

“Sugared Placebos”? The effects of satire and farce in the plays of

David Williamson

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## Declaration

This Thesis contains no material which has been submitted for examination in any other course or accepted for any degree or diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text

Signed

.....

Elvira Sammut.

July 2008

This Thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Mother, Elena Suarez Gallagher Corbett, whose passion and vision instilled in me her love of reading and her deep belief in education. She travels with me.

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## Abstract

This thesis focusses on the fact that although David Williamson's popular appeal is attested to by his continuing commercial success in a career of over thirty-five years, a consistent stream of adverse criticism has nevertheless been levelled at his work on the basis of perceived superficiality and glibness. The term "sugared placebos" was employed to describe the truncation of characterisation and treatment of ideas in Williamson's work (Fitzpatrick "Styles of Love: New Directions in David Williamson" 416). In examining and explaining the presence of satire and farce in his plays, this thesis interrogated the nature of both satire and farce to establish the accuracy of the term 'sugared placebos' when applied to Williamson's work, and suggests that instead what is produced is a valuable curative.

The thesis involved examining the concept of superficiality as a basis of criticism in a postmodern world and sought to connect this perceived superficiality with the presence of satire and farce in Williamson's work. The naturalist text of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* was evaluated to establish the validity of stereotypes and genre-blending in a foundational naturalistic text. Using *Ghosts* as a paradigm against which to compare Williamson's work, it was established that through a confluence of satire, farce, and irony Williamson creates his unique interpretation of "naturalism" by reflecting the patterns of behaviour of certain individuals in social situations. The study found that like Ibsen before him, Williamson also contends that individuals are strongly conditioned by their society and

the enduring and universal emotions they carry from their deep past are endemic of all cultures at all times.

A further outcome from the study revealed that far from being “superficial” Williamson’s use of satire and farce renders his naturalism ironic, while at the same time providing a deep and profound social commentary. In addition, it was found that Williamson’s characters, although robustly Australian and located in the history of their times have, become iconic representations of universal verities that present audiences with deeper truths about their humanity.

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## Introduction

*It was he [Williamson], more than any other individual, who did most to attract a widening and increasingly loyal popular audience back to theatre to watch and applaud Australian plays. Without that kind of popular success, a mere art theatre, no matter how deep and probing its artistic and indigenous roots, could only have limited cultural and social importance.*

(H. G. Kippax, "Williamson Dutiful But Disappointing" 11)

*I have always thought that underneath the surface entertainment I was conducting an examination of the nature of human nature itself.*

(David Williamson, personal interview, 20 September 2007)

In May 2005, David Williamson's thirty-fifth play, *Influence*, premiered at the Sydney Theatre Company, selling 31,000 tickets and grossing more than \$1.7 million. As well as setting box-office records, the play carried a special sense of occasion. *Influence* is significant in that, in the months preceding the premiere, Williamson had announced that it would be his last major drama, thereby bringing to a close a career that, starting in 1970 with *The Coming of Stork*, defined an era in Australian theatre.

During this thirty-five year period, Williamson established an unchallenged reputation as Australia's most commercially successful playwright, a fact acknowledged with a plaque in the Writers' Walk to the Sydney Opera House citing him as "Australia's best known 20th century dramatist".

*A Serendipitous Encounter*

It is important to acknowledge that this thesis was provided with added significance as a result of a chance encounter between the researcher and David Williamson himself at that very Writers' Walk at Circular Quay in Sydney, in July of 2007. The researcher introduced herself to Williamson, and explained that she was completing a doctoral thesis on his plays. His interest in this work facilitates the interview that comprises Chapter Seven. As this serendipitous encounter occurred almost six years after the commencement of the production of this thesis, it is gratifying to find that the perceptions and ideology that instigated the project are now found to be consistent with the views that Williamson holds concerning his work.

Despite widespread public recognition and acclaim, Williamson has, however, occupied a frequently contentious position in Australian theatrical circles and public life, where his detractors accuse him of abandoning alternative art theatre in favour of commercially viable, formulaic plays. A constant criticism is that he panders to the pleasures of middle class Australians with his humorous treatment of topical subjects of interest to them. A more serious criticism is one of 'superficiality', where elements of the Australian literary and theatrical establishments find his plays lack substance because of the supposed surface treatment of serious issues and stereotypical character-constructs. This thesis addresses both of these criticisms.

Williamson is concerned with the interactions of characters in both their private worlds and in the larger social and political environment. He writes from a naturalistic base with

a strong overlay of irony, satire, and farce and it is this constant reliance on comedy that fuels criticism of superficiality and glibness. As early as 1973 critics were finding Williamson's plays limited, as when Howard Jacobson singled out Williamson's shallow treatment of serious issues and stymied characterisations as contributory factors to plays he judged to be "quite bland affairs" (31).

It will be argued here that Williamson's naturalism, that is, his representation of local truths, has become iconic, making it universally true and therefore psychologically deep, even when it is presented as superficial. His *oeuvre* is a complex exercise of genre-blending creating accurate, relevant social commentary. Evidence will reveal that the inclusion of farcical or superfluous incidents and stereotypical characters may appear to dissipate the serious subject matter and complex characterisations of naturalist drama, however these comedic devices are just that: contrivances used as a conduit to satirise deeper social issues.

The perceived superficial treatments of issues and characterisations lamented by some critics are identified and labelled as "sugared placebos" by Peter Fitzpatrick ("Styles of Love" 413), and this thesis argues that these techniques are used by Williamson to court his middle class audience by presenting plays that are relevant to them. His topics are pertinent, contentious, and relevant; his protagonists can be coarse, casual, self-centred, quick-witted, morally irresponsible, and tacky. In the main however, they share one common trait: they are immensely likeable. Audiences, shocked by this coterie's outrageous behaviour, are somewhat mollified by its congeniality. This shaping of

material for audience appeasement provides the platform for the constant criticism of superficiality. This criticism is heightened by the tendency of some critics to read Williamson purely as a naturalist.

However, this same platform of outrageous humour and farcical interludes is lauded by Williamson's audiences, who come to the theatre to see themselves and people like themselves, and to have a good laugh, and who thereby guarantee his box-office success. As Fay Zwicky notes, "People love to go to see what they look like" (Wilbank 219). With the exception of *The Removalists*, Williamson's plays have dealt with educated, middle class Australians and their problems. Williamson eschews the problems of the working class: unemployment, housing, disability, displacement, and the sheer struggle for survival, and concerns himself with the problems of the privileged, who, assured of their jobs, homes, and general well-being, can then turn their attention to their sexual prowess and extra-marital affairs, their unfinished theses or novels, the question of whether to live in Melbourne or Sydney, and how to handle the boss or major client. While these issues can indeed be worrying to the individuals involved, they are not matters of survival, and it is this socio-economic demographic that comprises Williamson's *milieu*. However, representation of the superficial aspects of the middle class does not, in itself, constitute a superficial play. Rather, it provides the subject-matter that becomes the well-spring of the chosen treatment of the text.

The constant employment of overlays of humour in Williamson's work then begs consideration as to whether, with this comedic approach, he is deliberately dissipating

naturalism by shaping his work for humour and audience appeal. Certainly, the inclusion of intersections of satire and farce in any work are counter-productive to the fully-realised, rounded characterisations, and the resultant emotions, that we associate with naturalism. However, the overriding question is: are Williamson's plays any less potent because of this? This thesis will explore the notion of his superficiality *per se*, as a legitimate basis for criticism.

The definition of superficiality, as being concerned with only what is on the surface, or is obviously shallow and therefore not profound, is one that offers a range of meanings in the postmodern era. Any reading of the word 'superficiality' underpins a fluid, constantly changing social construction, from shallow to lacking in profundity, and these meanings are grounded in particular cultural contexts.

The strategy of this work too has been one of genre-blending. There is examination of the notion of naturalism as a specific genre first enunciated over a century ago by Zola. However the work also employs notions from postmodernism, particularly those of Barthes with his postulation of the "Death of the Author" (*Death of the Author*). Leaving that loaded term aside for a moment to examine its accompanying foregrounding of the actions of the audience, it can indeed be said that:

a text consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into contestation; but there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is not the author, as has hitherto been claimed, but the reader. ("The Rustle of Language" 54)

(Barthes uses the term reader in deference to his examination of works of literature such as the novel, but since the 'reader' of a work of theatre is indeed the audience, the terms are as interchangeable as 'author' and 'playwright'.) Barthes goes further by claiming that "the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination" (54). And this is certainly true, to an extent.

However given that Williamson himself expresses intent in the delivery of his plays and that this intent is often mirrored in the reception and reaction of his audiences, who occupy historical and social locations in specific times and places, it seems simplistic to reason as Barthes does that the audience is "a man [sic] without history, without biography, without psychology" (54). Since Williamson proclaims himself as "essentially a psychologist ... that's what I trained in and that's what I would still be doing if writing didn't take off" (Interview with Researcher) and successfully achieves the psychological effects he desires with his plays, it will be valuable in approaching this thesis, while acceding to the importance of audience reception in dealing with the plays, to also acknowledge the intentions of an erudite and perceptive playwright. It is no coincidence that the very term playwright encompasses notions of an active crafting of the material at hand.

Similarly postmodernism is, especially as Keith F. Punch would have it, "dependent on socio-cultural contexts, unacknowledged values, tacit discourses and interpretive traditions" and this is a valuable consideration in what follows. Robin Usher, Ian Bryant and Rennie Johnston say of postmodernism, that it

reflects a decline of absolutes... What we are left with is not an alternative and more secure foundation but an awareness of the complexity and fragility of the practices through which knowledge is constructed about ourselves and the world would have it. (210-211)

Yet cognisance must be taken of the fact that that decline of absolutes has not, and cannot be absolute itself. Such a postulation would reflect an inherent contradiction in postmodernist thought itself. So when Williamson says, as he did to this researcher, that he presents “universal truths” he is in fact doing just that. These truths may not be the foundational moral and philosophical truths dealt with and dismissed by postmodernism, but “universal” they are nevertheless.

Williamson’s universality deals with the psychological and therefore biological foundations of human emotions – what is termed the “limbic system” (Interview Chapter Seven) – that “group of subcortical structures (as the hypothalamus, the hippocampus, and the amygdala) of the brain that are concerned especially with emotion and motivation” (Musella) and are common to all members of the human species.

In what follows, reference will often be made to the “universal truths” inherent in Williamson’s works, especially in relation to their diachronic nature. When such references are made it should be understood, unless otherwise noted, that it is these inherent biological, organic, and emotional truths that are being called to bear on the argument of this work.

Postmodernism recognises the significance of language, discourse, and power in any knowledge claim (Usher et al. 207). The innocent view of language, as a medium for the transparent representation of external reality, is replaced by a view of language as centrally implicated in the construction of knowledge in its inevitable social context. In addition, the inability of language to pin down fixed meanings and representations of reality is well-suited to the emphasis, in postmodern discourse, on the constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation by which social reality is created and maintained (Punch 146).

This overriding conceptual framework is particularly relevant to a consideration of the term ‘superficial’ in a discussion of Williamson’s work, which offers social comment and critiques the sheer relativism of social values in the postmodern era. In many ways the postmodern response to language offers a different approach to that adopted by literary and theatrical critics, who use the word ‘superficiality’ in its basic generic meaning, without applying it in a shifting socio-cultural context. This then becomes a critical point in assessing the notion of superficiality in Williamson’s work. Some critics who read Williamson as a naturalist find him superficial because they fail to detect the irony and satire below the surface.

For the purpose of this thesis, ‘superficiality’ will be used to denote any approach or treatment that looks at issues and characterisations on the surface only, with little, or no attention to in-depth explorations, development or depictions in a contextual sense. The word “superficial”, according to *The Macquarie Dictionary* is an adjective meaning, “of

or relating to the surface” (911) and for the purpose of this study will be considered synonymous with ‘shallowness’, ‘cursoriness’ and ‘insufficiency’. Likewise the term ‘characterisation’ will be considered interchangeable with ‘character-construct’ in keeping with the theory underpinning this work.

Usher notes that “[p]ostmodernism reflects a decline of absolutes... What we are left with is not an alternative and more secure foundation but an awareness of the complexity and fragility of the practices through which knowledge is constructed about ourselves and the world” (210-11). It is with a sense of a decline of moral absolutes that Williamson’s plays should be read, and it is in this context that his perceived superficiality offers a way of reading and responding to the shifting social values he both identifies and writes about.

It will be argued that in its generic sense ‘superficiality’ is a pejorative term and that both literary and commercial critics who review plays, and individuals who receive those reviews, will interpret the word to mean ‘shallow’ and ‘under-developed’. The thesis will also examine the word ‘superficiality’ in the context of Williamson’s plays within a postmodern framework. Donald E. Hall argues that the “meaning of a text is not wholly intrinsic to the text” (46) and with this comes the concept of ‘reader-response’ and its place in interpreting a text. The postmodern audience receives, interprets, decodes, and uses a text in the context of its own background, emotions, values, and attitudes. Meaning is individuated within the complex context of the receiver and his world. So when critics label Williamson’s work ‘superficial’, are they allowing for the multi-faceted reception of the material by a large number of individuals, and the social forces they may reflect? This

contextualising of the text will be examined in relation to the legitimacy of criticisms levelled at Williamson over the perceived shallow treatment of issues and themes in a fast, ever-changing world of consumerism, technology, and multi-national economies.

Audiences in the third millennium, conditioned by the above influences, may themselves regard the glittering 'surface' of a work as being as valuable as the old, fixed, formal truth of 'depth'. Mary Klages elucidates postmodernism and the abandonment of the previously held notion of something (the signifier) signifying something else (the signified) in the following way:

Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's play with nonsense. The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears...there are only surfaces, without depth; only signifiers, with no signifieds... ("Postmodernism")

Some theorists claim, and this thesis is in agreement, that audiences make their own realities and that a text acquires meaning, not only at its point of creation, but at the various moments of reception (Barthes *S/Z* 4). The concept of Williamson's audiences constructing their own realities from the plays under discussion then becomes a crucial aspect of this work. Williamson's audience has evolved with the shifts of time over the past thirty-five years. The contemporary audience of 2007 is educated, enlightened, and tolerant of psychological probings and revelations. They eschew the naïveté of the 'head-in-the-sand' attitude of previous generations, conditioned as they were to the emotional disengagement of the dominant models of masculinity (Crawshaw).

The central manoeuvre of this thesis is to determine the extent to which satire and farce have contributed to the perceived superficiality in David Williamson's plays, and to establish that the plays have been deliberately shaped for audience appeal in order to gain recognition that the surface appearance is not all that there is.

The argument developed here queries whether satire is inimical to naturalism. It has been contested elsewhere that satire is weakened when it delves beneath the surface and excavates in-depth explorations of conditions of humanity (Walker 18). Satire has at its core the intention to expose to an audience the prevailing hypocrisies and duplicities of its society, and this is exemplified by the works of Molière (1622-1673), R.B. Sheridan (1751-1816), and Tom Stoppard (1937- ). Williamson has satirised many of modern society's sacred institutions and rituals. His panoply of satirical topics includes: sexual one-upmanship (*The Coming of Stork* (1970); *Don's Party* (1971)); police and domestic violence (*The Removalists* (1971)); football manipulations and collusions (*The Club* (1978)); marriage breakdown and gender rivalry (*What If You Die Tomorrow* (1973)); *The Perfectionist* (1982)); academic apathy (*The Department* (1975)); the greed, corruption and controlling forces of the corporate world, whether it be newspapers (*Sons of Cain* (1985)), film (*Emerald City* (1987)), art (*Up For Grabs* (2001)), or publishing, (*Soulmates* (2002)); the hypocrisy of the judiciary (*Top Silk* (1989)); and sexual abuse in the home and workplace (*Brilliant Lies* (1993)).

The efficacy of Williamson's skill in using satire and irony in order to reveal and ridicule those aspects of society that he deems offensive is periodically questioned by some

critics. However, of primary concern here is whether this comedic treatment is as beneficial with texts that are predominantly naturalistic. Naturalistic texts demand fully-rounded, three-dimensional characterisations that act as conduits to communicate issues, ideas and emotions to an audience. A satirical approach, of necessity, demands a thinning out of characterisations (Monahan 73) in order to render them more useful for the sharp impact of the ironical thrust. Through an exploration of selected texts the researcher intends to reveal that Williamson's naturalism uses 'flat', two-dimensional character-constructs, as well as more nearly rounded characterisations, to cloak his social commentary in humour, that is, in farce, satire, and irony.

Limited humanities and lack of character development are also characteristics of farce, where the exaggerated absurdities and chaotic situations are uncondusive to elaborate character development. Bergson, writing at the turn of last century, maintains that "laughter has no greater enemy than emotion" (qtd. in Davis 61). Satire, irony, and farce do have vestiges of humanity, usually in a predicament, but this humanity is seldom explored further. To do so would be to give prominence to the naturalistic form of emotional journeys, and so interfere with the fast, acidic dialogue of the irony and satire, and with those chaotic confusions and absurdities essential to farce. For Williamson, this means that he chooses to locate his plays within a naturalistic framework and employs intersections of irony, satire, and farce to deliver his social commentary.

Irony "carries an implicit compliment to the intelligence of the reader, who is associated with the author and the knowing minority who are not taken in by the ostensible

meaning” (Abrams 81), and consequently requires some collusion on the part of an audience to read that ‘sub-text’ which lies below the surface. It is at this sophisticated level that Williamson can be seen not only as social observer, but as social commentator. This assertion is endorsed by Williamson in an interview with the researcher: “I have been reflecting for over thirty-five years now, fairly accurately, the surface interaction patterns of Australian society that I have perceived” (Interview Chapter Seven). It would appear that irony is an elusive term that defies easy description, and that it is nearly impossible to identify the various subtleties that make up the concept. Irony, according to this thesis, is perhaps best explained as the discrepancy between appearance and reality and Williamson employs both such verbal and situational ironies in his *oeuvre*. Cuddon elaborates:

Irony has many functions. It is often the witting or unwitting instrument of truth. It chides, purifies, refines, deflates, scorns, and ‘sends up’. It is not surprising, therefore, that irony is the most precious and efficient weapon of the satirist. (461)

#### *Scrutiny of Four Areas of Contention*

It is the intention of this thesis to scrutinise four areas of contention. First, by defining and critically evaluating the claims of superficiality made against Williamson and the notion of ‘superficiality’ itself as a basis for criticism in a postmodern era; second, by exploring the comedic devices that scaffold Williamson’s work, and the assumption that it is not always possible to create emotional depth in emblematic characters; third, by establishing the extent to which temporal shifts and audience enlightenment give recognition to layers of meaning in the selected plays; and fourth, by exploring the extent

of Williamson's success in encouraging audiences to receive the plays on several levels. By so doing we may enjoy the overt comedic aspects, and through satire and farce, recognise that Williamson is a naturalist with a deeply ironic edge.

This study will explore selected texts by David Williamson to elucidate the central thesis. However, the main discussion will focus on the texts of *The Removalists* (1971), *Don's Party* (1971), *Travelling North* (1979), *After the Ball* (1997), *Face to Face* (1999), and *Birthrights* (2003). These plays have been selected because they, among Williamson's plays, most nearly conform to the tenets of naturalism, or have the potential to do so. During the aforementioned interview, which is submitted in full in Chapter Seven, Williamson endorses the choice of these plays for this exploration and this researcher's comment.

Chapter One will introduce Williamson and his *oeuvre* and place him substantially within the context of the Australian new wave theatre movement in the late 1960s, with particular reference to La Mama theatre. Chapter Two, considers the critical reception given to Williamson's work by both literary and commercial reviewers over the last thirty five years, with emphasis on the matter of superficiality, while Chapter Three will use Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), to set up a conceptual framework with a genre analysis of naturalism, satire and farce. Chapters Four and Five will examine how nearly Williamson's most naturalistic plays correlate with, or deviate from, the major tenets of naturalism. Chapter Six will evaluate Williamson in a diachronic sense and assess his durability as a writer at the forefront of the Australian literary scene, while Chapter Seven

will contain a complete transcript of the researcher's interview with the playwright on 1 November, 2007.

The overriding aspect of Williamson's popularity and commercial success will be addressed, along with how his audiences receive his plays in a postmodernist social world that is constantly changing, deconstructing, and reconstructing, on a local basis, rather than through the certainty of more universal knowledge. Given Williamson's longevity as a commercially successful playwright – highly marketable, and enjoyed by loyal audiences who have made the journey with him – questions are raised regarding his perceived superficiality. The researcher will address the question as to whether criticisms of 'superficiality' are valid and furthermore, does the charge of 'superficiality' really matter when such a wide audience receives his plays, some of whose members may not otherwise attend the theatre.

Clearly this thesis is a timely contribution to critical reflection on Williamson's *oeuvre*. To date only three major publications exist on his work. The last of these, *David Williamson: A Writer's Career* by Brian Kiernan was published in 1996. This paucity of scholarly evaluation of Williamson's plays proved a constant frustration for this researcher during the course of this study. It is hoped this situation will be significantly redressed by the completion of this thesis.

Finally this thesis presents an analysis of Williamson's work that is crucial to an understanding of his impact on Australian theatre. In doing so, it will be shown that not

only does Williamson present certain sections of Australian society with an essential mirror-image of themselves (see Chapter One) but with his expert confluence of irony, satire, and farce, he has lured them into a broader understanding of the world around them. In short, he has reflected the local Australian context to parlay universal verities. In demonstrating that these qualities are inherent in Williamson's work this thesis makes a significant contribution not only the field of literary criticism but also to our often contentious and constantly evolving perceptions of national identity.

