating. When it seems to be getting out of hand, and when Kenny pleads with him to call for help, the Removalist not only says that he cannot afford to get involved, he states his philosophy of life:

Sorry, mate. I've got a pretty simple philosophy. If there's work I work, and if nobody interferes with me then I don't interfere with nobody.

I mind me own business, if other people mind theirs, and that's the way I play the game.

He is more respectful to the Sergeant than to Ross, and he does not care about Kenny. He is more bothered about money than anything else, and he is prejudiced against undercutting immigrants. He is your normal, run of the mill male who subscribes to all the dominant values of his society. His self-esteem is in doing his job with competence and as little sweat as possible. As Williamson says in his article, "there are many other parameters of self esteem: reasonableness, tolerance, compassion, and humility – to name a few – yet none of the men in the play are able to define themselves or identify with qualities such as these." (p. 417)

How do the women define themselves and what is the role they play in the violence that the play explores? This is an important question because it is a common complaint that Williamson does not create fully developed women characters in his early plays. I would suggest that in *The Removalists*, the women are presented the way they are because of their 'dramatic' world, because of the nature of the society being explored.

To start with, the elder sister, Kate seems to object to the Fiona-Kenny marriage on grounds of class. Why did she then want to seduce Kenny? But it is not only Kenny that she has desired sexually. Kenny tells the Sergeant gleefully that Kate cannot resist any man. From Kate's embarrassed admissions it is clear that she has had her share of men while still married. If you go back to the first Act, you will remember that the Sergeant gets Kate's attention by the simple expedient of showing interest in Fiona. What you then have is a character who defines her being by her attractiveness to men. Objectified by a masculine society, her self-esteem is her sexuality. She is, without realising it, a threat to the men, to the Sergeant in particular. She has imbibed the values of the society only too well, and she willingly accepts the help offered by the Sergeant. She may not have expected the violence that takes place but she does nothing to stop it. Fiona is alarmed and remonstrates the Sergeant even if ineffectually but Kate does nothing to stop the beating up of Kenny. It quite serves her purpose. She is decisive, wants to exercise power over everybody in the play, and she can understand and even approve of the needs and strategies of the others to do the same. Violence is part of the power struggle, and is part of her mental landscape.

Fiona is quite different. She is married to Kenny and from all evidence in the play, she is not too unhappy with him. It is the class difference that her family feels so acutely about (and Kenny's reaction to it) that seems to have been a constant source of pressure for her. She is vulnerable to her sister's authority and is someone who does not challenge any power structure too hard. This explains her behaviour in the police station, where she lets herself be physically inspected and photographed. All through she makes clear that she does not agree with her sister fully and that she does not think much of the idea of the policemen coming home to help in the shifting. But she acquiesces to the arrangement. And while she is alarmed at the turn the situation takes in the Act II, she does not do more than remonstrate feebly. At the end when Kenny pleads with her, she takes back her complaint but when the Sergeant refuses to release Kenny, she allows herself to be dragged out by her sister. It is not that she has lacked initiative in life (after all she had tried to get out of Australia in the trip where she met Kenny), it is that there seems to be no viable alternative for her in this male

society except perhaps a sexless retirement for a while. If these are the values that men live by, and those values define at least one kind of Australia, then what role do women have in that Australia? They can only make ineffectual noises and moves.

Thus Fiona is the typical housewife of an ocker home – her husband will have his mates and his drinks. She will have to be there for him when he wants her, and run his household as efficiently as she can. She will be pushed around and beaten at times by her husband. She accepts the way this society functions. It may be a mistake in time reference in the play but, as the text stands, she and Kenny have made love even the night before Act II, after which she has made her complaint to the police in Act I. From the reference in Act I, it seems that she had been beaten by Kenny the day before the action begins. And in Act II, Kenny reminds her in the beginning that she had enjoyed making love the night before, i.e. thursday night. And she tells him that she had, but he had beaten her immediately afterwards – “Well, it hardly inspires confidence that you’re made love to one minute and bashed up the next.” He says so to the Sergeant as well, when he boasts of her enjoyment of his lovemaking the previous night. But she has been beaten again. This seems to be then a pattern that she is tired of now, but that she has accepted as the order of things so far.