## Chapter One

### David Williamson in Context

*A Storyteller to the Tribe.*

(Peter Fitzpatrick, *Williamson*, 10)

*I think my fascination with drama has been the interaction processes.*

(David Williamson, personal interview, 20 September 2007)

Australian drama was ready for David Williamson. The 60s was a time of economic prosperity. It was also a time of social revolution, with mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War and conscription, and the Second Wave of feminism – ushered in by the advent of the contraceptive pill – offering women liberation, and empowering their movement towards equality in the workplace as well as in the home. Australian drama was reaching to embrace these troubled times. However Australia's drama, by and large, was a British affair, emanating from a land half a world away.

Great Britain, too, was experiencing a theatrical revolution in the wake of similar economic, social, and cultural change. From the mid-1950s certain British playwrights, tired of conservative restraints, gave 'voice' to the antagonistic feelings of the times. Stephen Lacey (1995) saw it as a time of "dissent, instability, fracture and powerlessness" (16), and John Osborne personified this unrest in the classic *Look Back in Anger* (1956). It was a play which caught the imagination of theatre-goers around the world and

established Osborne as a member of the ‘angry’ new wave of British theatre. The play, though working-class in context, cut across social, political, and cultural boundaries and gave prominence to its hostile, disillusioned anti-hero protagonist. The character of Jimmy Porter immediately came to represent the young post-war generation that “looks around the world and finds nothing right with it” (Lacey 18).

Williamson’s characters were mainly middle class and did not, on the whole, cut across social and political boundaries. However, they certainly were disillusioned, and their hostility manifested itself in more self-deprecating ways than their British counterparts. The Australian protagonists of late 1960s and early 1970s drama were more inclined to show their frustrations by a surfeit of alcohol consumption and sex as in, for example, Jack Hibberd’s *White With Wire Wheels* (1967). Unlike Jimmy Porter, whose frustrations arose from disquiet with the country and with the struggle of the working-classes, the Australian anti-heroes were more concerned with their status among themselves, a phenomenon addressed later in this Chapter. There were however, similarities between the work of John Osborne and Williamson, who both sought to convey the language of everyday speech, and who both sought to shock with the overwhelming profanities and general crudeness of their anti-heroes.

Donald Horne has determined that the 1960s was a time when Australians were engaged in searching for a “new national identity” (117). He charges that Australians had ‘learned’ a culture from Britain and, that in the early 1960s, they rejected this and started to question their own attitudes, beliefs and values. This Anglophilic conditioning which

prevailed prior to the middle of the twentieth century, saw Australia as Britain's offspring with no real identity of its own (117). The 60s saw the emergence of a new, more aggressive nationalism, and playwrights such as Jack Hibberd, Alexander Buzo, and Williamson, created plays, of the people and for the people, (re)incarnating and celebrating their version of the 'ocker'. This 'outing' of the ocker was a deliberate attack on what Hibberd declared to be, "the old-fashioned repertory-elocutionary-mannerist mode of theatre" (qtd in Palmer, 129).

The renaissance of Australian theatre had really begun in the 1950s when Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) opened at the University of Melbourne's Union Theatre on 28 November, 1955. Prior to the staging of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Australian theatregoers were largely treated to commercially-viable, imported, English and American fare. These imported productions, often with their stars imported too, were considered safe at the box-office. They were mainly "polished productions of trivial but audience-pleasing plays" (Sykes, qtd. in Love 202). They generally fell into two categories: musicals and the classics, mainly Shakespeare. The musicals included, from England, *Salad Days* (1957) and *Oliver* (1961), and from America, *Oklahoma* and *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* and *Call Me Madam* (1954), and *Paint Your Wagon* (1955). Classical plays presented included, *Richard III*, *The School for Scandal* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1948); *Macbeth* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1949); *Othello*, *As You Like It* and *Henry IV Part 1* (1953); *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure For Measure* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1955).

Even the inaugural productions of the long-awaited and newly established Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust were English plays – *The Sleeping Prince* and *Separate Tables* (Elizabeth Theatre, Sydney, 27 July, 1955), with an English director and imported English stars. Only the supporting actors were home-grown Australians. However, the underlying premise was encouraging, with Dr. H. C. Coombs, Governor of the Commonwealth Bank, declaring:

How good it would be if in Australia too we could have a vigorous, mature Australian theatre... and even more splendid if, at the same time, we could create an environment in which the truly creative artists among us, the playwrights, the composers, the choreographers, many of them now mute and inglorious from lack of opportunity, should come to flower. (Qtd. in Rees *A History of Australian Drama Vol II* 251).

Australian plays were performed, but usually relegated to alternative, ‘little theatres’ with limited resources and limited audiences. Fitzpatrick opines that the reason local plays were generally not promoted prior to the 1950s was that “none of them is of the highest quality; and the immediate qualification that the kind of encouragement available to [*Summer of the Seventeenth*] *Doll*... was not offered to those plays of unfulfilled or deflected promise” (*After ‘The Doll’* 4). There was not much confidence in the local playwright and this resulted in few opportunities, resources, and audiences (4). As H.G. Kippax states in his “Introduction to *Three Australian Plays*”, “before 1955 the story of Australian-playwriting was one of aspiration rather than achievement” (7). The reasons for this predicament centred on the perceived need for financially viable theatre, the

industry's lack of cultural sensitivity, and audiences' lack of enthusiasm for local fare.

All this was to change.

In 1955, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* shared first prize in the Playwrights Advisory Board Competition with Oriel Gray's historical play *The Torrents*. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is written in naturalistic style and follows the prototype of Eugene Scribe's "well-made play" – which will be dealt with later. The play is a realistic depiction of working class Australians, in a realistic working class setting, with working class jobs, talking in a working class vernacular. As Rees states, the play has an "immediacy of acceptance and a sharply recognisable meaning for most Australians" (*A History of Australian Drama Vol I* 266). It was an immediate success, with audiences enthusiastically endorsing the realistic depiction of the concerns, deliberations, and resolutions of a particular quirky side of Australian life (*Vol II* 388).

Other important plays of the period include *The Shifting Heart* (Richard Beynon (1957)), *The One Day of the Year* (Alan Seymour (1959)), Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* (written in the late 1940s but not produced in Australia until 1961), and *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962). White's plays were markedly different from the more naturalistic plays of the time, in their German Expressionist-influenced treatment of Australian suburbia.

The establishment of The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1955 was followed closely by the opening of a national centre for theatre studies, The National Institute of

Dramatic Art on the campus of the University of New South Wales in 1959. Both events considerably influenced the emerging indigenous theatre's coming of age. The Australian Council for the Arts was set up in 1968, under the auspices of Prime Minister Gorton and the Liberal Party of Australia, with Dr. H.C. Coombs as Chairman. The Council advised the Government on matters concerning the arts, including limited funding. In March, 1975 under an initiative of The Australian Labor Party, the Council was reconstructed as, the Australia Council. Prime Minister Whitlam, in his introduction to the *Australia Council Bill*, stated:

I believe that the formation of an independent Australia Council will inaugurate a new era of vitality and progress in the Arts, that creative artists of all kinds will enjoy a new measure of security and status in the community and that Australian people as a whole will have new and wider opportunities to participate in the Arts and enjoy the emotional, spiritual and intellectual rewards which the Arts alone can provide. (*The Whitlam Government* 561)

The Australia Council was a statutory body, designed for the advancement and support of the Arts in Australia, and its twenty-four foundation members oversaw seven separate boards – each board being able to independently formulate its own policies and funding. David Williamson headed the board representing artists and performers.

The foresight and generosity of the Whitlam government provided funding to a widening range of theatres helping to underpin the theatre industry in its move towards the development of local plays. This shift in funding for national theatre was pivotal in

introducing and sustaining local playwrights at the forefront of Australian theatre. The times were, as Katharine Brisbane says, at “the cusp of reform” (1999 v).

It was not only theatre which benefited from the Whitlam Government’s extended Arts programme. Following the much-improved grants afforded by State and Federal arts initiatives, the writing and publishing of Australian literature also flourished. The early 1970s saw the establishment of the Australian Literature Board (formerly the Commonwealth Literary Fund), with extended powers and extensive funding, resulting in hundreds of writers receiving grants to facilitate their careers. The easing of censorship restrictions and then Patrick White’s Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, heightened the profile of Australian writers within Australia. Along with this came a renewed recognition of the value of those Australian writers previously forced to publish in England and America. Christina Stead, Martin Boyd, and Patrick White, all widely read overseas, now received acclaim at home and created a new Australian awareness. Australian writers were becoming aware of their own cultural roots and gaining confidence in expressing what they perceived as an Australian ‘way of life’. As a consequence, the climate for indigenous writings greatly improved and many of the newer playwrights eschewed naturalism and experimented with forms better suited to the emerging generation of middle class, educated Australians. Classrooms across Australia promoted indigenous literature with the inclusion of *The One Day of the Year* (Seymour 1959), *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (Stow, 1965), *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Keneally 1972), ) and other Australian works in schools’ curriculum.

Kerryn Goldsworthy in her essay “Fiction from 1900 to 1970”, lauds this period as “a turning point in Australian writing” (131). Bruce Grant in *The Australian Dilemma* concurs, commenting: “The renaissance of the 1970s was a rebirth of the nationalist spirit, fostered by prosperity and procured by public funding” (264). This cultural prosperity flowed into film production resulting in icons of Australian cinematic culture: *The Naked Bunyip* (1971), *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975), *Caddie* (1976), *The Last Wave* (1977), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), *Newsfront*, (1978), *Mad Max* (1978) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979).

When Williamson wrote *The Coming of Stork* in 1970 he was part of the alternative group of ensemble writers who comprised the “new wave” at La Mama (Worby 80). La Mama, a café-theatre established by Betty Burstall in an old shirt factory in Carlton, Victoria, in 1967, was a small, intimate space with an informal tone that made for close, personal theatre; theatre well-suited to the experimental workshops and productions created by a collaborative effort of writers, directors, and actors. Of vital importance to the new wave movement was its predilection for hosting new works by unknown Australian playwrights. Its audiences were mainly young, educated, middle class Australians immersed in university sub-culture (Kiernan, “Games People Play” 396).

The new wave playwrights engaged in a type of theatre that Peter Fitzpatrick has called “rough” theatre; it most nearly reflected the type of drama that Peter Brook, had deemed “rough theatre” (qtd. in Fitzpatrick, *After ‘The Doll’* 84). This rough theatre operated

under the premise that the works would be close to the people, which is affirmed in Williamson's work and goes some way to explaining his unprecedented success with the shared recognition between a playwright and his audience.

This rough alternative theatre originated in Melbourne at La Mama, and included a host of worthy alternative playwrights: John Romeril (*Chicago, Chicago* (1969)), *I Don't Know Who To Feel Sorry For* (1969)), Jack Hibberd (*White With Wire Wheels* (1967); *Three Old Friends* (1967); *A Stretch of the Imagination* (1971); and *Dimboola* (1974)), Hibberd and Romeril in collaboration (*Marvellous Melbourne*, (1970)), Alexander Buzo (*Norm and Ahmed* (1969) and *The Front Room Boys* (1970)), and Barry Oakley (*The Feet of Daniel Mannix* (1971)) among them. These new playwrights were a diverse group with few things uniting them but their antagonism towards a theatre they considered to be "safe, conservative, secondhand and dull" (Radic, *State of Play* 1979). They set about the creation of plays that were more relevant to contemporary society and with an enhanced verisimilitude. Williamson explained the germination of the new wave renaissance: "What brought us [the new wave writers] together apart from Betty Burstall at La Mama, was a desire to write about this Australia we grew up in. No one had got it right before, and it's a weird place" (qtd. in Arnold, "Aggressive Vernacular" 35). However, they did not go about this business of creating a 'new' theatre in quite the same way. While Hibberd, Buzo, *et al.* focussed on 'collaborative' theatre and employed a number of stylised, expressionistic devices in their plays, Williamson eschewed the group commitment, creating plays that were structured more conservatively, and were more naturalistically based.

The new wave playwrights created drama that was vigorous, immediate, audience-accessible and highly theatrical. The plays, though differing in form, shared many common conventions. They were highly charged pieces with the accent on physicality and highly coloured language. They used ‘direct address’ to the audience to reveal a character’s thoughts, or to extend the narrative, and they effectively fused music and song while stylising characterisations and movement. This theatre was essentially non-naturalistic. The Group utilised the confined theatre space at La Mama – or the unconventional spaces of the various streetscapes, or churches, or work places where they played – by integrating the show with an audience often encouraged to participate in the action. This interaction between the audience and the actors prompts what Carroll has identified as a “deemphasis of Stanislavskian roundness of character” (247) and results in characterisations, already thinly-drawn, being played with some virtuosity and unpredictability. The actor is required to change characteristics and time and place in what Carroll terms “transformations” (247). It is a presentational technique with, consequently, few claims to realism (Fitzpatrick, *After ‘The Doll’* 129).

Many of the new wave writers, while acknowledging the presentational influence of music halls, the Tivoli, and Sydney’s intimate and *risqué* revues, also embraced an adventurous, overtly expressive style of theatre that can best be described as eclectic.. They flourished with their new-found platform, but in 1970 a break-away group led by Hibberd, Romeril, Buzo, Graeme Blundell, and David Williamson left La Mama and moved into new premises. Calling itself The Australian Performing Group – or more succinctly, The Group – this new company was dedicated, even more fervently, to the

ensemble approach with the democratic work ethic of collaborative theatre established at La Mama (129).

Hibberd's *White With Wire Wheels* staged at La Mama in 1969, had its first production at the University of Melbourne in 1967. The play tells of the exploits of three young men, Mal, Simon, and Rod – all sociable, likeable, emotionally immature, and chauvinistic. They are the first of the urban ockers. They are addicted to their vehicles, and their passions in life are these cars, then beer, with women – ‘birds’ – coming a poor third. As Brian Kiernan observes, “they atavistically share the bushmen’s recreational attitudes towards beer and women” (*David Williamson* 65). The form of the play is darkly satirical, moving from stark realism to moments of expressionist mime (66). The use of verse to open and close several scenes, the “blokes” simulating cars on the race circuit at the end of Scene Five, and the robotic tableau when they ‘become’ the car at the end of Scene Eight, lean towards expressionism. Hibberd uses an innovative device to accentuate the stereotypical representation of women in the male mating ritual by stipulating in his Character List that the roles of the various girlfriends, Sue, Cath, Ann, and Helen be played by the same girl, in the same outfit, throughout the play. Hibberd adds wryly that “the male characters are naturally not aware of this and treat the women as different individuals” (152).

John Romeril, a foundation member of the La Mama group and the most politically motivated of the group (Carroll 267), came to recognition with his first full-length play, *I Don't Know Who To Feel Sorry For*. This play concerns the intimate relationship

between Lenny and Celia and utilises the close spatial area at La Mama by including the audience in the role of guests at Celia's party. The focus of the play is the combative nature of the couple's disintegrating relationship and the nature of the ocker male and his exploitation of women. Fitzpatrick likened the treatment of the relationship to "domestic cannibalism" (*After 'The Doll'* 93). In the best new wave tradition the play is highly satirical, with "direct address" to the audience, absurd dialogue, and manic behaviour. The confusion of the apartment, the comic ritualistic antics of the characters, and the closeness of the audience conspire to produce a claustrophobic ambience of theatrical surrealism.

Romeril went on to write *Chicago, Chicago* (1970) and *This Floating World* (1974), both plays dealing with social conformity and cultural conditioning, and both employing highly theatrical imagery to heighten the satirical thrust. Carroll, commenting on the surrealist quality of *Chicago, Chicago*, asserts that the characters are "television situation comedy clichés, their voices are pre-recorded and their identity rendered as cut-out puppets" (255). The play is a complex structure of disjointed scenes and dialogue and uses music and song in presentational mode.

Among this group David Williamson proved to be the most traditional, and most naturalistic. This thesis will argue that his plays emanate from a naturalistic base with strong intersections of irony, satire, and farce. Williamson at this early stage foreshadows his role in Australian theatre as both social observer and social commentator.

*Brecht's "Gestus" and Williamson's Naturalism*

From his earliest plays, Williamson has been concerned with the way people behave socially, their interrelatedness, and the way in which they use language and gesture. He envisages himself as both observer and commentator, and is intent on telling what he sees as he sees it. Williamson's effective implementation of his social observations into highly charged, entertaining theatre accounts, in part, for his success. Williamson's characters were representative of the people he knew and observed and Australian audiences went to Williamson's plays to observe themselves (or their friends and acquaintances, or 'types' they knew from the media) on the stage; they were not disappointed.

Fitzpatrick saw this writing as "of the people, for the people" and defends Williamson against some critics claims that the plays were, "exercises in the reflecting of surfaces" (*Williamson* 12). Underpinning the argument of this thesis and in concurrence with Fitzpatrick, is a recognition that this quality of recognising, isolating, and replicating social surfaces provides the platform for Williamson's unique style of naturalism; a style of naturalism where genre-blending not only enriches the form but provides veracity to the social context. This approach was verified by the playwright himself during the interview with the researcher, when he asserted, "you have to get the surface right to spark the recognition of truth of that surface behaviour from your audience" (Interview Chapter Seven). Williamson is interested in reproducing the behaviour of certain cohorts of middle class Australians with the focus on the social interplay that tends to subvert the norms of accepted social behaviour. He places scenes of 'social interaction' at the forefront of his early plays' structural design. Such scenes portray what Williamson labels "the social dance" (email to researcher, Appendix 2), which is the public behaviour

displayed between people that clearly results from their encoding of what they perceive as their 'appropriate' social roles. These interactions emphasise the exhibition of one person's social attitude to another – what Brecht calls "Gestic" attitudes (Carroll 222). Andrew Moore explains Brecht's theory of "gestus" as "everything an actor does (in terms of gesture, stance, what we now call 'body-language', intonation) in order to show the significance of a scene" (10). Brecht developed his gestic attitudes into his renowned "Alienation" theory encouraging audiences to alienate themselves from the emotions of the text, the better to objectively receive the serious message of the text. Williamson does something different.

Employing the comedic devices of satire, farce, and irony, Williamson instead seduces his audience to participate in the various levels of implication that lie beyond the surface of the text. This genre-blending in Williamson's plays, where incidences of farce and satire intersect with a mostly naturalistic text, is reminiscent of the genre-blending in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) and is a similarity that will be discussed in depth in Chapter Three. Williamson's reliance on the comedic devices of *satire* and *farce* to superimpose an ironic treatment onto a text results in some critics missing the *irony* by failing to look beneath the surface. Williamson's *modus operandi* is something of an irony in itself when he 'superficially' treats superficial social mores as a protest to those who hold them to be naturalist truths.

In the early 1970s, with the presentation of the *Coming of Stork*, *Jugglers Three* and *Don's Party*, Williamson gave voice to a selection of well-observed middle class

Australian characters and presented them – as their real life counterparts presented themselves – with their changing registers of speech, their out-spokenness and, often, their outrageous behaviour. His characters seem more concerned with their image and their status within their cohort, than anything else. It becomes evident that Williamson recognised and represented on stage this social mask that he felt was the result of an individual's social conditioning and patterning. It is a concept that can justify applying to Williamson a postmodern reading, one that foregrounds the impact of social context on values and attitudes. Of special interest is that postmodern notion of multiple world views where the absence of a single truth about social realities can enable an audience to receive these realities differently.

Williamson's early plays, *The Coming of Stork*, *The Removalists*, and *Don's Party* were immediate successes and this success propelled Williamson onto the subsidised theatre circuit (Kiernan, *David Williamson* 143). Williamson's next play *Jugglers Three* (1972) was performed at the mainstream Melbourne Theatre Company. Not everyone was happy with this move. There were those at the Australian Performing Group who felt that Williamson had too quickly abandoned his alternative theatre roots and sold out to the more commercially viable mainstream theatres (Fitzpatrick, *Williamson* 12). That they saw his departure as a betrayal and that the jibes and rumours still cause rancour is evident in Williamson's comment in 1995 as to why he left the Group:

I missed a couple of collective meetings and got the sack from Jack Hibberd ...I was seen as too commercial, too famous, too good. The Marxists and Maoists of

Carlton had it in for me. People hated me for loving my wife. For anything, even breathing. My plays were smashes; so, fair enough. (qtd. in Dickins 5)

Fitzpatrick defends Williamson's actions and maintains that "anyone who enjoys so much success, so quickly... is bound to have his detractors. A writer with a winning formula and no conspicuous ideology has little reason to change" (*Williamson* 12). Extrapolating from his position there, Williamson likened his success at Australian Performing Group to Graeme Blundell's success with *Alvin Purple* (1973), and says "we were seen to be bourgeois and independent and making money... in Melbourne at that time it was about the worst thing you could do" (qtd. in Zuber-Skerritt 13). Williamson has said that, at the time he was distressed by critics who dismissed his plays as light entertainment (and these critics will be dealt with in some depth in Chapter Two). These criticisms obviously affected Williamson for thirty-five years later he maintains:

Many critics attack me for not being Ibsen. They say "we wanted you to be Ibsen but you're not, because people laugh at your stuff and there is satire and there is sometimes farce, so you're not Ibsen – so you deeply disappoint us". (Interview Chapter Seven)

Nevertheless, Williamson continued to court his middle class Australian audiences with highly entertaining, contemporary plays of social interaction. He has, as Carroll astutely observes, the ability to provide a "certifiably accurate representation of contemporary manifestations of Australian society" (221). This ability to accurately capture the mode and mores of a certain period is reminiscent of "the father of modern drama" Henrik

Ibsen (1828-1906) (Fjelde, “Introduction to *The Wild Duck*” 389) and bears closer examination, despite the century that separates the two.

Ibsen, whose name is synonymous with naturalism (Worthen 551), understood the value of cloaking the seriousness of his subject matter in a palatable assemblage of satire and farce for audience appeasement. Illustrative examples of intersections of satire and farce in Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881) will be explored in Chapter Three. Williamson also masks his ideology with satire, farce, and irony to provide audiences with highly entertaining and edifying theatre.

Williamson has an uncanny ability to tap into the pulse of mainstream Australian society, extract the essence, and transpose it onto the stage as powerful representations of recognisable character-types and situations. He has the ability to mirror close trends of recognisable social behaviour, whether it be the loud-mouthed, uncouth ocker of the 1970s or the more sophisticated, silver-tongued manipulator of the new millenium: “Williamson reports and examines: he lets the tap flow or turns off the tap when impulse and observation tell him to do so” (Rees *Vol I* 123). This approach mirrors a postmodern approach to ‘reading’ texts, where character-construction is rooted in both the writer and the audience’s specific cultural context, a context that shifts constantly over different time periods.

With almost ruthless precision, Williamson has attacked many of society’s previously respectable and revered rituals and institutions: the volatility of the police force (*The Removalists* (1971)), marriage (*What If You Died Tomorrow* (1973)), election night

anxieties, (*Don's Party* (1971)), academia, (*The Department* (1975) and *Dead White Males*, (1995)), the hallowed realms of football, (*The Club* (1977)), old age and death, (*Travelling North* (1980) and *After the Ball* (2000)), the film and publishing world, (*Emerald City* (1987), *Soulmates* (2000)), the legal fraternity, (*Top Silk* (1989)), the lofty corporate world, (*Corporate Vibes* (1999)), anthropology, (*Heretic* (1997)), the suspect art world, (*Up For Grabs* (2001)) and civil justice, (*Face to Face* (1999)). As Fiona McFarlane writing for the *State of the Arts* asserts, “Williamson has made himself the poster child for bringing down the ivory tower (“Williamson on Writing”).

Williamson has written about a sizeable cross-section of issues within middle class society; it has been said that he “holds a mirror up to the Australian middle class” (Fitzpatrick, “Styles of Love” 426). Since 1970 his plays have provided a microcosm of contemporary Australian society. His panoply of characters includes, the quintessential ‘Aussie ocker’, the power-hungry authoritarian, confused and oppressed women, combatant couples, struggling writers, and greedy corporate manipulators. These character-constructions provide Williamson with a plethora of mouthpieces through which to satirise contemporary urban morals and mores.

Williamson’s *dramatis personae* have evolved over the thirty-five year span of his career from the innocent crudity of the early ockers to the more complex protagonists of the turn of the twenty-first century. Over the years his characters, along with their society, have become more affluent and up-market. As Sharon Verghis, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* asserts “now he’s skewering the elite” (“Today” 6). However he still focusses on

the individual, his power struggles, manipulations and control mechanisms. Whereas Stork's (*The Coming of Stork*) and Cooley's (*Don's Party*) manipulations were aimed at "getting laid" now the protagonists play for money, control, and corporate power.

This shift in the representation of Williamson's characters over the years reflects a range of changing characters, rituals and values. It is the inter-relatedness of these characters and their social interchanges, power struggles and often absurdist antics that audiences readily recognise and empathise with in a postmodern context. Williamson manipulates his audience with deliberately ironic and farcical devices in order to deliver his satirical observations. In these instances, Williamson can be said to be employing, to some degree, a Brechtian alienation effect to facilitate the reception of his message. Although Williamson's 'distancing' of an audience from the emotions of a play does not extend to the extremes of Brecht's alienation, his satirical treatment of a topic necessitates a certain amount of emotional truncation. Hugh Walker (1925) contended that satire is weakened when it delves beneath the surface and excavates in-depth explorations of the human condition. However, it is obvious for the purpose of recognition that there must be at least a trace of a human ideal in satire. This observation is the crux of the matter when it comes to distinguishing Williamson's style.

The period of the 70s was a time that saw further Aboriginal recognition and rights; the abolition of The White Australia Policy; women's rights; and the dismissal of The Whitlam Government. However, the quality of the times was also marked as a period of emotional disengagement from the dominant models of masculinity (Crawshaw), and this

thesis contends that this emotional barrier induced Williamson to employ shock, horror, and laughter, as a pretext to buffer the audience from the uncomfortable recognition of the realities of the times. In the 70s some men had little notion of emotional authenticity and hence no empathetic response to psychological awareness (Crawshaw). Professor Glenn Good notes that his findings reveal that men's reluctance to acknowledge their emotional side is a consequence of their socialisation and upbringing: "Many boys learn from their parents and from other children that they are not supposed to express vulnerability or caring. They learn to suppress their emotional responses" (qtd. in Winerman 58). By using humour as an ironic device Williamson is able to take his audience right to their edge and provide laughter as a coping mechanism. The temporal shift to 2007 finds an audience that is more emotionally literate through constant exposure to the pervasive influence of the mass media (Hodge and Tripp 1; May).

While this chapter has dealt with David Williamson's popular appeal attested to by his commercial success, it has also been noted that there are certain elements of his plays that have attracted adverse criticism. Perceived superficiality, truncated characterisations and glibness in the treatment of ideas have received attention. Williamson is generally considered to have written from a naturalistic base with heightened satirical and farcical overlays. It is from this consideration that this thesis poses its central query: how might satire and farce have contributed to the perceived superficiality in the plays of David Williamson?

While the central manoeuvre of this thesis will address the above question, it is considered to be of significant benefit to provide an overview of the critical reception that has been afforded Williamson over his extended career. This will be the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter Two

### What the Critics Say

... *the colossus of national theatre.*

(Usher, “An Eye On The Critics” 1)

... *works are spiritually hollow and lack an essential search for truth.*

(Westwood “Astride The Ideological Fault Line” 10)

This chapter will address the nature of enquiry that appears in the literature researched concerning David Williamson’s *oeuvre* from 1970 to the present. Critics praise Williamson’s popularity and commercial success, identifiability, continued relevance, and craftsmanship. They also lament his limitations and criticise his work for being shallow and glib. It is the researcher’s intent to use these perceptions, both positive and adverse, as a platform to examine the validity of the claims of superficiality dissipating the naturalism of Williamson’s plays.

There have been three major books published on the work of David Williamson. The first, *Williamson*, by Peter Fitzpatrick, is a comprehensive critical appraisal of Williamson’s work. The book starts with Williamson’s now famous labelling of himself as “storyteller to his tribe” (10), and uses a thematic approach to interpret and analyse *The Coming of Stork*, *The Removalists* (1971), *Don’s Party* (1971), *Jugglers Three* (1972), *What If You Died Tomorrow* (1973), *A Handful of Friends* (1976), *The Department* (1974), *The Club* (1977), *Travelling North* (1979), *The Perfectionist* (1982), and *Sons of Cain* (1985).

*Australian Playwrights: David Williamson*, edited by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt in 1988, is a compilation of autobiographical statements, articles and talks by Williamson, as well as print, radio, and video interviews.

The third book is *David Williamson: A Writer's Career*, by Brian Kiernan. This book is a critical biography that traces Williamson's life and works and ends with an account of *Emerald City* in 1987. A second edition of this book was published by Currency Press in 1996.

In the last twenty years Williamson has written twenty-two plays, making a grand total of thirty-five plays. Over five hundred articles and essays have been devoted to Williamson (*Australian Public Affairs Information Service; Australian Literature Gateway*), along with a vast number of reviews of the individual productions and re-runs of his thirty-five plays. Selected articles, reviews, and opinions will be recalled here in an effort to describe Williamson's critical reception. In keeping with the particular form of postmodern reading that underpins this work, critics, both academic and commercial, bring to a play their own specific cultural contexts and so any criticisms fall within the limitations of their own perceptions. That is, there is no right, nor is there a wrong appraisal of Williamson's work.

Despite the large amount of literature surrounding Williamson, it is evident that there is a dearth of critical analysis of his work. Fitzpatrick's *Williamson* proves the most

comprehensive but covers only the first eleven of Williamson's plays. This explains the need for the researcher to frequently draw on Peter Fitzpatrick's comments.

While David Williamson's popular appeal is attested to by his commercial success, there are certain elements of his plays that have attracted adverse criticism. Perceived superficiality, accusations of truncated characterisations, and a certain glibness in the treatment of ideas have received attention from both literary and commercial critics. He has been praised for his commercial success, his entertainment value, his ability to introduce a certain cohort of Australians to themselves and his ability to tap into relevant and topical social issues.

Michael Morley, writing in *The Australian*, credits Williamson with raising the profile of Australian drama more than any other playwright, and asserts "he is an astute, sometimes savage, more often mocking, observer of his society and its patterns of personal sociocultural and sexual interaction" (8). H. G. Kippax and G. Burchall acknowledge both Williamson's popularity and his craftsmanship, with Kippax deeming him "our most successful playwright and our best playwright" ("Williamson Dutiful But Disappointing" 11) and Burchall: "David Williamson has had the most successful and prolific career of any Australian playwright" (5). James Waites concurs, eulogising "he is the rock on which contemporary Australian theatre has been built...he has bankrolled the industry" ("Man of the Moment"). These opinions are reaffirmed by Fitzpatrick who, acknowledging Williamson's popularity says, "Williamson has proved a goldmine for the Melbourne Theatre Company. His plays consistently attract capacity houses" (qtd. in Love 213). These are but a few of the myriad accolades that have been bestowed on

Williamson over the past thirty-five years. It is interesting though, that critics should find his most notable skill to be the commercial success which arises from his popularity.

### *Popularity and Commercial Success*

There is much evidence to support David Williamson's popularity and commercial success. Theatre managers and critics have documented his box-office appeal and lasting popularity with audiences that began with *The Coming of Stork* in 1971. Leonard Radic comments on Williamson's popularity, and explains that audiences enjoy his plays and flock to them ("Wordplays" 10). He cites *Dead White Males*, as an example of Williamson's box office appeal with over 120,000 people seeing the play that took over \$3.5 million dollars at the box office. Radic concludes, "any playwright with such huge financial drawing power can rest assured that whatever he writes will be picked up" (10). Barry Dickins, praising Williamson for his continued success at the box office, agrees that "he fills theatres in Australia. Right up" (5).

The Sydney Theatre Company, registering a deficit of \$300,000 in 1986, credits Williamson's *Emerald City* for its financial recovery in 1987. The play drew capacity audiences at the Opera House's Drama Theatre, where it broke house records, taking \$85,142. Blake Murdoch, in an article for *Variety*, reports that the figure was over \$7,000 better than the previous house record, for Sondheim's *Company* (145). Toby Creswell, examining the state of theatre in Australia in 1987, reveals the Sydney Theatre Company's audience numbers for three productions: *The Philadelphia Story* (1986) 24,205; *The Floating World* (1986), 10,964; and 37,759 for Williamson's *Emerald City*.

*Emerald City*'s figures were over 50 per cent higher than the American show, Philip Barry's *Philadelphia Story*, and 200 per cent higher than the other Australian play, *The Floating World* by John Romeril (30).

Critics concur that what makes Williamson's plays enduring hits with audiences is his ability to consistently entertain them with broad comedy underscoring scathing social commentary. Fitzpatrick notes that "Williamson's plays have, without exception, proved very funny ... [one] tends to lose sight of that most immediate and tangible dimension of the pleasure Williamson has given to his audience" (*Williamson* 28). Fifteen years later, after viewing a production of *Soulmates*, Chris Boyd cites Williamson's "dazzling mix of contemporary issues and pungent comedy" ("Highs and Lows" 58). He labels Williamson "our greatest dramatic entertainer". It is evident that a vital contributory factor in Williamson's commercial success is the variety of the forms of humour he employs.

The raucous comedy and gags of *The Coming of Stork* and *Don's Party* in the early 70s, cemented Williamson's place as a popular entertainer. His use of obscene incongruities and coarse slapstick incidents display a sure-fire knowledge of the immediacy of this level of humour to an audience. Gerald Mayhead ("Williamson at Russell Street") commends Williamson on "the twanging, whacko comedy" of *The Coming of Stork*, while John McCallum finds *Don's Party* "one of the funniest plays ever" ("Study Notes" 3). Katharine Brisbane, analysing the success of *Don's Party*, comments that it "combines all the attraction of commercial comedy with the lasting elements of serious comedy" ("Don's Two Parties"). Brisbane cites the exchanges between Mack and Cooley

over the supposedly pornographic pictures of Cooley with Mack's wife as being "comedy at its purest". Kevon Kemp describes Williamson's treatment of the "slice-of-life" scenario of *Don's Party* as displaying a "rich and Rabelaisian comic flair" ("Review of *Don's Party*"). These critics agree that the combination of astute observation, quick wit, and outrageous gags certainly contribute to Williamson's audience appeal. John Sumner and Greg Curran had some minor reservations, but Sumner concedes "what entertainment it all was" and pronounces Williamson "a boon to Australian theatre" (238), while Curran agrees that "nothing this funny has hit [the audience] since Dame Edna's gladioli" ("Review of *The Club*"). Curran's praise emanates from his recognition of the audience appeal of a group of Aussie blokes portrayed with their limited interests and chauvinistic bent, but with a certain amount of likeable innocence. Regrettably, some critics read this surface level of slapstick comedy, such as the conga-line of the "duck-hunting" joke (*Don's Party* 29) and the farcical bedroom to-ings and fro-ings (67), without delving deeper to recognise the satire masking ironic interplay. The irony here is reliant on Williamson's use of several comedic devices: the incongruity between what is expected and what is realised (the audience is never privy to the "punch" line of Cooley's joke, only to the comical vision of professional men and their partners engaging in the highly farcical duck-waddling conga line!) and the "distancing" effect that alerts the audience to the discrepancies between the overtly farcical antics of the characters and the seriousness that underlies the couples' lives. This thesis contends that Williamson here is presenting characters realistically, as he sees them, as representatives of types of people who would rather "party on" than take a serious look at themselves or, particularly in the case of the males, individuals conditioned by their society to suppress their emotions and "soldier

on". This provides the play with the two-pronged affect of nudging the audience into a realisation that meanings may lie beneath the surface and that all is, perhaps, not as it seems.

On another level, Williamson employs the more sophisticated device of satire to reveal the irony of context and situations. *Don's Party*, *The Club*, *The Perfectionist*, *Sons of Cain*, *Emerald City*, *Brilliant Lies*, and *Sanctuary*, while humorous and entertaining, have currents of irony and satire intersecting the naturalist foundations. *The Perfectionist* and *Emerald City*, cited by Dennis Carroll as "more predominantly comic plays" and "big draws for audiences" (235), won his praise for "keeping a wryly comic tone in the social interactions" (237) of modern marriages. Carroll attributes the comic success of these plays to a "segueing" effect and the use of "direct address" by Barbara, the young wife. Direct address as a comic means was also employed successfully in *Emerald City*, which prompted Mick Barnes to enthuse, "possibly David Williamson's funniest play... another sellout" ("New Emerald City" 148). No doubt, it is the juxtaposition of the real situation and the fantasy, or vice-versa that provides Williamson with the impetus for his ironical treatment. Audiences, it would seem, enjoy the character's dilemma. Kippax, too, acknowledges *Emerald City's* "glittering patterns of wit, wisdom and wise-cracking" ("Williamson's Tale" 22), and attributes its success to its "comedic variety" and finds "its crackling, fire-cracker progressions of wise-cracking... are irresistible as humour" (22).

*Top Silk* (1989), Williamson's play about power-plays and marriage set in the colourful world of the law courts, received mixed responses from critics. However, Barnes finds it

still has the Williamson hallmark of “crisp dialogue and some devastating one-liners” (“*Silk: A Guessing Game*”). *Money and Friends* (1991), labelled a “comedy of manners” by Brendon Doyle, had the “usual Williamson witty one-liners” (“Williamson Without Bite”), *Brilliant Lies* (1993), received mixed reviews, but still was praised as a “splendidly scored soap opera, with more than its fair share of delicious lines” (Boyd 8). These last three reviewers are not wholly impressed with these plays, but they acknowledge the trademark humour and quick repartee that audiences have come to expect from a Williamson play.

Brisbane, writing in the introduction to *Emerald City* in 1987 has this to say:

He [Williamson] is still the most bankable name in the business; and the source of his popularity is his ability to combine an unwavering curiosity about the familiar with an undiminished facility to surprise. Audiences know they can rely upon a Williamson play to be entertaining, accessible, and appropriate to the mood of the moment. (v)

Brisbane’s words are as relevant today as they were in 1987.

As late as 2002, reviewing *Soulmates* (2002), a play about an elitist critic and a ‘chick-lit’ author, Fiona McFarlane nominates Williamson’s ability to walk the fine line between “high and low brow” art as one of the reasons for his continued commercial success: “he sells tickets. Audiences love him, partly because he comes at elitist worlds with a sharp eye and a bias toward the everyman” (“Williamson On Writing”).

### *Identifiability*

Williamson's characters are easily identifiable by the audiences he writes for and this is a major factor in his popularity. This recognition factor was documented by, among others, Fitzpatrick and Carroll. Fitzpatrick comments that "much of his [Williamson's] popularity...is attributable to the accuracy of his observation of people walking and talking in recognisable ways" (*After 'The Doll'* 112). Carroll asserts that Williamson's characters provide a "certifiably accurate representation of contemporary manifestations of Australian society" (177). According to Fitzpatrick, Williamson's acute observation, coupled with his expert and accurate mimicry, enables him to "hold a mirror up to Australian middle class society" ("Styles of Love" 426). McCallum, commenting on *Don's Party*, feels that the play gave a shock to audiences who could recognise that:

the trappings of an Australian middle class, trendy party are there: the beer, the Twisties, the home-made pizzas, the bawdy jokes and cracking-on by the men, the women talking about their husbands in the corner ... and the gradual decline into drunken argument" ("David Williamson: *Don's Party*").

McCallum muses that audiences admitted to having been at parties just like that in a "national wave of confession".

According to Kippax "there isn't a line, and not a character, that hasn't the ring – just off-key – of one part of Australia, larger than life" ("Review of *Dons Party*"). John Clark, in his informative introduction to the published script of *Don's Party*, remarked that the play was about "people whom audiences recognise immediately" (8). Brisbane agrees: "the sheer joy of the play lies in the people themselves: familiar, funny and real" ("Don's

Two Parties”). Fitzpatrick sums up Williamson’s early popularity with audiences:

“Williamson offers his audience a variety of types sure to be known to them, or among them” (*After ‘The Doll’* 120).

Audiences, amused to recognise themselves, or people they knew, in Williamson’s early comedies, were jolted into uncomfortable recognition when confronted with the raw brutality of *The Removalists* (1971). This chillingly comic story of domestic violence and police brutality depicts “that peculiar cauldron of repression, prurience and authoritarianism which is too recognisable in us” (Brisbane “Review of *The Removalists*”). Ian Turner agrees, saying “Williamson [...] has put his finger on a pulse of violence existing at deeper levels in Australian society” (9). As late as 1991, Angela Bennie, reviewing a revival of *The Removalists*, still felt the sting of identification: “It [*The Removalists*] has the ability to lead us, through humour, pathos and fear, to the shock of recognition” (“Tribal Rites Chill the Blood” 14).

Shirley Despoja and Lou Richards agree on the identifiability of the characters in *The Club*, with Despoja suggesting that Williamson’s main function as an Australian playwright has been to “introduce the typical Australian male to himself” (“Will The Typical Male Please Stand Up”). Richards, in “The Greatest Game Of All”, admonishes “if you can’t recognise among the people you know, the characters and situations ... then you’ve either spent the last few years in a Tibetan monastery or you’re a New South Welshman” (vii).

Writing in 1982 of *The Perfectionist*, a play about the machinations of the modern marriage, David Ives concedes, “it is almost certainly the story of my marriage....let me also say that I’m pretty certain 90 per cent of the audience....is saying the same thing” (18). He goes on to say that he found the play most satisfying and wholly relevant and “likely to give us all shivers of recognition” (18).

The identifiability of Williamson’s characters in *Money and Friends* was observed by *The Sun-Herald* in a review of 5 January, 1992, entitled “Another Classic for Williamson”, which concludes, “all of us recognise Williamson’s microcosm and judge it unerringly because Bond, Skase, and their ilk created the macrocosm”.

Robin Nevin emphasises audience recognition in her “Introduction” to *Corporate Vibes* (1999), a play linked to *The Club* in that it deals with the power-plays and hypocrisy of corporate management: “It is a joy to hear the mutterings of the audience as they identify with each of the characters in turn ... Williamson is the social and human chronicler of our age” (xi).

Writing of *Top Silk*, as late as 1996, Matthew Westwood accredits part of Williamson’s popularity to the audience recognition of both characters and situations. He sums up: “Williamson’s ability to ‘king-hit’ an audience with an image of itself has been his great dramatic skill” (10).