The sergeant says in Act I, that “It’s pretty terrifying when the family unit becomes a seat of violence.” But this seems to be just a platitude from a man who is out to impress two women who he sees as physical objects to be enjoyed, the way he sees all women. The family unit is the seat of all violence and marital violence seems to be an accepted fact of life. Husbands beat wives. Just as all authority figures are violent in the exercise and defence of their authority. Men are violent to each other in order to establish the pecking order, and more so in front of women in order to establish their manhood. Inherently inequality engenders violence even to maintain itself.

4.2.4 The Marriage Motif

And how is marriage, the punching bag of early Williamson, depicted in the play? You have three marriages, two that are talked about and one that is depicted – the Sergeant’s, Kate’s, and Fiona-Kenny’s. The institution of marriage comes off pretty badly, doesn’t it? It seems that Kate stays on in her marriage for purely economic reasons. As she says about Ralph, her husband – “He’s provided a good life for me and my children and he’s a fine man.” She has affairs, sexual liaisons, with various men and argues that too much fuss should not be made about affairs these days. Marriage seems to be a bad trap which the partners try to make the best of in their own ways. The duty of a husband may still be to provide, but what are the other responsibilities that come with marriage? And what are the duties of the wife? It seems that what we have is travesties of traditional marriage. The men seem to set no store by ideas of fidelity, the women do not seem to care much either. Kenny thinks that it is the duty of the woman to do all the household chores and that it behoves on him as the man of the family to beat her up if she fails to do her chores to his satisfaction. The Sergeant finds the medical condition of his wife a great strain, and they then proceed to have children against the doctor’s orders. The risk is all the woman’s but it is part of her duty to keep her husband sexually satisfied. There is no hope for marriage in this society – see where the potential union between Ross and Marilyn is already heading.

As we saw in our close reading of the play all these issues jump out of the pages of the play/text. We have explored the problem of violence in society, within and outside marriage, and explored its relation to the idea of the Australian male. This leads us to both sexual morality and the state of the marriage. The whole of society seems infected with this malaise of people lacking all sense of direction and even good sense. The ending of the play with the two men taking part in a fight that “take on the air of a frenzied ritual of exorcism” is emblematic of a society which has defined itself in such a physical, limited masculine way.

Fitzpatrick says that *The Removalists* is not "the kind of play one can forget, and in relation of its guaranteed shock-value to some very provocative sociology and very assured craftsmanship, it remains the strongest of Williamson's plays." (pp 114-15) He feels that the play's limitation is in not exploring the characters in terms of individual psychology, in that "the characters' roles are explored more for representativeness than particularity...." (p 119) But, he concedes, the organising ideas and the plot are "strong enough to make *The Removalists* compelling in the theatre...." (p 119) In any case, I think we can safely agree that the play is not merely about police atrocities however much our own situation may tempt us to read it in that manner. This is a complex play that compels us to read not only Williamson's Australia but also our own India because we have to ask ourselves how many of these values we accept as well. It is a bleak play because it exploits our laughter to make us complicit in the violence of the action. But we must remember that we are manipulated (as well as shocked?) as much by the language of the play as by its structure and action. This is what we will examine next.

4.3 THE TITLE OF THE PLAY

Have you paid close attention to the text? I am sure you know it inside out by now. What then is the significance of the title? Note, if you done so, have not, that it is in the plural. Who are the removalists in the play? Is it a jocular reference to the fact that Ross assists the Removalist in shifting the furniture? Is it a reference to the fact that the policemen change roles when they offer to help the women shift house? Are the policemen the removalists? And if they are, is it only a simple reference to the role that they want to play in the lives of the two women? Are they removalists for the life changing (change place taking here) impact they have on people's lives? Isn't Kate also a removalist? Is there not enough evidence in the play that she not only encourages but has actually persuaded Fiona to move? Why, even Fiona's mother who is contributing towards the new flat is a removalist! But people who move you from one unit to another in the same structure reinforce the structure and in fact profit from it. They are removalists and not revolutionaries. The Removalist thinks only of money, the policemen of the women and authority, and Kate of getting rid of the lower class Kenny. Even the death of Kenny is accidental, the policemen do not really want to remove him from this world – there is no profit in that for them. In the struggle over territories of various kinds, everybody acts the removalist, whether consciously or unconsciously. Have you heard this word-Removalist before? I doubt it, in India this term is unheard of, in the United States, they are normally referred to as the "movers". In fact, this term seems particularly Australia.