*Continuing Relevance*

“A kind of passing parade” is how Fitzpatrick describes Williamson’s themes and characters and their relevance to Australian society (*Williamson* 15). Fitzpatrick talks about the scandals, the elections, the “rhythms of hope, cynicism and despair” (15) that mark Australian public life and provide Williamson with material for his contemporary, topical plays. Although Fitzpatrick made his comments in 1987, only fifteen years into Williamson’s career, the same sentiments are echoed by Phillip Adams writing of *Don’s Party* in *The Australian* twelve years later. He speculates, “But 1969 is now 1999 and, despite the changing times and the alleged triumphs of feminism, one suspects that similar guests are still attending similar parties” (29). Kippax, in his Preface to *Don’s Party* in 1973, foreshadows the relevance and timelessness of the play:

Its sociological themes sketch some of the elements of change in the electorate: the accelerating effect of affluence and expanding educational opportunities on social mobility; the invasion of the professional middle class by the working class or lower middle class beneficiaries of Menzies’ enlightened Universities policy; the emergence of the bored and discontented, educated housewife in the labour saving homes of suburbia, the recruiting grounds of Women’s Lib. (6)

Kippax obviously feels that the affluence, discontent, and boredom characterised in the play astutely reflected the community of the early 70s.

Bennie recognises this relevance in her review of a 1991 production of *The Removalists*: “*The Removalists*’ pessimistic and shocking view of our society, in which violence is shown to be part of its very fabric.... is as relevant today as it was 20 years ago when it

first appeared. Just consult the court statistics” (“Tribal Rites” 14). Thus, in keeping with a postmodern reading of texts, an audience constructs meaning in conjunction with changing cultural contests. In Williamson, however, it would appear that much of his comment on 1970s’ society still holds relevance decades later and that this universality and durability provide an underpinning of this thesis and will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters. It would be appropriate to say that a contemporary audience, enlightened by the modernity of this new century, is quite tolerant of confrontational material.

Also reviewing a revival of a Williamson play, *The Club*, was Ross Gittins who marvels at Williamson’s penetrating account of the machinations, betrayals and corruption of a football club: “I was struck by how prophetic it was and how relevant its concerns remain”. Gittins was referring to Williamson’s almost prescient examination of the power-games, manipulations and scandals regarding “salary capping” that have plagued sporting bodies since the 1980s (13). Back in 1987, Jamrozik also recognised the prophetic thrust of *The Club*:

Sport is a metaphor in *The Club* ... in the mid 70s, professionalism was only just beginning to make serious inroads into Australian sport. These days, the theme of money and power versus love of the game is played out every day in the tabloid papers. (23)

Brisbane agrees with Jamrozik on the relevance of the themes of *The Club* and gives credence to the relevance of *The Department*, *A Handful of Friends*, and *Travelling North* in her “Introduction” to *Collected Plays Volume II* when she concludes:

The primary themes covered in these plays are bureaucratic pettiness, artistic and professional integrity, committee-room power games and the legacy of ideologies. The average man and woman’s experience of life is present in all of them and none of the themes are [sic] new: and yet in retrospect each of them, is very clearly a direct response to the progress of the 1970s – to the political and social turmoil of the Whitlam period and the financial crackdown which followed, and the gap Williamson perceived between the opportunities offered the reformers and their achievement. The vested interests uncovered, the betrayals, the accession of entrepreneurial management to what once were community affairs; the disappointments and mid-life crises of the baby-boomer generation – such are the preoccupations of this collection. (vii)

Brisbane’s observations give strength to the argument that, far from being superficial, Williamson – with his satirical treatment of his texts – is both social observer and social commentator. Indeed Williamson himself endorses Brisbane’s comment when he says,

when you move into irony, as a writer, you’re trying to say something about the human condition – our proclivity for egocentric behaviour, our inflated sense of self-importance and whenever you move into irony it’s not just for theatre effect, it’s for an illumination of the underlying human condition rather than the surface condition. (Interview Chapter Seven)

Williamson's comment is pertinent to this thesis, in that it establishes that he is, indeed, aware of his preference for irony as a medium to reveal the complexities of the human condition. His stated aim to eschew the "surface condition" in favour of deeper reflections should go some way to answering his critics' claims of superficiality.

*Sons of Cain* from 1985 concerns a network of corruption involving drug lords, high-ranking police officers, public servants, the judiciary and apathetic and frightened newspaper editors. This play came about as a direct result of conversations Williamson had had with various investigative journalists who had been asked to pull back on stories exposing drug racketeering for fear of retribution (Kiernan, *David Williamson* 361).

Within a year, certain high ranking New South Wales public servants were on trial on corruption charges and "The Fitzgerald Report Into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct" was well under way in Queensland. Hence *Sons of Cain* was recognised as being eminently relevant to the wider society of the 1980s. These court proceedings prompted Kiernan to observe "This [*Sons of Cain*] was again, as with *The Removalists*, theatre that reflected life in the streets around it" (*David Williamson: A Writer's Career* 364).

*Top Silk*, in 1989, and *Siren* in 1991, also addressed pragmatism, hypocrisy, and corruption in high places and these themes exactly mirrored the deplorable state of Australian public affairs in the 1980s when sensational revelations of systematic and institutionalised corruption was rife through corporate bodies and financial institutions (Bond Corporation, Rothwells, Quintex Limited, Tricontinental Merchant Bank) and the

police force (*The Fitzgerald Report*). In fact the 1980s has become known in Australian folklore, as the “greedy eighties” (Kiernan *David Williamson* 369) prompting Karen Fredericks to observe that “Australia’s legal, bureaucratic and corporate system apparently has so many grey areas, a thief in a suit can’t be recognised, caught, prosecuted, or punished” (“The Untouchables”). This echoing of public affairs in Williamson’s plays of the 1980s is recognised by Bob Evans in his review of *Siren*: “Given recent events in NSW, it’s a plausible, even timely, story outline” (“Juggled Ball Fumbled In New Tack” 79).

In 1999, Williamson developed *Face to Face*, the first of a trilogy (*The Jack Manning Trilogy* (2002)) of plays that promote the innovative process of acquiring justice through participatory conferencing. This method of justice reform, by dealing with conflict by conferencing the parties involved, is relatively new in Australia and was still gaining acceptance in social, criminal and commercial disputes when Williamson wrote his play.

The relevance of literary criticism and discussions of low-art-versus-high-art in the new millennium proved fruitful topics for Williamson’s *Soulmates*, a play dealing with literary characters, that caused much guessing around theatrical and literary circles as to ‘who was who’. The close proximity of the fictional characters to well known names, prompted McFarlane to write, “all the usual suspects: Sydney/ Melbourne rivalry, the ‘tall poppy’ syndrome and subtle digs at famous Aussies” (“Williamson On Writing”).

The Melbourne Theatre Company's programme notes for *Birthrights* provide a retrospective of Williamson's pertinence to society's concerns:

looking back, *The Removalists* and *Don's Party* with their ocker aggression, seem to capture the rebellious, over-compensating assertion of the early seventies Australia, just as *Emerald City* seems to get right the moral contortions that accompanied the sell-out culture of the booming eighties, and the unholy righteousness that we associate with the politically correct nineties, finds exact expression in *Brilliant Lies*.

Williamson's topicality is best summed up by Radic's insightful observation that "one of the great strengths of Williamson's writing for the stage has been his close identification with Australia and Australians, and his uncanny ability to pinpoint what are, or will be, the popular issues or talking points of the day" ("A Songless Siren" 79).

### *Craftsmanship*

While critics have been unanimous in praising the humour that underpins each Williamson play, some have argued that far from being Williamson's stock-in-trade, formulaic device, this humour is underscored by well-orchestrated craftsmanship and design (Carroll 232; Kiernan *David Williamson* 246). There appears some inconsistency when the same critics who accuse him of superficiality acknowledge that he has been very careful to appear spontaneous, and that his works are very skilfully crafted. The ostensible 'chaos' in the early plays (*Stork*, *Don's Party*, *Jugglers Three*), the deft compilation of scenes building up to the "tall story" gag in *The Club*, and the fine balance

between humour and sympathy (*Travelling North, After the Ball*), consistently draw praise as evidence of the control and competency of Williamson's craft.

Writing of *Don's Party*, McCallum asks, "How does he [Williamson] give to such a carefully arranged selection of details, the appearance of a loose, chaotic party?" and notes that "the play is carefully structured and contrived to give the appearance of something uncontrived and natural" ("Study Notes" 3). This unobtrusive craftsmanship is noted by Fitzpatrick and Kiernan in connection with *The Club*. Fitzpatrick calls attention to the structure of the play "for the way it fits the play's moral patterns of connivance and come-uppance, and for the sense of aesthetic rightness that it offers the audience" ("David Williamson: *The Club*" 3). He nominates the key scene of Geoff's "tall story" to the old-timer Jock as an example of Williamson's expert design and declares "it is very clearly the work of a playwright at the peak of his form" (3). Kiernan reiterates this opinion, praising *The Club* for the way it is "intricately, but unobtrusively crafted" (*David Williamson* 246). In her review of a 1987 production of *The Club*, Wanda Jamrozik quotes the actor Peter Corbett's admiration of Williamson's "awesome grasp of the writer's craft". Again the "tall story" scene is given as evidence of the playwright's skill in constructing "a story that is absolutely brilliant" (qtd. in Jamrozik 23).

Williamson's skill at balancing storytelling with humour and empathy for his characters prompts Colin Menzies to enthuse of *The Perfectionist*: "Not a word is wasted, yet the treatment of the subject is exhaustive" ("Double Play Bill A Singular Experience"). Menzies feels that Williamson's treatment of the elation, manipulations and negotiations

of a modern marriage is a “mirror-true reflection of a microcosm in some of the tightest writing we’ve seen”.

Of *Travelling North*, Philip Parsons, notes that “...this play has the lovely athletic clarity of a thing stripped to essentials...the form is anatomised, as unified time and place are dissected into a succession of scenes” (viii). Parsons comments on Williamson’s use of numerous scenes (thirty-three scenes, in fact), “compared, connected, slotted together in a growing structure that will be complete only with the last scene of all. No form could more perfectly express the search for meaning in a life shortly to end” (viii). This finely balanced structure of *Travelling North*, oscillating between gravity and gentle humour, prompts Fitzpatrick to liken the play to Chekhov’s comedies and their “critical balance between farce and pathos” (*Williamson* 149). The expert manipulation of the forty-two, almost filmic scenes of *Sons of Cain* provide Fitzpatrick with evidence of Williamson’s continued development as a playwright with his skilful ability to explore times and locations (22).

With *Birthrights* (2002), Williamson tackles the personal issues of childlessness and infertility. Brian Gridley of the *Mosman Daily*, Sydney, comments on Williamson’s craftsmanship: “David Williamson is truly a master of his craft. To be able to take a topic like artificial insemination and fashion a play which is at once thought-provoking, provocative and richly entertaining proves the point [of Williamson’s mastery of his craft] yet again” (31).

McCallum, writing on *Don's Party* in 1981, lauds the way Williamson is able to achieve a “subtle alternation between humour and sympathy” (“David Williamson: *Don's Party*” 3). McCallum feels that this is brought about by the careful structuring of the play, with each of the couples revealing their ambitions and hopes, and that these scenes are carefully engineered to build audience expectations, which almost instantly dissipate. The tone of the play is shaped by both hope and disillusionment, not only with the lost election, but with the hopes and aspirations of the needy guests. McCallum goes on to say that it is the audience’s sympathy for these characters, as well as the much-documented humour, that makes the play such a success (4). *Don's Party* also moves Ruth Hessey to remark on Williamson’s craftsmanship, particularly his ability to depict the emotional frustration that simmers beneath each character, and then to overlay this with sharp retorts and humorous, casual party-talk as dialogue (19). She observes the “tension between escapism and pain that is the cutting edge of *Don's Party*” (19). Ken Healey, reviewing a 1988 production of *Don's Party*, is impressed with “the playwright’s extraordinary achievement . . . in assembling a shower of disparate characters who, when described, are wholly unprepossessing. Yet in the context of the election night party, they evince laughter that is benign rather than excoriating” (11).

The balance of humour and sympathy in *The Club* prompts Fitzpatrick to name it a very “assured and controlled piece of writing” (“David Williamson: *The Club*”) and he credits Williamson’s technique of underpinning overt comic expansiveness with a disciplined structure as part of the play’s success. He also notes the stock-in-trade farcical devices of “reversals and false appearances” which keep the balance between humour and pathos.

Williamson returned in 1997 to the serious issues of life and love and death in *After the Ball*, a play dealing with familial relationships at significant moments in a family's journey. Bryce Hallett, writing for *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 25 March, 2002, felt the play was "one of his [Williamson's] finest plays, balancing comedy and tragedy ... it is clear, convincing and not obscured by muddle" ("Elegy For Two Generations" 14).

There is no doubt that David Williamson's popularity and commercial success is established through the sound craftsmanship of his plays; by the topicality of his subject choices, and the easy recognition of the characters and situations by his audiences; and, of course, by the over-arching, always present, humour. These attributes, prompted Katharine Brisbane, in 1987 to assert:

more than any other writer in Australia today his works have charted the problems which the breaking up of political, domestic and moral patterns over the past 20 years in Australia have caused our progress as a nation... his genius has been to define for us, in advance of our own recognition, the qualities which make up the Australian character. (36)

Up until now the researcher has cited critics who have admired Williamson's work and who have defended him against charges of superficiality on the grounds that he is well received by the public, that his plays are commercially successful, that the public recognise themselves in his characters, and that he writes of the mores of Australian society. However there are still good reasons for finding Williamson's plays superficial:

there is particularly his shallow and one-sided treatment of serious issues; his flat character-constructs – especially his female roles; and the lack of emotional depth and social context. The researcher will deal with these issues now but return to them in the following chapters to argue that Williamson may have both comedic and naturalistic reasons for not making his plays too complex.

*Limitations: The Shallow Treatment of Serious Issues*

As early as 1973, critics were declaring Williamson's plays shallow on the grounds that the characters were flat and the issues not fully explored. Howard Jacobson, writing of *Don's Party* and *Jugglers Three*, describes them as "quite bland affairs" (31) because, rather than challenging their audiences, the plays merely echoed current orthodoxies. In 1975, Kiernan says of *Don's Party*, "the potentially serious issue of the election (and presumably the future of the country) is all but ignored by the characters" ("Games People Play" 397). *Jugglers Three* prompted Jacobson to assert, "there is no good humour, no warmth and no wit. Even less does he have anything to say about this world" (31). Radic, writing in the *Age* concurred, maintaining Williamson tended to "skirt the deeper issues" ("Review of *Don's Party*").

It was then the turn of *The Removalists* to incur criticism of Williamson's supposed surface treatment of serious issues. In a 1973 survey article, "Assaying New Drama", A. A. Phillips laments Williamson's shallow treatment of the serious contemporary issue of violence, labelling it "almost irresponsible" (193). He feels the serious issues of domestic violence, police corruption, and a death in custody were trivialised by the almost farcical

treatment of the material. A perceived lack of depth was also of concern to *The Guardian's* Michael Billington. He asserts that “the play never reaches the metaphorical resonances of the best violent art” (qtd. in Kiernan, 188). *Jugglers Three* was also criticised for perceived superficiality in its treatment of the serious issues of the trauma of war, the problems of displaced returning Vietnam veterans and the emotional flotsam of dislocated relationships.

*Sons of Cain*, *Brilliant Lies*, *Corporate Vibes*, and *Siren* deal with serious issues that are touched upon but left undeveloped. *Sons of Cain*, a serious examination of corruption and moral culpability that requires some deeper insight into the complexities of the machinations of the power-plays and the moral dilemma at the heart of the matter, did not in fact offer any real debate. Fitzpatrick feels that Williamson has presented a “position play” rather than what should be an “issue play” (Williamson 143), and comments that: “*Sons of Cain* gives grounds for uneasiness. The momentum of the narrative allows little time for examining complexities” (144). *Brilliant Lies*, a black comedy that deals with the increasingly prevalent and pressing issue of sexual harassment in the work place and at home, was labelled “too well tailored to genuinely jolt an audience” (Carroll 242). *Corporate Vibes*, a play about workforce machinations, hypocrisy and responsibilities was deemed “slight and superficial” by Hallet of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (“Satiric Vibes” 11), who went on to ask, “Where is the insight, the disturbance, the revelation?”. *Siren* fared no better: Radic called the play “A Songless Siren” in his review in *Sydney Morning Herald*. He went on to declare it “cynical, regressive and uninvolved”. Evans agrees and decries Williamson for “shying away from the burden of intellectual

responsibility” (“A Songless Siren” 79) and summarises *Sons of Cain*, *Emerald City* and *Top Silk*, with the comment: “the analysis of the social fabric never sufficiently permeated the dramatic fibres of the plays. They couldn’t bear the burden of their themes”. *Top Silk* also came under fire from Kippax who claimed that Williamson “merely parades the issues...He leaves no time for debate, no time for the cut-and-thrust of raillery and wit” (“Williamson Dutiful” 11).

Bennie, while praising the first half of *Sanctuary*, lamented that Williamson “lets us morally off the hook. He brings us back after interval and then proceeds to give us sanctuary” (“Moral Minefield” 19). Martin Ball, lumping *Brilliant Lies*, *Dead White Males* and *Up for Grabs* (2001) together, thought them “shallow works that exploit modish ideas for clever one-liners” (7). The London production of *Up for Grabs* again saw Williamson under fire for the shallow treatment of serious issues with Kate Bassett deciding that while Williamson’s play “touches on big issues, not least market forces corrupting personal morals, this is no trenchant masterpiece. Plot developments feel bald and the humour frequently lame” (12).

In 2002, Frank McKone says of *Soulmates* “Williamson seems to me to be just playing games with the issues for the sake of laughs (2), while McCallum found the script “biased and tendentious” (“Storyteller” 13). *Birthrights* also came in for criticism for a superficial approach to a theme that was, at once, both a public issue and a personal matter. Both McKone and McCallum regretted the rather superficial and predictable approach Williamson takes to the relevant and contentious issues comprising the themes of

*Soulmates* and *Birthrights*, the former concerning ‘chick-lit’ versus literature and the honesty/hypocrisy of the publishing world and the latter the very complex and contentious issues of artificial insemination and surrogate motherhood.

To summarise these adverse criticisms of Williamson’s perceived superficial treatment of serious issues, it is evident that some critics find Williamson lacking in the depth of his treatment of certain issues and also see a truncation of his character-constructs within these serious plays. It is perhaps useful here for the researcher to express the opinion that while all of Williamson’s plays may not be masterpieces, and while some may be considered somewhat ‘light on’, criticism of them rests to a large extent on the misguided idea of some critics that because plays are humorous, they lack substance. This notion of humour masking insightful, satirical social comment will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

#### *Theatre of Ideas*

Just as Williamson has been criticised for lack of substance in dealing with plays with serious, emotional content, so he has also been criticised for lack of content in what is known in the theatre as “Theatre of Ideas” where the logical presentation of serious subject matter is vital to the expected rigorous debate of a play.

Williamson’s foray into Theatre of Ideas with *Dead White Males*, again found him the butt of criticism concerning his shallow and erratic handling of serious debate. Guy Rundle claimed *Dead White Males* was

not so much a play as a two-and-a-half-hour harangue ... it is an immensely smug, self-satisfied work, rigged so ludicrously and one-dimensionally in favour of its own philosophy that no genuine conflict is possible” (qtd. in Wilmoth).

McCallum complained that Williamson’s superficial and one-sided presentation of the serious issues of feminism and post-structuralism was misleading to audiences who were sold short on these important and relevant concerns. In *The Australian* of 13 March, 1995, John McCallum summarised *Dead White Males’* effects:

a play about the oppressive power of ideology ends up by being oppressed by an ideological agenda. Williamson has said that in *Dead White Males* he wants to explore the “con” in ‘deconstruction’. But the real con lies in the play’s own cynical populism.

In July of the same year, he continues his lamentation: “You cannot retreat from a play about ideas by saying that it is really a play about human relationships and that the ideas in it don’t in the end matter” (“Character Assassination” 10). McCallum contends that Williamson has a certain amount of knowledge of contemporary critical theory and attempts to present this knowledge to his theatre audiences in the guise of a popular comedy. The result is a dismissal of “one whole side of the argument in which the intellectual debate is corrupted by the mechanics of drama” (10). McCallum, Pamela Payne (“Big Bark, Little Bite”) and Paul Galloway (1996) feel that Williamson’s use of a corrupt, questionable protagonist to denigrate an important issue of contemporary literary theory, deprived audiences of enlightenment on a serious matter. Galloway furthers his

argument by maintaining that Williamson trades on false logic when the “snake-oil salesman” academic fondles the *ingénue*’s bottom; with misplaced logic, the audience immediately dislikes him and rejects the postmodern theoretical position he represents.

*Heretic*, written in 1996, a year after *Dead White Males*, was another venture into “Theatre of Ideas”. Again Williamson was criticised for his one-sided argument and simplistic approach. *Heretic* tackles one of the big questions: the time-honoured debate of Nature versus Nurture and the true make-up of man but, as Michael Fitzgerald writes, “Williamson rarely goes beyond a simplistic ‘he says nature, she says nurture’ argument” (68). Radic and McGillick were disappointed with the play not matching up to expectations. Radic disparagingly compares Williamson’s treatment of a heretic figure, with Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Brecht’s *Galileo* and Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, in an effort to justify his labelling the play “small beer” by comparison (“From Satirist to Moralist” 11). McGillick concedes that Williamson wants to write about major issues but also wants to be liked and hence “the one-liners, the parodies so often mistaken for satire, the comic straw men [are] set up to be knocked down” (“Heresy”).

*Heretic* offended both critics and academics (who are often the same), as well as the general public. One reader/viewer, Mark Weeks of the *Age*, was moved to verse with a poem entitled “Don’t Put Your Art on the Stage, Mister Williamson” wherein he advised Williamson to “write a book instead” (16). The same edition of the *Age*’s Opinion/Letters carried a letter from Dr. Peter Hinton from the University of Sydney’s Department of Anthropology, in which he called *Heretic* a “travesty of anthropology” (16). These critics

felt dissatisfied with the lack of debate in *Heretic*, the unfair one-sidedness of the script and the lack of any real reasoning in the argument of nature versus nurture. *Heretic* left Frank McKone feeling about *Dead White Males*, as Fitzgerald, Radic and McGillick had, that Williamson was just “playing games with the issues for the sake of laughs” (2).

#### *Representative/Stereotypical Characterisations*

Just as Williamson has been criticised for shallowness in his treatment of serious issues, he has also been subject to criticism for his underdeveloped characterisation. Plays such as *The Coming of Stork*, *Don's Party*, and *Jugglers Three* have been criticised for their limited characterisation. Williamson comments, “I think of a group of people in a situation and I start from there” (qtd. in Palmer 104). Kiernan, writing of Williamson's early plays, explains that Williamson is more interested in exploring “patterns of social interaction” within a certain group of people, rather than in-depth explorations of individual motivations (“Games People Play” 397). He says of *Don's Party*: “after the establishment of relationships.... The play proceeds to vary (rather than develop) these in an elaborate game of sexual politics” (397).

Fitzpatrick, writing in *After 'The Doll'*, asserts that *The Removalists*' “limitation is the lack of real substance in its psychologising: the characters' roles are explored more for representativeness than for peculiarity, and the documentation of their private tensions often seems perfunctory” (119). Both Radic and Brisbane have strong views on the limited characterisations in *The Removalists*. Radic regretted the truncated portrayals: “the motivation of the police was not clearly established” (“Review of *The Removalists*”)

while Brisbane asserts that the play was more complex than Radic had allowed; however, she still considers some of the characters somewhat limited (“Review of *The Removalists*”). These views of Radic and Brisbane concerning David Williamson’s limited characterisations mark the beginning of an on-going debate centred on the use of stereotypical character-constructions and their place in satirical works.

### *Sitcom Deployment*

Brian Hoad, in *The Bulletin*, lamented that Williamson’s career took a turn “for the worse with plays which began to resemble draft film scripts” and singles out *Travelling North* with thirty six little scenes that tended to “smother those theatrical resonances which alone can give a play depth of interest” (“An Anguished Cry” 42). Hoad felt that ultimately the play became a “sort of theatrical strip-cartoon” (42).

*What If You Died Tomorrow*, *A Handful of Friends*, *The Perfectionist*, *Top Silk*, and *Money and Friends* all concern characters at a significant moment in their lives.

However, seldom are their motives revealed or their values and beliefs explored to the satisfaction of the critics. Fitzpatrick, writing at length on *The Perfectionist*, finds the characters disappointingly two-dimensional. Coupling *The Perfectionist* with *A Handful of Friends*, he says, “Williamson’s interest is not in uncovering motives and giving explanations, but in understanding processes” (*Williamson* 108). Evans concurs and comments on the lack of emotional exploration in *Money and Friends* where “the play is almost devoid of any emotional substance (“Getting Away From The Emerald City”). *Top Silk*, appearing in 1989, was not well received by the critics who mainly agreed that

the characters were two-dimensional. Kippax blamed the congestion of the plot: “the playwright has not the time to explore and develop his characters, to make discoveries about them (“Williamson Dutiful” 11), while Barnes, in the *Sun-Herald* found the humour delivered by “characters who, in the main, are never more than two-dimensional” (“*Silk A Guessing Game*” 104). Hoad sums up the criticisms: “here is a play that calls for greater empathy and insight, yet offers no empathy or insight of its own” (“Theatrical Journalism” 91).

*Corporate Vibes* is concerned with the issue of conflict in the workplace between the old authoritarian management attitudes and the new-age, feel-good, democratic approach. Hallett, reviewing the play for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, designated it “a slight and superficial play, strewn with the playwright’s typical one-liners and amusing banter, but it never manages to get beneath the formulaic parameters of its own largely static and neat satiric veneers” (1 Feb. 1999). Written of the literary world, a topic presumably well known to Williamson, *Soulmates* was also found to be lacking in depth. The characters “don’t resonate”, was Michaela Boland’s verdict (“Review of *Soulmates*”). This familiar criticism dogged *Up For Grabs* with Hallett labelling it “a slice or two short of a gâteau” (“Williamson’s Thinly Plotted Cartoon” 10). He goes on to blame “implausibilities in character development” (10) for its shortfall. The criticism of superficiality followed *Up For Grabs* to London where it premiered in May, 2002, with Ellen Hale declaring “Chekhov it ain’t” (“She’s A Not-So Lucky Star”). As late as 2003, Tracey Sanders alerted students to Williamson’s limited characterisation “...the absurd situations they get

themselves into prevent any real understanding of the deeper sub-text of each character's behaviour" ("Lecture Notes").

*Lack of Context: A Social Vacuum*

Some critics see a lack of emotional context as one of the main causes of the perceived truncations of emotions in Williamson's work. With no expository revelations and virtually no time for the disclosure of motivations and behaviour, some of the plays appear to happen in a social vacuum. *The Club* enjoyed unrivalled success when it opened in 1977, but critics wrote of the shallow characterisations. Curran finds the humour effective but lamented that one of the main scenes, involving the "tall story" that Geoff tells Jock "doesn't build or lead anywhere or explain anything about the themes or characters ("Review of *The Club*"). Barry Oakley concurs, finding the characters superficial: "there's not enough shading to give depth" ("Review of *The Club*"). These characters are very well-known types to most of the audiences and Curran and Oakley feel that there was more to them than sharp retorts and hasty verbal skirmishes: they seem somehow stymied; they lack development—there was more to know that was left unexplored.

Plays dealing with more personal issues such as, *What If You Died Tomorrow* and *The Perfectionist*, were also seen to evade the more serious emotional issues. They lacked psychological context. Commenting on *The Perfectionist*, Hoad and Sumner, observe that Williamson still chooses to observe superficially (Hoad 70; Sumner 347). Fitzpatrick pronounces the play "disappointingly thin as a treatment of the forces that impel marital

politics” (*Williamson* 98). Hoad, Sumner, and Fitzpatrick feel the relevancy and serious nature of the problems facing young professional married couples in the 1980s called for a deeper exploration than Williamson had afforded them. Hoad sums up his feelings about the serious emotional issues of the play: “Not so much as the smallest palpitation of a heart is exposed, not a tear shed, nor a pot thrown” (70).

*Travelling North* gave Williamson an opportunity to explore emotions in a play about sensitive, mature-age love, and although he was generally praised for his delicate handling of human relations, there were still detractors. Radic, reviewing the Sydney opening for the Melbourne’s *Age*, finds the play to be “deficient in psychological and social detail” (“Review of *Travelling North*”). Harry Robinson in his review of the 26 August, 1979 describes the play as “glib”. Nearly twenty years later, writing again of familial human relationships in *After the Ball*, Williamson’s expression of deep emotions through rounded characterisation was still cause for criticism. Jeremy Eccles finds the characters in *After the Ball* limited and the emotions superficial, “the underlying seriousness of a mother’s dying and its effects on her adult children was lost in a welter of one-line wit” (9).

In *Brilliant Lies*, Boyd feels that too much time was spent “tuning the quandary” (68) and too little time fleshing out the characters. He sums up with “if Williamson had lavished as much attention on characters as he has on plotting and slick dialogue, the product would be infinitely more satisfying” (68). Evans concurs and laments the “hop, step and jump psychology” of the play (“Death By Comic Overkill” 21), where there is no chance for

exploration and reflection on a character's motivation and actions. Payne, writing for the *Sun-Herald*, complains that the characters in *Brilliant Lies* were not strong or credible enough to carry the weighty arguments and sums up "they're flat, woefully simplistic" ("David's Lies" 128). In *Brilliant Lies*, a play about sexual harassment in the workplace and at home, the seriousness of the scenario at many potentially heart-wrenching moments is displaced by Williamson with comedic devices. In the following chapters it will be argued that Williamson's satirical treatment of *Brilliant Lies* is a clever and deliberate approach to presenting unsavoury material in an easily accessible mode. Aside from audience appeasement, this truncation of serious subject matter is a deliberate ploy of Williamson's to maintain the racy pace of the satire and to present characters as truthfully as he perceives them.

*Birthrights* is a play set firmly in the emotional turmoil of family conflicts of deprivation and longing, loyalty and courage, tenacity, love, and commitment. Kate Herbert found much to complain about in the sterile character-constructions, which she labelled "mouth pieces rather than individuals" about whom it was "impossible to empathise" and who lack. "any true emotional engagement" (68). These types of lamentations centred on Williamson's truncated treatment of emotions and his perceived avoidance of exploring psychological reality.

### *Women's Roles*

One of the most frequently voiced criticisms of Williamson's plays is the stereotypical treatment of women. Leslie Rees states that the women characters in his early works

“show very little differentiation ...they are not seen in perspective; we learn few facts about their earlier lives” (129). Rees speculates that perhaps women’s conditioning up to the 50s and 60s, to behave modestly and avoid the label “cheap”, may have precluded them from substantial parts in the “new wave” plays of the 1970s.

Amid much praise, *The Removalists* was criticised for its stereotypical treatment of the women characters. Brisbane laments that the women and their relationships had not been “drawn closely enough yet to call it a complete play” (“Review of *The Removalists*”). Writing twenty years later, Kiernan labels *The Removalists*’ women characters as “even more stock figures than the policeman; in fact they could have been perceived as the males’ stereotyped images of two kinds of women” (*David Williamson* 7). Fitzpatrick sees an imbalance between male and female characters in the early Williamson plays and decides that the women “function as catalysts of sexual intrigue and the rites of male-proving” (*Williamson* 20), and continues his criticism in “Styles of Love: New Directions in David Williamson”, commenting on the female guests gathered at *Don’s Party* as “having no more in common than their sex and their status as appendages” (416). *Sons of Cain* also elicits from Fitzpatrick criticism of the thinly drawn three women characters: “they are tokens of the playwright’s good intentions rather than significant contributors to the central dramatic conflicts of the play” (*Williamson* 147).

As late as 1999, Sue McKell criticises Williamson for his two-dimensional women characters in *Corporate Vibes*:

...such stereotypical portrayal of women in the workplace, along with other examples of stereotypical feminine preoccupations with the personal, beg to question whether Williamson is more interested in merely reflecting rather than challenging sexist corporate stereotypes and Australian corporate sexism in general. (“A Vibrant Corpus”)

### *Summary*

It is generally acknowledged that David Williamson is Australia’s foremost playwright. He has enjoyed wide and continued critical and box-office success. He is praised for his ability to “hold a mirror up to Australian middleclass society” (Fitzpatrick, “Styles of Love” 426), his critical exploration of Australian society and “its social myths and rituals” (Kiernan, “Games People Play” 395) and because “it was he [Williamson] more than any other individual who did most to attract a widening and increasingly loyal, popular audience, back to theatre” (Kippax, “Williamson Dutiful” 11). Critics have praised his satirical comedies for their relevant topicality, their astute observations, acerbic wit, sharp one-liners, farcical comings and goings, and outrageous gags. All of this is indisputable, but it would appear that as early as 1973 critics were also questioning the slick, almost formulaic, style of his plays. Recurrent questions were being asked about the perceived shallowness of his treatment of serious and contentious issues, his lack of exploration of characters’ emotions, their motivations, beliefs, values, and his persistent failure to address psychological reality.

It has already been noted, and will be visited again in the course of this thesis, that critics who read Williamson as purely naturalistic will always be disappointed in the surface treatment of his plays. They will fail to read the play on the different levels afforded, and so miss Williamson's ironic premise and his related ideologies that, of necessity, are masked by satire and farce.

Williamson has defended his perceived superficiality with the claim that his plays "hover on the border between naturalism and satire" (qtd. in Palmer 115) and that this gives his use of formulaic or stereotypical characters validity. It is considered to be of significance here that a discussion of stereotypes and their role be addressed. E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* maintains that real life contained both "round" and "flat" or stereotypical characterisations and therefore flat characters are crucial to the fullness of drama (138). A fuller discussion on Forster's "round" and "flat" characters will be observed in Chapter Five which addresses 'characterisation'. While Forster considers that stereotypical characters were easily recognisable and easily remembered by an audience, Margaret Williams sees stereotypical representation as a "surprisingly sophisticated dramatic device in its own right" ("Snakes and Ladders" 2). Certainly the new wave plays of the late 1960s and early 1970s relied heavily on stereotypical representation of certain cohorts of Australian society. The stereotype is used to represent an image rather than an individual character.

Stereotypical representations are not always indicative of a playwright's limitations however, indeed they can be used as an effective construct as a mask for the insecurities

and vulnerabilities of the characters. The thinness of their construction and the repetitive nature of their discourse is a mark of their inadequate and defensive persona. The ubiquitous ocker, the disillusioned university graduates, the red-necked police officer, and the marginalised women are all too familiar representations of certain cohorts of Australian society. The underlying tensions that simmer beneath the surface of these characters offer the audience a suggestion of deeper psychological states.

It can be argued that Williamson has varying degrees of success, both literary and commercial, with his plays, and that not all will become Australian classics. The continued charges of superficiality that have followed him over thirty-five years arise, in part, because some critics fail to recognise the subtle ironies that underscore the plays. These ironies present audiences with issues, truths, and realities that have become more potent since the 1970s.

The next chapter will use Ibsen's *Ghosts* to examine the validity of the use of stereotypes and to explore the use of genre-blending in a mainly naturalistic text. Ibsen's text depicts life at the end of the nineteenth century and, in keeping with the reality of the situations, is peopled with both round and flat character-constructs. These characters are all complex constructions of characters who, for varying reasons, keep their thoughts and emotions disguised under a cloak of conformity. Ibsen is both social observer and social commentator, exploding the myths of the late nineteenth century with his ironic depiction of Norwegian family life. Similarly, Williamson has used irony to special effect in his depiction of certain cohorts of Australian society in the second part of the twentieth

century. The use of genre-blending in *Ghosts* will set up a paradigm from which to review the effectiveness of intersections of satire and farce in the mainly naturalistic texts of David Williamson.

### Chapter Three

#### Intersections of Satire and Farce in the Fundamentally Naturalist Text of *Ghosts*

*Story-teller to his Tribe.*

(Williamson, *Meanjin*, 186)

*Ghosts is generally regarded as the “most important naturalist drama [because] it depicts the remorseless and vivid truth of human characters”.*

(Furst and Skrine, *Naturalism* 58)

This chapter investigates naturalism and, through an exploration of the seminal text, Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881), observes seemingly disruptive elements of irony, satire, and farce in a play held to be a more or less accurate slice of life (Cuddon 887). This idea, of art as ‘slice of life’, is at odds with postmodernism which sees all texts as artificial “constructions” always presenting a subjective “version of reality”. The presence of this genre-blending – that is, the interplay between the disruptive elements of satire, farce, and irony, and the attempt to represent a slice of life – in *Ghosts* is evidence of Ibsen’s solution to a central difficulty of naturalism: how to maintain audience interest while presenting an apparently artless representation of reality. This blending of genres is intrinsic to theatrical naturalism and this chapter provides the basis for an examination of irony, satire, and farce in David Williamson’s naturalism. Ibsen uses irony to point out the hypocrisy and pretensions of his society, and Williamson also uses irony to examine the interactions and patterning of individuals in a social context. This chapter will therefore be devoted entirely to an examination of *Ghosts* in an effort to establish a

strong, clear, and relevant platform for a comparison with Williamson's genre-blending in his naturalist plays.

Emile Zola (1840-1902) identifies naturalism as being part of a general movement early in the nineteenth century that seemed inevitable given the tenor of the times, with its emphasis on inquiry and analysis in not just the sciences but the arts as well. As Zola sees it, "an irresistible current carries our society towards the study of reality" (901).

However, a postmodern reading of texts eschews any notion of a text offering a "slice of life". Hence, satirical and farcical elements that disrupt a transparent rendering of reality are intrinsic elements of the 'reading' or interpreting of texts. Postmodernism sees all texts as artificial 'constructions', always presenting a subjective version of reality.

The naturalists championed a spirit of inquiry, a disquiet with burdensome social conditioning, a freedom of spirit, and frequently depicted an individual's struggle against social convention and even biological imperatives. Naturalists, as Zola states, aimed to create drama that pulsed with life, the "very entrails of humanity", with characters "whose muscles and brain function as in nature" (901). No problem was too dark, no past too mysterious, no thought too complex for the naturalists. This spirit of enquiry is vividly elucidated by Otto Brahm at his opening of the Berlin *Freie Buehne* (Free Stage) in January, 1890:

The art of our time embraces, with its tentacles, everything that lives: nature and society; truth; truth and truth, truth on every path of life ...individual truth, freely

arrived at from the deepest convictions, freely uttered: the truth of the independent spirit who has nothing to explain away or hide. (qtd. in Esslin 70)

The pursuit of truth and the depiction of reality were the focus of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero (1855-1934) who was at the forefront of the naturalistic movement in England. Pinero aimed to replicate reality in the theatre with a photographic copy of life, through “natural dialogue, realistic scenery and understated acting” (qtd. in Shepherd and Womack 251). However, if Pinero’s ostensible intention was to construct a sense of seamless ‘reality’, then a postmodern approach to drama would question such an assumption. Reality in this interpretive paradigm can never be “replicated” (271); the play can offer to the modern audience only another version of reality.

Gassner, Pizer, Caputi, and Esslin concur that the basis of naturalism is to present, on stage, life as nearly as possible to reality. This reality becomes a shifting concept given the postmodern readings of the twenty-first century. Williamson refers to this tenet of Gassner et al. as “peeling the onion” (Interview Chapter Seven). Towards the end of the nineteenth century Jean Jullien coined the phrase “*tranche de vie*”, a slice of life, to suggest literary works that presented life in the raw, “factual, visceral and unadulterated by art” (Cuddon, 887). This belief of Jean Jullien’s echoed the naturalists’ ideal of theatre without overt contrivance. The depiction of reality was also the goal of Henrik Ibsen, with the additional belief that individuals’ lives and actions are influenced by an interplay of personality and environment. While some theorists, including Cuddon, maintain that naturalism and realism are synonymous, it would appear that the distinguishing factor for

naturalists was the concern for a scientific approach to narrative with an emphasis on biological and social determinism (575). Also of primary concern for naturalists was the liberation of the theatre from the ‘well-made play’ of Scribe (1791-1861) and Sardou (1831-1908).

The ‘well-made play’, popularised by Eugène Scribe, embraces a formula with a “standard plot, pasteboard characters and a superficial treatment... It is a tightly-knit creation that meets the requirements of theatrical representation” (Koon and Switzer 36). In contemporary dramatic theory the term is used, somewhat pejoratively, to describe plays that are constructed with formulaic precision. The well-made play invariably involved exposition, where information is revealed (or concealed), characters who are highly dramatised and hold the key to situations that will destroy either families or individual reputations, and a *dénouement* in which the fates of the characters are resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. Stock incidents may include the unexpected appearance of a person or letter, mistaken identity and errors of judgement. The sequencing of events, careering towards an unexpected, but plausible resolution, happens “so rapidly that the audience has little time to question the validity of the proceedings” (Watson and McKernie 320). Meticulous planning, contrivance, and the use of incident and complication to entertain, provided the basis for Scribe’s plays and they proved hugely popular with audiences who went to the theatre to be amused and entertained, rather than edified.

It is also of interest to note that Ibsen, while a bastion of the late nineteenth century naturalist movement, with its thrust towards realistic theatre and less contrived artistry, continued to create plays the structures of which closely resembled the 'well-made play'. *Ghosts* consists of three acts, a hallmark of the well-made play, and the similarities do not stop there. The play concerns hidden secrets and long held grievances, misunderstandings, mistaken identity and unexpected appearances. While moving into radically new thematic territory with a revolutionary naturalistic approach, Ibsen, it can clearly be argued, retained much of the proven structure of the entertaining plays of the times in order to assuage his audience.

To sum up then, the naturalist movement had as its basis a shift towards scientific principles that dictate psychological reality. The aim was to create theatre depicting physical and psychological detail with discrete artistry, a theatre that depicts the natural interactions of a society demonstrating the interplay of heredity and environmental factors. This premise, one hundred years later, fuels Williamson's assertion that "acute observation, perceptive observation...can be very potent in illustrating ...the nature of humanity" (qtd. in Zuber-Skerritt 201). However, this comment cannot be read as Williamson being determined to offer to his audience a plausible "slice of life" – in a postmodern context he is simply offering a construction of reality that can be open to multiple readings.