A play which makes you say all that by the act of the insertion of a letter at the end of a word asks for careful reading. This is a warning that should be taken seriously because a number of contemporary plays, including many of Williamson's, seem to care less for language and more for form. This only means that they are not full of quotable quotes, picturesque speech, or are not poetic enough. Their content and intent calls for a different use of language. As said earlier, much of the violence in this play is inherent in the language itself. Take for instance the references to women in the play. What is the language used by the men about women and relationship with them?

4.3.1 Language

The first reference to women in the play is to the Sergeant's wife and daughter. The Sergeant describes his daughter to Ross in these words – "Not bad looking, mind you, and a good arse, but she's an irritable bitch, Her mother all over again." These lines thus refer to both women from his family and Simmonds describes women in terms of their body, and their character is described in terms of the animal world. The next reference is in the story the Sergeant tells about a previous constable. The girl who complains of rape in the story is a "little tart", "the tart", "the biggest bike", and a

"Silly bitch". And all the boys had "been through her". This is in Act I of the play which ends with the Sergeant calling the Constable "a stupid great arse" who "nearly ballsed" an opportunity. He assures Ross "We'll be in like Flynn there tomorrow night. We'll thread the eye of the old golden doughnut – no worries." And he then shares out the women, "I'm having the dentist's wife. Snooty bitch but she goes for it." Every reference is derogatory and male-female relationship is always in terms of male performance.

There is a lot more of this in Act II of course. The first term of 'endearment' that Kenny uses for Fiona is "you lazy bitch". He is suspicious that she wants to get rid of him because she is expecting another man, but tells her that it cannot be so because she is "too bloody lazy", even as he calls her a "Bloody slut". Fiona's mother is an "old bitch". 'Bitch' is the basic expression used for women in this act. When Kenny speaks insultingly to Kate, the Sergeant beats him up and explains to Fiona that he cannot stand women being addressed as if they were from the gutter. To which, Fiona replies, "It doesn't worry us, Sergeant. Really. We're used to it." This is true of the society, the women are used to being addressed as sex objects and described in the crudest terms. They are all "twat flashers". And in what is perhaps the most picturesque of descriptions, Kenny says that Kate "Bangs like a buggered tappet" after having called her a "bloody trollop". In this world even love-making is described as a "grapple", a wrestling bout, and Kenny's prowess in bed is in making his wife "squeal like a stuck pig". All that men want to do with women is, in Kenny's words, get "your end in".

Since the man-woman relationship seems to be one of power and domination and the men attempt this physically – violently and sexually. Kate's angry retort to Simmonds when he threatens her is, "What will you do if I don't? Chain me to the bloody door and rape me?" That Turner is right in the prefatory article when he says that "the male-female relationship in Australia rests on a frightening sub-stratum of violence" is corroborated beyond doubt by Kenny's 'reasonable' complaint – "In the old days if a man didn't give his wife a thrashing every week or so she wouldn't respect him. Nowadays you give 'em a love pat and they shoot through on you." In this world of male violence and women's objectification, the deadliest interest for a man is to be referred to as a woman, especially if the term used is derogative to women in the first place. When Kenny is left free by the Sergeant, Kenny provokes him by calling him a "dead cunt".

This then is the language that makes Rees say that the play's impact is made "by way of an astonishingly direct, fluent, uninhibited dialogue, often scatological, and very free about sex and other matters in a very funny way." (p 120) Fitzpatrick notes that Kenny and Simmonds have a "shared attitude toward women [that] is brutal and it is confirmed in the fabric of the play's language." (p 117) He goes on to say that "The fact that the terms of most violent abuse are sexual ones acquires special significance in a play where sex is so often talked about as the abasement of the female.... the vocabularies of sex and violence are interchangeable in more specific ways." (pp 117-18)

The shock of recognition that critics often talk about in Williamson's plays has also to do with the language. He manages to use the rhythms and the current vocabulary of the spoken language of the street very effectively. Men talk about sex and women in this manner even if Williamson seems to use this language in a limited concentrated way in this play to bring out its brutality. In a play on violence, the language plays as much of a role as the physical action in order to weave together a reflection on contemporary society.