Commentators assert that Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* is a fundamental naturalist play. For Furst and Skrine, conditioning factors and a compulsion to construct drama that as nearly

as possible replicates individuals in real life lie at the very heart of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) and no doubt influenced their assessment of *Ghosts* as "playing a part in naturalist drama equivalent to that played by Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) in the naturalist novel" (58). They assert that *Ghosts* is generally regarded as the "most important naturalist drama [because] it depicts the remorseless and vivid truth of human characters" (58).

*Ghosts* is well documented as embodying and treating the subject matter within the realm of traditional naturalism: themes of the individual and society, duty to one's self, and the dichotomy between appearances and reality are all realistic and confrontational. Such subjects as venereal disease and incest had certainly not been exposed and explored publicly, and aroused controversy in Europe and righteous indignation, bordering on abuse, in London. Outraged British critics denounced *Ghosts* as "putrid" and "an open sewer" and condemned its "naked loathsomeness" (Watts 11).

Ibsen's exposure of the "ghosts" manipulating middle class society, his belief in revealing pretensions and social hypocrisy, his exploration of the workings of the psyche, and the consequences of action and inaction provide the well-spring of his *oeuvre*. The theme of individuals being trapped by their past dominated Ibsen's thinking. In fact, Peter Watts, translator of Penguin Classics' *Ghosts* (1964), quotes Ibsen in the Introduction: "we sail with a corpse in the cargo" (10).

Ibsen explained his compulsion to create completely naturalistic plays with "I want the reader to feel that as he reads, he is sharing in an actual experience" (10). Ibsen sets out to

present human beings, human emotions, and human conflict against a background of the cultural and social mores of the times, correlating to a foundational premise of naturalism. As George Bernard Shaw concluded in his essay “The Technical Novelty in Ibsen’s Plays”: “Ibsen gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situations” (Dukore 646). It will be argued in the following chapters that Shaw’s comment on Ibsen could just as well be said of Williamson who states, “I really want to depict the reality of processes that happen in social situations” (Interview Chapter Seven). It is the contention of this thesis that Williamson’s plays give an audience a representation of themselves, in situations that are easily recognisable and identifiable. It is this diachronic sense of meaning within selected Williamson’s plays that will guarantee their durability as classics of local identity and universalities.

*Ghosts* addresses all of the tenets of naturalism: subject matter that deals with the inner conflicts of the protagonists; an ambience as close as possible to the real social and cultural period of the play; characters constructed as nearly as possible to real life; and an honesty of approach that presents individuals interacting with each other with a minimum of theatrical artifice. *Ghosts* deals with a contemporary (nineteenth century) family enmeshed in its cultural and social environment. Mrs. Alving, the protagonist, is a woman of individual strength, but she is a product of the pretensions of late nineteenth century middle class society, intent on keeping up appearances and protecting her late husband’s reputation. She is haunted by the “ghosts” of her past, her husband’s infidelity, alcoholism and his debility through syphilis. These topics were considered taboo in nineteenth century theatre, and so the middle class audience is positioned to observe the

reality of the corrosive effects of hypocrisy, lies, and pretensions. Today, with a postmodern reading, there is no one truth about social realities, however these multiple realities received subjectively by a diversified audience in no way detract from the impact of Ibsen's reality.

Psychological reality and the conflicts of the human condition are the wellsprings of the naturalist movement and are ubiquitous in Ibsen's work. His protagonists are hampered, often stifled, by their past and their conditioning, with only a courageous few able to rise above their conditioning to shake off the lie and be free. This struggle that lies at the heart of *Ghosts* exposes the dichotomy between determinism and free will and, in the case of Mrs. Alving, results in "the will taking wing" (Knight 48). This exploration of inner conflicts that underscore the characterisation of Mrs. Alving epitomises Ibsen's belief that society can have a stifling effect on an individual's personal life. In this instance Mrs. Alving, long conditioned to a restrictive, puritanical and often hypocritical society, and after much soul searching and sacrifice, throws off the shackles of convention, reveals her hidden secrets and, so, exorcises her "ghosts".

Mrs. Alving has her genesis in Nora Helmer, the spirited heroine of *A Doll's House* (1879). Nora rises up out of the ashes of her moribund marriage, breaks free of her social conditioning and liberates herself and, perhaps, others like her, for generations to come. Ibsen's portrayal of the independent Nora, who abandons husband and home for her innermost needs, completely affronted the staid Norwegian society of the time and earned Ibsen severe criticism (Watts 11). In fact, so sensational and radical was the subject

matter of *A Doll's House* that, for the German performance of the play, Ibsen was required to write an alternate ending where a contrite and responsible Nora returns home to her husband and children (King 8). The codes of Norwegian nineteenth-century marriage dictated that a wife remain faithful within the union no matter what the cost to personal freedom and contentment. The hypocrisy and façade of the “happy marriage” was suddenly in contention and Ibsen was branded as both liberator of the virtually powerless housewife and villifier of traditional family values.

Nora remained so intrinsically part of Ibsen's cause that he felt compelled to answer his critics two years later by creating Héléne Alving. Mrs Alving is the wife who stayed at home. She personifies Ibsen's belief that individuals are conditioned by the prevailing social mores of the times. Under pressure from her family, Mrs. Alving marries a wealthy, dissolute man. In keeping with the conventions of the time, she masks the unhappy marriage and her husband's debauchery with a sham front. Mrs. Alving is a product of her society. She is introduced as a respectable family woman who has an independent mind, reads books, and forms opinions of her own. Fearing that the sins of the father will be visited on her son, Oswald, she sends him off to Paris to live and be educated. For all her independent thinking, Mrs. Alving is trapped by a stifling society. Although Ibsen lists Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts' Dramatis Personae* as “Mrs. Héléne Alving” she appears in the body of the text only as “Mrs. Alving”. Ibsen here makes the statement that Héléne, once she entered the sacrament of marriage, subjugated her individuality and irrevocably became Mrs. Alving.

Like his follower, Pinero, Ibsen placed paramount importance on the realistic evocation of the setting of the play. He insisted that his characters be depicted against a background precisely resembling the environment of the times. Ibsen is meticulous in his instructions for the set of *Ghosts*. The large living room of the Alving residence is distinctly detailed with:

*A large garden-room, with one door in the left wall and two in the wall to the right. In the middle of the room is a round table; at it there are chairs, and on it are books, magazines and newspapers.*

*In the foreground to the left is a window, with a small sofa and table in front of it. At the back, the room opens on a conservatory, rather smaller, and walled with large panes of glass. From the right of this conservatory a door leads into the garden. Through the glass, a view of a gloomy fjord, half-hidden by continual rain, can be made out. (21)*

Ibsen exactly reconstructs the late nineteenth century middle class room to present a real, contemporary space. Nothing is left to chance in the evocation of the naturalistic ambience. To some extent this can be seen as manipulative. Clearly the choices symbolise representations underpinning Ibsen's belief in the inherent interplay between nature and the human condition.

Of equally legendary commendation are Ibsen's major characterisations, where the individual's inner reality is revealed, layer upon layer, in a "spiritual strip-tease" (Knight 48). This technique, unique to naturalism, of slowly revealing a character's traits, motivation, and belief is termed by Williamson "peeling the onion" (see Interview

Chapter Seven). Ibsen is credited with naturalistically creating rounded, recognisable, flawed, thinking characters speaking individuated, conversational dialogue. His major characters are not cardboard cut-outs, but real people, grappling with problems and complications, played as nearly to “real life” as is possible. He is credited with drawing characters with precision and clarity, capable of recognising and discussing their problems: physical, psychological, and spiritual with “each character playing its own instrument” (Ellis-Fermor 18). His protagonists have a past, they have forces at work within them, they react and interact and they deliberate their inner conflicts. The economical text of *Ghosts* provides an ideal scaffolding for the sub-text of the play, the underlying psychological conflicts of the protagonists. These conflicts result from conditioning that eschews honesty and independence and promotes hypocrisy and deceit. The dichotomy between appearance and reality provide Ibsen with an ironical premise for satire and farce.

*Ghosts*' protagonist, Hélène Alving, battles her “ghosts” throughout the three acts of the play and, in the closing tragic moments, seems still to be deliberating. Ibsen depicts his heroine as a “flesh and blood” character. She is, by turns, passionate, resigned, indifferent, ambiguous, loving, trusting, doubting, warm, maternal, uneasy, confessional, desperate, and finally, inconsolable. Mrs. Alving is representative of a premise at the heart of naturalism, “from the betrayal of truth all other betrayals flow” (Northam 105); she is also fecund material for Ibsen's ironical foundation. She has never been able to tell the truth. She has been conditioned by her society to repress her instincts and feelings and to “keep up appearances”. She succumbs to existing social bias and prejudices, and

sacrifices herself to the mores of the times. She is aware of the social hypocrisy but bows to it. Mrs. Alving's fully-rounded characterisation is a true embodiment of the ideal naturalist portrayal in that the audience is privileged to share her cathartic journey at a significant time of her life. However, a more recent reading of this text may differ markedly from even a contemporary one. A contemporary audience, steeped in the mores and social attitudes of a parochial, xenophobic, bigoted, conservative context would respond much less critically to Mrs. Alving's life of pretence. A modern audience, by contrast, may be much more judgemental and scathing of her passivity and acquiescence in a markedly feminist cultural context.

Oswald is a complex construction, too. He is educated, cultured and refined and the audience is positioned to receive him as the embodiment of Mrs. Alving's aspirations. However, he quickly reveals different levels of knowledge, experience, and development as he challenges Pastor Manders on his ultra conservative views of life. His characterisation begins to burgeon, so very soon the audience receives a more complicated, more mysterious character than it had at first perceived. Ibsen constructs Oswald so that the complexity of his characterisation is revealed, layer upon layer, throughout the play. Oswald has returned from the bohemian atmosphere of an enlightened Paris, where people feel "it's a joy and delight to merely be in this world" (82), to the claustrophobic conventions of parochial Norway where "I'm afraid that everything that matters to me will be turned into something ugly here" (82).

The growing complexity of Oswald's characterisation deepens when he is willing to demonstrate his freedom from the binds of public opinion by making advances on the maid Regina. Once again the audience's expectations are jolted. Ibsen, for a short time, allows the audience to read Oswald as a replica of his father and this construction reinforces Ibsen's suggestion of the potential power of heredity. However, it soon becomes clear that Oswald has a hidden agenda. He is suffering from syphilis, "the disease that I've inherited" (98), and has come home prepared for death with twelve morphine tablets in his pocket. Oswald's premeditated suicide is a clear indication of the measure of Ibsen's belief that individuals are programmed by their past (Watts 10). The irony for a modern audience of the notion of syphilis being hereditary borders on the absurd (Vora 75). The audience learns quite a lot about Oswald. They have seen him develop throughout the play from the much admired, returning, "golden-haired" son, through the seeming libertine, and into a figure of sympathy at the end of the play when he begs his mother to help him die. This characterisation is a fair representation of the in-depth, 'warts-and-all', realistic characterisations that are associated with naturalism. At the same time it is also a deeply ironical character-construct that goes against the tenets of naturalism. Here we begin to see the very early stages of a form of genre-blending that was to develop much later – on a different continent and in a different era – in Williamson's work. Oswald's character is intricately fleshed-out with his aspirations and agonising resignation to his fate realistically evoked through naturalistic dialogue, motivated action, and the subtle implication of sub-text. Despite the realistic 'evocation' of Oswald's complex character however, a modern audience would be likely to respond with scepticism to the notion of the power of hereditary forces – the sins of the father

visited on the son – and particularly to the idea that syphilis would automatically be inherited by the son from the father. This connotes a major shift in the reading of *Ghosts* in a postmodern context.

Not all of *Ghosts*' characters are so 'fleshed-out', so rounded, and this requires an examination of whether, and in turn how, the play deviates from naturalism's full characterisations. Pastor Manders appears to be a two-dimensional character constructed as a potential representation of neurotic conformity. Engstrand also has the potential for the representation of greed and commercialism, while his daughter Regina, displays comic aspects that set her up as a stock character of cold-blooded opportunism.

Pastor Manders is a product of the rather rigid and reactionary society of Norway at the end of the nineteenth century. As Alvin B. Kernan puts it, Manders is "almost a personification of propriety, a man whose rather undistinguished motive is to do what is generally thought to be correct" (14). He has lived his life within the narrow confines of public opinion. He suppresses his feelings in order to conform to the morality of the times and fails Mrs. Alving when she, in desperation, goes to him about her failing marriage. Mrs. Alving, recalling her plight, asks Manders "Have you forgotten how miserable I was in that first year?" to which he replies "Craving for happiness in this life is the sign of an unruly spirit. What right have we mortals to happiness?". He concludes his moralising with, "It was grossly inconsiderate of you to seek refuge with me... it was vouchsafed to me to lead you back to the path of duty – and home to your rightful husband" (46). The placement of this melodramatic outpouring in the context of a scene of heart-breaking

and life-changing significance sets the irony of the scene. Pastor Manders does not recognise Mrs. Alving's *cri de coeur* and responds, quite stoically, with platitudes about duty and morality.

Pastor Manders, stiff and prim, as he arrives at Mrs. Alving's residence, is immediately included in a rather comical interlude when he is put on the spot by Regina, in a humorous exchange of niceties. When Manders, with formal propriety, remarks that Regina has grown quite a bit, she replies "Madam says I've filled out". Manders, embarrassed, mumbles "Well yes, I think you *have*... a little..." (29). Another comic scene transpires in his exchange with Mrs. Alving over the insurance for the orphanage. After much deliberation, they bow to imagined public opinion and do not insure the orphanage for fear that to do so will be seen as distrust in God. Their practical solution could well be viewed by a modern audience as ludicrous. Further, the seriousness of this scene in presenting the prevailing prejudices of the society, and the superficiality of Mrs. Alving's philanthropy, is undercut by the rather heavy-handed foreshadowing of the destruction of the orphanage.

The burning of the orphanage, a potentially serious affair, elicits a broadly comic response (particularly in a modern audience steeped in a much more secular, irreverent context), when Manders, terrified for his reputation, allows himself to be duped by the incorrigible Engstrand. The power shifts from the vulnerable Manders, to the duplicitous Engstrand when the latter, homing in on the guilt-ridden Manders, convinces him that he is better off to invest what is left of the orphanage money in "The Seamen's Refuge". The

irony of this scene is not lost on the audience, which is positioned to view the role-reversal as humorous. When Manders is seduced by Engstrand's sanctimonious self-promotion, "Jacob Engstrand is like a guardian angel, sir, that's what he is", the cowardly Manders can only mumble "You're a man in a thousand" (89). It is interesting to note, in keeping with the conventions of the times, the truth is sacrificed for appearances. In struggling to maintain his conforming, sedate demeanour, Manders is presented as being something of a fool. Although falling short of the complete buffoon, Manders has something of the comical qualities of the awful Mr. Collins of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Regina, the maid and Oswald's half-sister, is also a two-dimensional character who opens the play with a comic incident. The dismal ambience of the scene is shrouded in heavy rain, and the gloomy tone is thrown into sharp relief by the maid, Regina, watering the plants! Then she engages in an exchange with her presumed father, Engstrand, which is both revealing and broadly comic. Both speak in a coarse, uneducated idiom when they are arguing between themselves. However, the duplicitous character of the pair is revealed when they pretend to be what they are not. Engstrand, oscillating between ostentatious pontifications and angry outbursts, calls Regina "a little slut" (23). She, in turn, reveals her pretentiousness by peppering her speech with French phrases, revealing that she aspires to something more grand than her present circumstances. There is comedy when Regina uses the term "*fi donc*" (So what!) and Engstrand, appalled, replies "I'm damned if I ever used a dirty word like that" (26). Ibsen assumed the effectiveness of this humorous device when he employed it again, when Regina remonstrates that "Sailors have no *savoir vivre*" and Engstrand flabbergasted replies, "Haven't got *what*?"

(26). The incongruity of this language certainly reinforces the comedic effect and Regina's strivings to better herself establish her as a prototype for Shaw's aspiring Eliza Doolittle, thirty years on.

Regina is also shown to be hard-working, and she elicits some sympathy from the audience because of her misuse by Mrs. Alving and her scheming father, but she is not an empathetic character. She is cold, practical and manipulative and this is reinforced when Oswald reveals that she was his first choice to euthanise him. During the cathartic scene when Oswald confesses his terminal illness and asks Regina to stay with him, her reply, "I'm certainly not staying out here in the country to wear myself out nursing the sick" (94), marks her as shallow, duplicitous and disloyal, and the scene as deeply ironical. However, it is interesting to question how a modern audience, with temporal shifts, might react? Perhaps Regina would be applauded for her refusal to succumb to the acquiescent, nurturing, passive role automatically assigned to women in the cultural context of late-nineteenth century Norway. Indeed a postmodern reading might endorse her much more practical, pragmatic approach that ensures her economical survival, much as today's audiences applaud Norah's initiative in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879).

Engstrand is constructed as a potential representation of the machinations of the business world and the profit-at-all-costs bent of commercialism. He is something of an "Alfred Doolittle" type. He is uneducated, down-at-heel, energetic, and vocal. He philosophises on all things; his worthless past, the relationship between father and child, and even gender issues: "We menfolk mustn't judge a poor woman too harshly". He is rough,

distasteful, hypocritical, and comical and serves as something of a palliative to the catastrophes about to unfold.

Engstrand is positioned as a comical character when he first appears. The whispered dialogue in the quiet, dignified room of the residence is incongruously juxtaposed with the dissonant clump, clump, clumping of Engstrand's club-foot. Again, at the beginning of Act Two, there is a comical exchange with the obsequious Engstrand interrupting Mrs. Alving and Manders: "I humbly beg pardon... I made so very bold as to knock...if you'd be so kind... of course, if you don't think it fitting..." (64). This behaviour proves highly comical given his bravado with Regina in the opening scene of the play.

It is evident that Manders, Engstrand, and Regina are constructed as two-dimensional characters with little or no development or growth. These cardboard cut-out characterisations in an otherwise naturalistic text, and the mixture of serious and potentially comic incidents, compel an examination of the styles of comedy in *Ghosts*. Given Ibsen's discontent with the narrow-minded provincialism of late nineteenth century Norwegian society, satire presents itself as a distinct stratagem.

"*Ibsenism* came to be a catchword for a variety of social causes," writes W. B. Worthen (551), concurring with G. Wilson Knight who observed that Ibsen never forgot that he was "forging a ladder, and his eye is always on the one goal of a greater humanity" (48). Ibsen's concern with the rigidity and limited beliefs and mores of his society, lampooned in the characterisations of Manders, Regina and Engstrand, correlates with Heiserman's

belief that the aim of the satirist is “to expose, or deride or condemn... satire begins when laughter enters” (296). M. H. Abrams concurs with his definition of satire as the “literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn” (153). Ibsen’s use of satire as a weapon for social criticism is praised by Alvin B. Kernan, who comments on the precise construction that has Manders, Regina and Engstrand so adeptly personifying the follies and vices of the times (20). Williamson also uses satire to promote social criticism of the follies and vices of certain cohorts, or sections, of Australian society in the second-half of the twentieth century.

Molière, that master of satire, was convinced of its power. “If the function of comedy is to correct men’s vices...the theatre is admirably suited to provide correction” (Worthen 417) and sums up its effectiveness on an audience:

The most forceful lines of a serious moral statement are usually less powerful than those of satire; and nothing will reform most men better than the depiction of their faults. It is a vigorous blow to vices to expose them to public laughter. Criticism is taken lightly, but men will not tolerate satire. They are willing to be mean but they never like to be ridiculed. (Worthen 417)

Northam writes that Ibsen rebelled against the “contradictions inherent in modern society” (228) and he uses Manders as a representative character to personify the limitations and hypocrisy of religion. Kernan recognises the satirical effect of Manders and labels him as a “type” or “flat” character, because he “lacks variety and depth” and observes that this type of character is a “staple of comedy” (15).

The exaggeration of the comic satirical characters in *Ghosts* is in direct correlation to their lack of humanity. Satire, with its protest, moral criticism and exposure of the foibles of society, does not lend itself to fully-rounded characterisations. Characterisations used for satirical purposes are mainly representative types, or ‘flat’ characters who do not grow throughout the play. As Hugh Walker (1925) observed, developed humanity in literature is nearly always at odds with satire (18). He argues that the thrust of satire may be weakened because of the extent and tolerance of the human themes. Characterisations are essentially truncated and dialogue is sharpened in order to retain their representativeness. Ibsen has constructed the more serious, humanised, ‘better’ characters (Mrs. Alving and Oswald) in sober, dignified tones with fully realised, flesh-and-blood characterisations. In contrast, he has used the devious, hypocritical characters of Regina, Engstrand, and Pastor Manders as satirical caricatures with no developed humanity. Bergson, writing at the turn of last century, contends that “laughter has no greater enemy than emotion” (qtd. in Davis 61) reinforcing the observation that fully humanised characters are at odds with comedy. This deduction, which will be explored in the following chapters, lies at the heart of Williamson’s perceived superficiality when he is read as purely naturalist.