4.4 TECHNIQUE

This is a seemingly conventional realistic play in terms of technique. A traditional two-act play, it makes use of realistic devices of the *proscenium* theatre. As John

The Removalists

Bull says in "Directing *The Removalists*", his note appended to the text of the play in your edition, he and the cast "were a bit apprehensive at first about its foursquare, conventional structure and unfashionably strong naturalism." (p 122) He feels that the physical space that they enacted their production in had a lot to do with the impact of the play. The actors were never more than five feet from the audience, and often seemed to be about to fall on the first row laps. He says that coupled with the play's unpredictability and the built in shocks, "this sheer physical proximity generated a fair deal of real nervous excitement." (p 124)

In Fitzpatrick's opinion, the traditional form and the startling subject of Williamson's play work together to ensure that the audience has "enough insulation... to be reflective... but never cosy." (p 116) The violence may numb an audience forcing them to see it as the artificial construct that it is, while the shock of recognition in terms of dialogue as well as the world referred to makes them identify with the issues raised as well as with the characters. What this means is that even if the violence acts as an alienating device, the identification means that the audience does get involved in the action, emotionally and mentally. This seems to be a marriage of the realistic play and the happening that was in vogue in the sixties and seventies, in which was the attempt to involve the audience directly in the action. We may agree with Fitzpatrick's reading that in *The Removalists* the audience is part of the theatrical experiment – in that the mixed reactions of the audience "are as much a part of the play's sociological treatment of violence in Australian society as the action of the stereo typical characters." (p 116)

The action consists of what McCallum describes as "a series of little, almost accidental moments". (p 347) What this should alert us to is that Williamson's plays are only apparently naturalistic. Williamson is hardly an Ibsen, and we do not mean this pejoratively but state this to highlight his difference. *The Removalists* is full of gags and one liners, what else do we laugh at? This is straight from the music hall, from the revue. No self-respecting naturalistic dramatist would employ this technique. Williamson is not interested in psychological characterisation and is more than willing to play around with stereotypes and representative characters. The failings of characters are not in their past or their fathers' but reflective of the society they live in. Hence the criticism about the women's roles being neither well developed nor original does not detract from the value or impact of the play in any way.

As we have seen, the reversal of action at the end of this play has been complained about. It is startling but realistic. The complaint is thus because of the conventions of the well made play which has traditionally been the vehicle of naturalism. While this play like all Williamson's early plays is broadly realistic, it uses the conventions of stage naturalism as much as it uses any other convention available to it in order to explore its concerns fully. For example, he is willing to use slides in between Act I and Act II which illustrate our idea of happy family life. Thus he is willing to highlight the constructed nature of theatre without any second thought. This is a compromise no naturalistic/realistic writer will allow himself/herself. Williamson's attempt is to give a convincing and interesting play, to shock the audience, to make them laugh and think. And he does that very well.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

We have seen the various themes that *The Removalists* addresses and studied the way the play uses language and the conventions of the realistic play in order to fully explore its concerns as well as to involve the audience in the action and the subsequent reflection. You can see that the play fits in very well in the broad range of Williamson's concerns that we identified when examining his early plays.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the title of the play.
2. Write a detailed note on various aspects of violence in the play.
3. How does *The Removalists* fit into the early phase of Williamson's career?
4. How is *The Removalists* a critique of Australian society?
5. Write a note on the women characters.
6. What is the impact of the language in your interpretation of the play?
7. Write a critical note on Williamson's "naturalism".
8. What is the role of humour in this play?
9. Give your analyses of the three major male characters.

4.7 GLOSSARY

proscenium:

proscenium is the front arch of a theatre stage where a curtain may be lowered between scenes, it also refers to the part of a stage that comes forward beyond this.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

Williamson, David. "*The Removalists*: A Conjunction of Limitations", *Meanjin Quarterly*, Summer 1974.