While evidence of satirical characterisations is noted, it is also apparent that *Ghosts* contains intersections of farce: a nascent emergence of, or movement towards, the genre-blending to be found in Williamson’s work. Regina and Engstrand, while serving a satirical purpose, are also constructed as farcical characters. Cuddon maintains that the

object of farce is to “provoke mirth of the simplest and most basic kind; roars of laughter rather than smiles” (330). He elaborates: “the basic elements of farce are exaggerated physical action (often repeated), exaggerations of character and situation, absurd situations and improbable events and surprises in the form of unexpected appearances and disclosures” (330). Certainly Regina and Engstrand’s characters are representative of these elements with their slightly exaggerated portrayals, idiosyncrasies, unexpected retorts and comical role-reversals. Regina’s pretentious duplicity, ambition, use of sexuality, and her obsequious niceties (“There. Let me help you...Oh, it is wet. I’ll just hang it in the hall. Give me your umbrella too...” (28)), all set her up as the farcical “French Maid”. Engstrand, with his distinctive limp, his cunning, his turgid platitudes and his sanctimonious manner, is a comically grotesque character.

Irony is used effectively to contribute to farcical incidents. The final scene of Act One, when Mrs. Alving, feeling some relief at “laying the ghosts” of her past, sums up her situation as a “long, hideous farce” (54). She is then abruptly faced with the sounds of Oswald in furtive sex-play with the maid Regina, in reality his half-sister. This is too much for Mrs. Alving who hurries into dinner, muttering “*hoarsely*”, “Ghosts” (54). Ironic incidents occur with the burning down of the monument meant to honour her lascivious husband. Mrs. Alving in her attempts to deceive society, has failed. The seriousness of the situation and the solemnity that has pervaded the scene is abruptly shattered with the words “The Orphanage is on fire!” (85). A disastrous moment is rendered farcical by the irony of the situation. Farce intersects again, when the duplicitous Engstrand convinces the terrified, sanctimonious Manders to pay over the

insurance money from the fire to fund the seamen's brothel. This farcical scene relies not only on the reversals of the status of Manders and Engrand, but on the incongruity of the self-righteous Manders being unconsciously party to such a scheme.

Other scenes from *Ghosts* ambiguously blend seriousness and comedy. A prime example is the highly charged final, deeply ironical, scene of the play. Mrs. Alving, standing at her son's side, pulling her own hair in anguish, can only sob, "Yes... No... No..." as her cherished son, with his last breath, sighs "Mother...the sun...the sun". While potentially tragic in context, the scene is somehow overworked with disproportionate qualities and disruptive elements. Naturalism demands a realistic setting, but Ibsen's laboured detailing seems excessive: "*He [Oswald] sits in the armchair that Mrs. Alving has moved over to the sofa. Day is breaking. The lamp is still alight on the table*". Then half a dozen lines later: "*She goes to the table and puts out the lamp. The sun rises; the glaciers and peaks in the distance glow in the morning light*". This incongruity of the lamp burning while the sun is coming up is a repetition of the absurdity of Regina watering the plants while it is raining in the opening of the play. Then later: "*Sitting in the armchair his [Oswald's] back to the view, suddenly speaks without moving: "Mother, give me the sun...the sun"*" (101). This surfeit of mawkish sentimentality smacks of the old *Movie Tone News*: "And as the sun sets slowly in the West. We say goodbye to..." A more minimal approach may have preserved, more effectively, the sombre quality of the scene. With Oswald, lapsing into a coma, muttering 'the sun...the sun' and Mrs. Alving tearing at her hair, *first screaming*, then *whispering*, and finally in *speechless horror* (102), the scene blurs into bathos reminiscent of the lamentable Thisbe, cradling the dead Pyramus in her arms,

“Asleep my love? What, dead, my dove?” (Act 5, Scene 1, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*).

The fundamentally naturalist text of *Ghosts* employs an interplay of seriousness, satire, and farce. Ibsen, retaining the structure of the well-made play, has adopted naturalism to address the serious subject matter with realism. Ibsen’s attention to the fine detail of *Ghosts*’ set, albeit somewhat manipulative and the meticulous stage directions again conform to the tenets of naturalism. Both Mrs. Alving and her son, Oswald, are constructed as ‘flesh and blood’ characters. Through their journey they change from the perceived conventional personae of their rather rigid, Norwegian, late nineteenth-century society into more fully humanised people. These portrayals represent the psychological reality that lay at the heart of the naturalist movement, although it needs to be noted, in keeping with a postmodern historical paradigm, that these ostensibly ‘fully humanised people’ offer only a particular construction of character that may either endorse or interrogate ‘naturalised’ contemporary values and attitudes. However, the characters of Pastor Manders, Regina and Engstrand may be read as figures of satire and farce. The audience is positioned to receive Mrs. Alving and Oswald as realistic people, whereas they receive Manders, Regina, and Engstrand as comical stock characters representative of the hypocrisy and pretensions of their society, contributing to farce, irony, and satire.

In summary it is contended that Ibsen’s use of genre-blending, along with the retention of the structure and certain elements of the well-made play, is evidence of Ibsen’s awareness of the need to shape material for audience appeal. Ibsen expertly inter-weaves elements

of irony, satire and farce to realistically evoke a naturalistic drama of a family in crisis in late nineteenth-century Norway. Although Ibsen promotes a 'naturalistic' rendering of serious-subject matter, of necessity, the seriousness of the play is intermittently truncated by moments of humour, much as happens in real life. This, in turn, provides a framework within which to explore genre- blending and audience appeasement in the more naturalistic texts of David Williamson.

This chapter has provided a conceptual understanding of naturalism which will be used as a benchmark in Chapter Four to examine how Ibsen's tenets of naturalism translate to Williamson's texts in a "naturalistic" Australia.

## Chapter Four

### Williamson's Naturalism

*His [Williamson's] metier is naturalism.*

(Fitzpatrick, *After 'The Doll'* 112)

*The plays hover on the border between naturalism and perhaps satire.*

(Williamson, qtd. in Palmer 115)

It was established in the previous chapter that the foundational naturalistic text of Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) contains seemingly disruptive elements of satire and farce, and that this genre-blending, together with evidence of the well-made play, hints at a central issue: that there is a need to shape theatrical events in order to sustain and audience's interest as well as to entertain them. This chapter will argue that a similar confluence of naturalism, satire, farce, and irony is observed in David Williamson's more naturalistic plays and will establish the extent to which it has contributed to the perceived superficiality of his work.

It is the object of this chapter to explore the intersections of satire, farce, and irony in Williamson's purportedly naturalistic texts. Specifically, this chapter will determine whether these comic deviations are intrinsic to naturalism and whether they in fact, contribute to the perceived superficiality in his *oeuvre*. Further the chapter will explore the extent of this genre-blending to determine its contribution to Williamson's popularity.

One of the first tenets of naturalism is the treatment of serious subject matter, and so the texts of *The Removalists* (1971), *Don's Party* (1971), *Travelling North* (1979), *Face to Face* (1999) and *Birthrights* (2003) will be examined in terms of their themes. These plays have been selected because, among Williamson's plays, they most nearly conform to the tenets of naturalism, or have the potential to do so.

Peter Fitzpatrick considers naturalism a "slippery term" and explains, "sometimes it is used as though it were synonymous with a simple verisimilitude; at other times it seems to imply a particular set of philosophical assumptions, and a belief in the determining power of environment" (*David Williamson* 23). Abrams and Gadaloff agree that naturalism aims to reproduce theatre as nearly as possible to real life (Abrams 141; Gadaloff: 199). Layton concurs with Abrams and Gadaloff, maintaining the naturalism movement in the theatre was characterised by "putting the ordinary middle class on stage and making drama out of their lives" (1). It is the contention of this thesis however, that naturalism cannot be so neatly encapsulated as these two theorists maintain. It is argued here that Williamson's more naturalistic texts are a complex blend of theatre styles, an interplay of naturalism, satire, irony and farce, and that this blending of genres contributes to the overall success of the plays, and accounts for their popularity with certain cohorts of Australian theatre-goers. Further, it will be maintained that Williamson's plays, starting from a naturalistic premise, are a representation of local truths, positioning the audience in an experience of identity in Australia that becomes iconic, evoking universal truths which are psychologically deep, even when they are presented as superficial. Williamson endorses this assertion when he reveals, "I have

been observing social interaction... Letting the audience see glimpses of what's underneath the surface but not interrupting the flow of drama as it really would happen" (Interview Chapter Seven ). Katharine Brisbane summed up Williamson's intent as a "painful examination of the truth" ("The Looming Giant" 36), which aligns Williamson, in his search for the premise of truth in the theatre, with Zola. Ronald Gaskell takes the premise one step further by advocating naturalism as a "conception of the world, of what is real in human experience" (14).

The worthy tenet of naturalism that advocates artless theatre in the pursuit of truth must be considered within the realm of theatre itself. Even Zola acknowledges that "any piece of work will always be only a corner of nature as seen through a certain temperament...at best it can only be a material reproduction of life" (qtd. in Dukore 716). Not only does individual interpretation infringe on verisimilitude but the very nature of theatre, with its tangible representations and illusory effects, is a contradiction to the truth-at-any-cost code of naturalism. As Shepherd and Womack remind us, "a naturalist play *is* a show" (271). All manner of limitations infringe on the naturalist text: the restraints of length, the patience of the audience, the unities of time and place, inventions, role-playing, 'blocked' movements and the general 'quality control' of the text. All, of necessity, impede the truly authentic treatment of a naturalistic text. These variables are further complicated by current notions of 'postmodernism' with their onus on the audience to receive the reality of the text within the cultural context of their own attitudes and beliefs.

A conundrum then exists in the desire to represent life naturalistically for a theatre audience: is 'life' always so neatly packaged? Is not the tone of any real-life scene precarious? In real life, cannot the seriousness of a significant moment be jeopardised by a triviality? Can economical and meaningful dialogue be expected when individuals themselves may be exceedingly garrulous or taciturn? The best-laid plans in any real-life interaction, may go awry, with the *dramatis personae* contributing to very messy exchanges. *That* is life. In a naturalistic text the audience has expectations that the characters and their interactions should be not only credible but as near to real life as possible. Gilbert Highet in *The Anatomy of Satire* contends that society often ignores the fact that "the ridiculous is built into human experience" (155). Williamson himself acknowledges the dilemma and maintains that his style of naturalism is

not naturalistic in the sense that 'naturalistic' drama is being defined usually, which is we put characters on stage, we let them interact and we peel onions – peel the layers off the onion and we find out what's truly there at their deepest core... I'm not trying to peel the layers off the onion... I really want to depict the reality of processes that happen in social situations on the surface... I'm much more interested in showing how people disguise what's underneath, disguise their self-interest in fake altruism or disguise their anxiety by false confidence.

(Interview Chapter Seven)

This then presents the naturalist playwright with the problem of how to present 'real life' truthfully onstage with seemingly no contrivance. The question then arises as to whether it is feasible to expect a 'naturalistic' text to be purely naturalistic? Perhaps Zola himself

anticipated these dislocations when he described naturalism as “sifting out the confusions of life” (Worthen 904).

Zola, in 1878, eschews what he calls the “mock truthfulness” (Worthen 904) of the romantic period and advocates pursuing real “truth” which he sees as being attainable through the precise analysis of man and his conditioning environment. He envisioned, as documented in Chapter Three, a theatre that looked beneath the seemingly commonplace surface of ordinary life to embrace the emotional context and social aspects of serious subject matter. The everyday, familiar interactions of ordinary people, played out as nearly as possible to real life became Zola’s goal. Depicting ordinary people in real life is also the goal of David Williamson who asserts that his plays are about “how it is” and that his work draws on “personal experience and direct observation” (Kiernan, “Games People Play” 404). However, this very insistence on “how it is” simply posits a particular version of reality that reflects Williamson’s value system and the particular issues he wishes to convey.

It is the contention of this thesis that Williamson’s naturalism is a deceptively simple platform that provides an innocuous wellspring for his ironical and satirical treatment of serious issues. The familiarity of both stage settings and stereotypical character-constructs seduce the audience into identification on one level while below the surface there is an underlying depth of social comment on the superficiality of Australian life.

The seriousness of the subject matter of the aforementioned, purportedly naturalistic, plays embraces both the social aspects and the emotional contexts and situations that are fundamental to naturalism. With the serious, social content of these texts Williamson has the opportunity to eschew a glib, superficial approach in favour of a fuller in-depth naturalistic exploration. He chooses however, to dissipate the naturalism with intersections of satire and farce, thus entertaining the audience while presenting them with his representation of reality. While the surface features of the plays may be perceived as superficial, Williamson's craftsmanship in seamlessly satirising his characters with a blend of irony and farce enables an audience to look beneath the surface for a deeper awareness of universal human conditions. In a postmodern paradigm, Williamson offers his perception of reality and leaves it open to the audiences' multiple readings.

Certainly Williamson's themes concern the lives of individuals from the middle class of Australian society. He told Peter Thompson during *The Wisdom Interviews*, "I was really obsessively interested in human personality, in group behaviour, in the psychology of the human species" (1). Meryl Tobin, writing in *Westerly*, reinforces Williamson's claim, "David Williamson likes to stress the naturalistic. His writing is from real people doing real things" (40). In the following pages this thesis will look at the serious subject matter of the selected Williamson plays to determine the extent of genre-blending in the work and its effect on naturalistic texts. Further, it will establish that, far from dissipating the naturalism of the texts, Williamson's use of intersections of irony, satire, and farce effectively posit the audience in a uniquely Australian experience that is representative of

Williamson's reality. Nowhere is this technique more evident than in *Don's Party*, a play that resonates with iconic Australian representations.

### *Don's Party*

John Clark, in his "Introduction to *Don's Party*", compliments Williamson on his achievement "in capturing one whole segment of Australian society and getting it down with remarkable accuracy" (9). Radic writing in *The Age* for 16 August, 1971, thought that Williamson had "nicely caught the rhythms of a party in his slice of life" (qtd. in Kiernan, *David Williamson* 109), an opinion echoed by the *Listener-In* reviewer, who reaffirmed the play's naturalism by suggesting that "Williamson had left his tape recorder running at a party" (qtd. in Kiernan, *David Williamson* 110). However, not all critics agree. B. A. Young, reviewing the London production of *Don's Party* for the *Financial Times*, laments the lack of substance in the play, "it is not enough, surely, to train a searchlight on it [Australian society] without some further dramatic purpose" ("Review of *Don's Party*"). Malcolm Pettigrove, reviewing the play for *The Canberra Times* in 1974 says, regarding the themes of the play that, "the situation is a launching pad for all kinds of social, psychological, or political investigations... unfortunately its possibilities are never realised. Ignition point is reached between some of the characters, but nothing of significance ever takes off". Following Young and Pettigrove's points, the "social, psychological, or political investigations" present fertile ground for thematic exploration and development, but this does not happen. The research conducted as the basis for this thesis suggests, that this 'expectation' of naturalism and its requisite deep and meaningful probing of serious issues lies at the centre of some critics labelling of Williamson's work

as superficial. Many critics fail to recognise that Williamson, like Molière and Sheridan before him, uses genre-blending and its perceived surface treatment, as a device to accurately expose the sham and hypocrisy of certain cohorts of Australian society. Sheridan's superficial treatment of superficial characters will be dealt with in Chapter Five.

Williamson chooses to sacrifice the purer naturalism of *Don's Party* in favour of a comedic treatment with irony and satire cloaking the astute social commentary. He employs both verbal irony and situational irony during the course of the play and these will be examined in some detail in the following pages.

Williamson's deeply ironic treatment of *Don's Party* is foreshadowed in his choice of title, *Don's Party*, setting up expectations of celebration and good times. The evening, however, descends into something resembling a debacle and herein lies the situational irony. The opening scene of the play juxtaposes the banality of the party dialogue with the context of the seriousness of the federal elections, and this premises the satirical treatment of the text, setting up the audience for irony of situation, where there is a discrepancy between what is expected and what eventuates. The surface level of the text dictates a fast moving, wise-cracking, comedic treatment. However, as with all effective satire, there is a biting criticism of social mores with serious, counter-meanings simmering beneath the surface.

The evening starts off with a gathering of young, educated, married couples coming together, to party, in the living-room of Don and Kath's home. The innocuous setting of the living room places the play in a particular social context, reminiscent, to some extent, of the kitchen in the opening scene of *Ghosts*. The placement of this scene underscores the naturalism of the text as well as setting the irony. The occasion is a 1969 Federal election party, in anticipation of an Australian Labor Party victory. The Labor Party's election platform of "opportunities, the taking of opportunities, the making of opportunities for Australia and for all Australians" (Whitlam "Into the Seventies") gives promise. The election Policy Speech focuses on sweeping social changes to Education, Health, Housing and Urban development, Taxation, Welfare, Aborigines (health, education housing, employment and land rights), Development of Natural Resources, Overseas Investment, Primary Industry and Vietnam. The contentious issue of Australian troops in Vietnam has divided the nation over a number of years and Whitlam promises that under a Labor government, "there will be no Australian troops in Vietnam after June, 1970".

The seriousness of these issues affect the very heart of the nation and provide Williamson with a plethora of satirical substance to pinpoint and reveal the ironic reality permeating the gathering. Here, amidst the tinkling of glasses, the smutty repartee, and banal chatter of home renovations, is an ideal representation of the shallowness of much Australian life. It is ironical that despite the seriousness of the Vietnam War and the crucial federal election results, all of a public nature, these couples are more concerned with how they look, as with Jody's first line on entering the party, "I hope I haven't over-dressed" (18).



- Don:                   What do you reckon?
- Mal:                   No luck?
- Don:                   Depends what you mean.
- Mal:                   Come on. Yes or no?
- Don:                   Yes.... And then no. (*Don's Party*, 35).

This exchange is interrupted by a TV announcement:

*The most significant trend to emerge from the early counting has been the marked swing to Labor. Eight percent, the biggest since the present party system came into operation. If this trend continues to midnight Labor will form the new Government... (35)*

After this encouraging news item it might be expected that the men at the party, and the women who have just rejoined the group, might be fused with some enthusiasm and expectations. However they continue their trite conversation:

- Kerry:                It's a very convenient layout [the house].
- Kath:                 It's so flimsy compared with an old place.
- Kerry:                You ought to try cooking in my kitchen.
- Kath:                 Yes it is a bit small.
- Kerry:                Evan's knocking out the whole back part and remodelling it. It's his next project. (35)

This pattern of banality continues throughout the play with the news bulletins barely causing a ripple among the guests, until the final announcement that, due to the distribution of the preferential votes of the Democratic Labor Party, the Australian Labor

Party, has been defeated. Not for Don and his mates any in-depth discussion of the Labor Party loss, they bury their disappointment with another drink and some more smart talk. After all, they are products of a time when masculine feelings were disengaged and repressed under a casual, 'she'll be right, mate' shield.

The closest the text gets to a post-mortem is Mack's "Look at that bloody DLP vote" (70), followed immediately by:

Cooley: My old man voted DLP,

Mack: Yeah! I had an argument with him one day. Didn't like the permissive society. Wanted a return to Catholic moral purity.

Cooley: He was the last of the great Catholic diggers.

*(Cooley turns down the TV).*

He died on the job you know. By the time they dressed him they couldn't put his teeth back in.

Mack: Yeah. (71)

Ignored also, are the weighty probings, fake presentations, false promises, and unsavoury machinations that make up the political machine at any election time. The seriousness of the issues at hand is dissipated in a swirl of alcohol, bad behaviour, and comic antics. However, the argument of this thesis is that these shallow superficial responses offer to the viewer an entirely appropriate and recognisable value system that emanates from a particular cultural context.

While the overarching serious issues of the Federal election are overlooked by the guests, so also, is the more personal issue of the moral behaviour of the company. “Chatting up” and “scoring” with each other’s women, seems not only to be tolerated by the guests, but accepted as normal. The marginalisation of the women and the sexual predatory behaviour of the males correlate with the antics of the incorrigible Mal, Simon, and Rod from Jack Hibberd’s *White With Wire Wheels*. The added years, and the responsibility of marriage, do not seem to have helped these ockers to develop and mature, which may offer a construction that is entirely recognisable in modern Australian society. The contentious issue of the ethical behaviour of lawyers is touched upon when Cooley accuses Mal (the lawyer) of “peddling bull-shit”. Don intervenes, to say that lawyers are not “beyond reproach”. The irony of the moment is reinforced with Mal’s outrageous response, “Cunt. At least I have a social conscience” (77). Again Williamson uses the shock-value of an obscene retort to jolt his audience into the realisation that the surface appearance is not all there is. Beneath the quick retort, the blasé response and the questionable language are vestiges of the ocker and his strut-and-shrug manner of masking his true feelings. This perfunctory treatment of serious issues is reminiscent of the hapless Pastor Mandors responding to Mrs. Alving’s *cri de coeur* with platitudes in *Ghosts*.

Williamson, in an effort to give a true representation of a group of young, educated ockers, creates a “slice-of-life” scenario with, what Kevon Kemp describes as “enormously rich and Rabelaisian comic flair” (10 July, 1972), has, in fact, sold his

audience, under the guise of entertainment, a satirical and deeply ironic view of themselves.

The play is possibly the most readily recalled of any of Williamson's plays and it is remembered for its comical dialogue and frenetic action: the comings and goings to and from the bedrooms, exaggerated dialogue, characters talking over each other, quick repartee, and the shock factor of vulgar language and gestures. These conventions constitute the hallmarks of classical farce. The object of farce, according to J. A. Cuddon is to "provoke mirth of the simplest most basic kind; roars of laughter rather than smiles" (330). The traditional farce elements comprise repeated, exaggerated movement, ridiculous situations, and improbable events, all emanating from a foundation of naturalism, and all conspicuous at Don's party. Williamson, by exaggerating the antics of Don's guests, particularly after they have been plied with alcohol, creates an hilarious play that satirises the banal behaviour and silliness that permeated gatherings of many young Australians in the 1970s. The juxtaposition of these farcical incidents with the more serious issues of the Federal election and the disintegrating marriages of the couples, provides a highly ironic platform for the play.

Among the most memorable farcical scenes are, when Cooley greets his host, Don, as he arrives at the party "G'day cunt features" and introduces his partner "A cunt is an object of joy. This is Susan" (39). This vulgarity and appalling behaviour sets the scene for the "party tokens" that the guests were asked to bring: Mal's, a playboy cartoon; Simon's balsa phallic symbol; Mac's blow-up of a nude picture of his wife; and Cooley's

pornographic object, his partner. The duck shooting story, with all guests in single file, role-playing the “wading, wading, wading” action (30) and the ruckus in the bedroom with Cooley appearing dishevelled with his fly unzipped, (67) are classical farcical disruptions designed not only for humour and audience appeasement but with a strong satirical purpose. The audience recognises and identifies with the characters and revels in the antics of men behaving badly.

These farcical incidents can be seen as gratuitous and totally at odds with the convention of seamless artifice that underscores the entire naturalist movement, however, they provide the life-blood of *Don's Party*.

The gravity of the issues is dissipated by intersections of humour, both satirical and farcical, and this comedic treatment gives rise to the argument that Williamson, in an effort to appease the audience, has seduced them with comedic devices whereas, in fact, he has shocked them into recognition of the superficiality of certain cohorts of Australian society. Farcical incidents are not inimical to social comment but operate at a different level and Williamson ‘sugar-coats’ the acuity of his comment for audience consumption.

In stark contrast to the surface ‘fun’ at *Don's Party*, is Williamson’s next play, *The Removalists*, where, however, he again uses the guise of humour to heighten his themes of social conditioning. In *The Removalist* however, the themes are about as far from the ‘fun’ of *Don's Party* as it is possible to get: domestic violence, power games, and abuse of authority.

*The Removalists*

*The Removalists*, undoubtedly Williamson's bleakest play, revolves around the serious issues of domestic violence, anti-authoritarianism, limbic emotions, and police brutality. The seriousness of this subject matter certainly meets the demands of Zola, who pursued theatre that depicted the individual's struggle against social convention and even biological imperatives (Worthen 906). The naturalistic treatment of such material has been dealt with, in some depth, in Chapter Three. Williamson's choice of 'black comedy' as a genre to present material that is shocking and horrific, is evidence that he is aware that audiences will be ameliorated by the humour into receiving his disturbing message. Cuddon says of "black comedy" that it shows "human beings in an 'absurd' predicament" (94). Black comedy treats material that is serious – death, suicide, drug abuse, terrorism – in a humorous vein. Williamson has used black comedy in several of his plays. The 'double-demise' – where a character 'dies' twice – is used effectively in *The Removalists*, *Travelling North* and *Sanctuary* (1994). An attempted suicide (*What if You Died Tomorrow?* (1973)), and sexual harassment (*Brilliant Lies*, 1993) are both given a comedic overlay that reinforces the satirical impact.

It is deemed valuable here to digress from the thesis' selected plays to consider the social commentary underpinning *Brilliant Lies*, (1993) as further evidence of misreading of the text on the part of some critics, and their erroneous assumption that the play was "superficial". The main issue of the play is sexual harassment, both at home and in the workplace, with the ancillary concerns of incestuous child-abuse, the inchoate born-again Christian sibling, the blatant in-your-face sexual harassment, and the dubious

machinations of the legal system acting as a wellspring for Williamson to accurately pinpoint some of the social problems of the time.

Williamson's satirical treatment of the serious subject matter in *Brilliant Lies* received adverse criticism for distorting the inherent drama by not only adopting a superficial approach, but also by the addition of contrived and unnecessary characters, in the form of an alcoholic father, a lesbian-feminist sister, and a bankrupt, weak, religious zealot brother. This argument has some validity when the material is looked at as purely naturalistic, however the various and disparate characters, the numerous complications and revelations at significant moments in the play, are evidence of Williamson sacrificing the quest for the psychological truth demanded by naturalism, in favour of biting satire and irony. There are many ironies in the play: the oxymoronic title, *Brilliant Lies*; the fervently holy brother, who ignores the revelations of his father's sexual abuse of his sisters, only to reprimand him for taking the Lord's name in vain; and the *pièce de résistance* when Suzy, the sexually-abused protagonist, gives her legal winnings to the father she is trying to avenge. This ultimate twist has much in common with the irony of Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* using the ill-gotten gains of her husband's philanthropy to establish a children's orphanage. As stated earlier these ironies are lost on critics who, intent on reading Williamson solely as a naturalist, fail to recognise the deep social commentary running beneath the superficial banter.

Not so blatantly satirical is *The Removalists*, which adds a bleak, disturbing element to Williamson's normally "feel-good" plays. In correspondence with the researcher

Williamson reveals his deep belief that “the most satisfying explanations of the enduring mysteries of human nature are located in our powerful emotions, a legacy of a long evolutionary past” (Appendix 2). Williamson names these emotions as belonging to the realm of the “limbic system” and notes the biological universality they present (Interview Chapter Seven).

It is Williamson’s belief that under the surface patterns of behaviour that have been so strongly conditioned by our society, are the enduring and universal emotions of love, hate, aggression, and motivation from our ancient past. The limbic system is present in the members of societies across temporal shifts and space. Aligning himself with Ibsen, Williamson contends that this social conditioning is so strong that society operates behind this ‘mask’ and only occasionally, and in certain circumstances, reveals “the raw power of our limbic emotions lurking underneath our conditioned social responses and sometimes breaking through and overwhelming them” (Appendix 2). Margaret Williams contends that the social ‘mask’ of many Australians, and the effects of social conditioning, tends to confirm “the image of man in Australian drama is collective and social rather than individual” (“Mask and Cage” 327). This concept is dealt with in some depth in Chapter Five. The fracturing of our conditioned social mask, under duress, lies at the heart of *The Removalists*.

*The Removalists* tells the story of a young couple whose combatant marriage is blighted with domestic violence. The wife Fiona, and her sister Kate, arrive at the local police station to be met by the authoritarian Sergeant Simmonds and his rookie off-sider,

Constable Ross. The police officers then embark on a journey that proceeds through a domestic violence report to humiliation, sexual advances and rebuffs, violated sensibilities, and ultimately, a death-in-custody. The play is tightly drawn and plot-driven with the focus on what Williamson asserts is “the authoritarian behaviour and the processes whereby ordinary individuals are drawn into it” (qtd. in Fitzpatrick, *After ‘The Doll’* 117), and the underlying limbic emotions inherent in all of us.

It is of benefit to note that the published script of *The Removalists* is preceded by three essays: “Reflections on Violence” by Ian Turner, “Authority and Punishment: The Australian Inheritance” and “Police: Authority and Privilege” both by Frank Galbally and Kerry Milte. These essays, by way of introduction to the play, offer serious reflections and raise grave issues concerning the subject matter of the play. Turner sees the play raising 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?)” (7). The second, archival essay, which recounts, in case histories, the grim circumstances and harsh brutality afforded the early convicts, concludes with: “The beginning of the twentieth century and the federation of the Commonwealth found inequity, inhumanity and privilege still well entrenched in Australian society” (19).

The final essay by Galbally and Milte opens with:

Many complaints of assault have been made against the police, but few actual charges have been laid. Most of the assaults have taken place within the confines

of the police stations and have been witnessed only by police; not surprisingly, we have never yet heard of one policeman giving evidence against another in these circumstances. Victims are reluctant to complain or take legal action, because they fear reprisals of one sort or another". (20)

It is rare, perhaps even singular, for such serious allegations to be made in preparatory readings for an Australian play, and the profundity of the essays foreshadow, it would seem, a serious play. The whole premise of the text rests on the gravest of indictments of society, however Williamson chooses to juxtapose the foul language, abusive behaviour, and physical violence involved with comedic devices. This surely is testimony to Williamson's adroitness in providing accurate contemporary manifestations of Australian society through the use of irony, satire, and farce. It is also testament to his predilection for shaping material for entertainment and audience appeasement, or as Fitzpatrick would have it, distributing "sugared placebos" ("Styles of Love" 413) to humour his audience, the while making biting satirical comment. In this sense, he is constantly positioning the audience to distance them from the subjectivity of the brutality of the work.

There is no doubting the significance of *The Removalists* and its place as one of the great Australian plays. The play succeeds on many levels. On the surface level it is a naturalistic play with serious subject matter, yet it is also peppered with humour and comical, even farcical, incidents. However the juxtaposition of these humorous scenes within their contexts (Sargeant Simmonds chatting up a victim in the safe confines of the police station and the police officers beating up Kenny in his own home), and the

incongruity of actions and results (the removalist doggedly stripping the place bare while police brutality takes place) makes for biting satire that fuels the irony.

The serious issues are foregrounded by some significant scenes: Ross, reporting for duty, squeaky-clean, on his first morning; Kenny wondering what will happen to his daughter and his pleading for help from the only objective person around, the removalist; and, finally, the truly appalling effect of the two policemen abandoning their duty-of-care as law-enforcers, and starting to violently beat each other up. This is serious theatre. The casual remark, the fake bravado, the laid-back attitude suddenly accumulate and with relentless momentum the action descends into chaos. The positioning of these scenes within the gravity of the context strengthens their irony rather than the naturalism of the text. The incongruity of the humour within the context of the play is an indication of the sophistication of Williamson's satirical treatment of the material. If an audience takes one moment to look beneath the surface and reflect on the hopes and aspirations of the new officer Ross – his pride in his appointment, his nervousness on the first morning, his intent to “get it right”, his willingness to subordinate himself to Simmonds' intimidation – then certainly Williamson is dealing in universal truths. Everyone has “been there” or knows someone who has. Even within a postmodern reading, these universalities are easily recognisable and identifiable. It is this placing of local truths within their context that enables them to become iconic and universally true. This universality constitutes a depth of psychological meaning that manifests itself across times and places and secures Williamson's position as a major Australian playwright.

Williamson uses humour in the opening scene of the play with easy laughs at the expense of the tough cop and his disingenuous partner. Ross, eager to learn on his first morning “on the job” is advised by the senior policeman “stuff the rule book up your arse. That’s the first thing you’ve got to learn. Get me? Life’s got its own rules” (37). Later he quizzes Ross on his ranking in his training class:

Simmonds:               Where’d you come in your class, Ross?

Ross:                       I did reasonably well.

Simmonds:               Isn’t he sweet? Where’d you come, Ross?

Ross:                       Ninth.

Simmonds:               Out of how many?

Ross:                       Eighty.

Simmonds:               Top ten percent. (*Recalculating*) Almost. Pity you didn’t come eighth, Ross. (49)

The easy-going tone of this scene, with the senior officer having a joke at the expense of the young newcomer, sets the scene for the appalling irony that underpins the entire play, and lulls the audience into enjoying the camaraderie. There is no hint of the horror to come.

The crucial scene supporting the claim of domestic violence is given a comic turn, when the crusty old Sergeant shows an unexpected carnal interest in the young women: he unnecessarily inspects the evidence of Fiona’s physical abuse, prodding her naked hips and back: “Tender?” ... more prodding... “There”. It is interesting to note here the neatly

constructed build-up to this significant moment, that is, the young woman's domestic dilemma, the trauma of reporting to the police, her humiliation at having to expose herself in front of the police officers, and finally, the degradation of Simmonds lasciviously touching her. Here we have a situation where a most serious community issue is being confronted. The audience is primed; slightly uncomfortable at the intimacy of the scene, they anticipate Simmonds' weighty verdict. He takes his time, looks the victim all over and quips, "You one of these braless birds, eh?" (55). Simmonds' response is so obscene that it is shocking, the irony jolts the audience into a serious awareness of something that should not be happening. The laughter that accompanies this line is slightly uneasy as the audience begins to have a sense of foreboding of the darker scenes to follow.

Later, when Simmonds is trying to impress Kate and Fiona, he denigrates the legal profession and talks up the police force. He looks to Ross to prove his point, "Wouldn't you say Ross, that the whole emphasis of a policeman's training these days is to enable him to handle human problems?". Ross answers, "Yes...well...we did do a subject called practical psychology for policemen". Simmonds is pleased, "Exactly. Did you find it helped your understanding of the human mind, Ross?". Ross innocently replies: "I was sick that week" (51). Here Williamson's deliberate construction of a context is effective in seducing an audience with humorous banality, the better to have them reel at the horror of the impending brutality.

Fitzpatrick (*Williamson* 42) comments on the topicality of the police brutality in *The Removalists*. On 26 March 1971, Neil Collingburn was intercepted by two Victorian Police constables. He later died in St. Vincent's Hospital on 28 March, 1971. Controversy surrounds what happened in the intervening days. The constables maintained that Collingburn had provoked them with an iron bar, while Collingburn told the hospital staff that he had been severely beaten by the constables. Medical evidence showed that Collingburn had suffered severe injury to his abdomen, bruising, and bleeding from the nose and mouth. The constables involved denied accusations of police brutality in custody and, though they were brought to trial, they were found "not guilty" by a jury in March 1972 (Victorian Office of Police Integrity 45). The case incited public demonstrations against the police force and raised various issues concerning the police brutality and deaths in custody. Given the seriousness of the allegations, the ripple effect it caused, and the close proximity of the creation of the play, it is interesting to note Williamson's confidence in satirising the subject matter. He assuredly balances the seriousness of the matter, with both poignant moments and absurdities, to create an iconic play on the recognition of the repressed aggression inherent in all of us.

It is interesting to note also, that although Kenny goads his captors and makes outrageous threats he, in fact, does not act upon them. The brutality is left, ironically, to the police officers, who seem as if their uniforms have desensitised their sensibilities. When the seemingly innocuous Ross goes berserk and punches into Kenny, Simmonds seems quite nonplussed:

Simmonds:                    Did you let him get away?

- Ross: (frightened. Softly, hoarse) I've killed the bastard, Serg.
- Simmonds: (amused) Come on, Ross. Haven't you ever knocked a man out before?
- Ross: (frightened) I think I've killed him.
- Simmonds: You better not have bruised him, boy. I hope it was a nice clean punch
- Ross: (frightened) No, look I really think I killed him.
- Simmonds: Yes, well I'm afraid I'm going to have to report this incident to cover myself in case anything does blow up, but if you hit him on the chin you should be right. (110)

This interaction, quite humorous in performance, underscores the subtle conspiracy that pervades institutions when trouble arises. Kenny's ultimate death, finds Simmonds still thinking how to exonerate himself from the debacle. When Ross laments that they should have taken Kenny to hospital, Simmonds responds: "...get into casualty with a body on your hands? I'm not crazy, Ross. I'm not callous, but then again I'm not stupid and there's an important distinction there" (127). It is noted that an incident of police brutality in 2005, reported and discussed in Chapter Six ("Police Brutality Inquiry to Open) also discloses that police lied in court and had turned away an ambulance that arrived to treat the victim's injuries. This is case of life imitating art. Simmonds and Ross are drawn naturalistically, and however limited their character-constructs may be, they have become symbolic representations of police corruption and the police culture that protects them.

The scene continues with the officers accusing each other and humorous one-liners following in rapid-fire succession. The characterisations of the out-of-control officers become caricatures, and the scene descends into farce. Fitzpatrick, commenting on the transition from “jokey camaraderie” to horrific reality says “when Kenny suddenly dies in front of us, we are caught, like Simmonds in mid-laugh” (48) and goes on to ponder “why do we laugh?” (49). Audiences often laugh as a release-mechanism from the tensions of the play (Praities 2) and this appears to be the response to much of the brutality of the second act of *The Removalists*. They also laugh because they are positioned, by the playwright’s structuring of the play, and the comically heightened dialogue and antics, to receive the play at some distance from the horror of the situation. This distancing, or emotional detachment, allows an audience to laugh, and at the same time satirises Australian male detachment from empathy.

In the last scene of the play, the audience, finally, becomes aware that they are experiencing an horrific act of violence. Ross, distraught at his actions in killing Kenny, panics and suggests a number of alibis: “We could make it look like a suicide” and “we could hang him” and “[to Simmonds] I’ll say that you did it” and “let’s blast his head off with a shot gun” (115). While the officers bicker and yell, and grapple with each other in a true frenzy, Kenny, dying, slowly crawls into the room. This unexpected reprise is greeted with a variety of responses by the audience, from abhorrent gasps, to nervous shrieks, to full-blown comedic laughter. Kenny says: “Did you two pricks think you did me?” (116). The officers, saving their own heads, refuse to get Kenny a doctor, but try to placate him, with Simmonds offering to set him up with some prostitutes and Ross

getting him a cold can of beer. While the three are drinking, and Simmonds is pontificating on how Ross can best address the flaws in his character, Kenny dies, again, and this time for real. And, again, the audience responds with shock, horror, and laughter. Irony pervades the scene when the officers, while lamenting Kenny's injuries, and exonerating themselves, actually succeed in killing him.

The double demise in *The Removalists* is a favourite farcical ploy of Williamson's. He uses it again in *Travelling North* (and yet again in *Sanctuary*, 1994). The utter seriousness of the moment when Frank dies in *Travelling North* is truncated by his farcical death. With Frank sitting upright in his armchair and Frances "tear-stained but resolute" (248), toasting his life with a bottle of champagne, the foot-rest of Frank's chair suddenly alters and he collapses, to die again! The group "jump with shock" (249). This farcical ploy of Williamson's works well with an audience. In both *The Removalists* and *Travelling North*, the deaths occur unexpectedly after a strong narrative build-up. The effect is one of disbelief and horror. With barely seconds with which to digest the enormity of the demise, the character, presumably lifeless, either comes to life again, as in *The Removalists*, or in the case of *Travelling North*, Frank's chair alters position, with his corpse appearing to sit up. The audience is positioned to receive this action with relief on one level, and with side-splitting humour on a broader level. Either way, the response marks the irony and the horror of recognition of an audience that is being wrenched from its comfort zone. This "pulling back from pain", the failure to explore deeper into difficult emotional moments, is almost Brechtian in its effect of distancing the spectators from the emotional impact of the text. However, Williamson does not allow the same

degree of objectivity as Brecht's alienation effect, as the audience is shocked into confrontation with a reality it would rather not know.

The serious, topical issues of a society so enmeshed in itself that it ignores a victim's cry for help; the dehumanising effects of domestic violence and the ubiquitous police brutality to a man in custody, are introduced and given a satirical treatment aimed at confronting the audience on several levels. There is no doubting the powerful effect of *The Removalists* and it deserves the iconic status it has attained in Australian theatre.

*Travelling North*, *Face to Face* and *Birthrights* deal with subject matter that is not only serious in content but exposes the conflicts and deliberations which are ubiquitous within familial relationships. These plays have the potential for naturalistic treatment, with its accompanying examination of the convoluted perplexities and serious issues that lie at the heart of most conflict.

#### *Travelling North*

Possibly the most intimate of Williamson's plays, *Travelling North* deals not only with mature-age love, but the insecurities, responsibilities and expectations of the families involved. Katharine Brisbane in her Introduction to Williamson's *Collected Plays Volume II* likened the introspective themes of this play to King Lear with his personal conflicts and the tragic consequences of his daughters' ingratitude (xi). The play is recognised as one of Williamson's finest, with Fitzpatrick, proclaiming it "the best" (1987 164).

*Travelling North*, essentially a love story, is undoubtedly Williamson's most naturalistic play. It involves a seventy-seven year old socialist, Frank, and his new-found love, the fifty-five year old Frances. The play charts the developments within the lives of the protagonists and their respective children, and with it, Williamson moves into new territory. Leonard Radic, reviewing the play for *The Age*, (25 August, 1979) reported that Williamson had taken "one of those artistic leaps which every playwright needs to take from time to time if he is not to become typecast and repetitive". This is a reference to Williamson's creation of a play about human relationships with deeper, more complex involvements. Talking with Jennifer Palmer, on this shift in his work, he said he was getting older and reflected "I'm prepared to look inside myself and look at the Freudian 'Id' and be a bit more honest, hopefully" (qtd. in Zuber-Skerritt 209).

Williamson gives *Travelling North* an almost 'filmic' treatment with thirty-three scenes, oscillating between Melbourne and Northern New South Wales. This somewhat fragmented approach keeps the action of the play moving at a fast pace and is also representative of the many threads and concerns with which the protagonists deal. *Travelling North* is concerned with, love and separation, parents and their children, selfishness, responsibilities, loyalty, and ultimately, death. These weighty subjects are touched upon and depicted with some degree of veracity, yet Williamson still infuses the naturalistic drama with elements of farce and satire to establish the ironies evident in the cross-generational relationships

A pivotal scene in the play, Scene Two, introduces Frances' two daughters, Sophie and Helen. Through exposition it is revealed that Frances and Frank have been writing to each other twice a day and, although Sophie is apprehensive, Helen is downright against the match: "I think the whole thing's sick" (194). This scene is pertinent to the play as it foreshadows some of the doubts and deliberations that Frances faces later. The stage directions tell us that the girls are "*stylishly dressed in a conventional, middleclass manner*", that Sophie has a "*quality of self-absorption about her*" and Helen has a "*neurotic compulsion to ferret out the facts*" (193). Williamson uses ironic reversal to satirise these girls in thirteen lines of dialogue that makes for biting social comment.

Sophie and Helen's representation as young modern women is discussed further in Chapter Five. However, their brittle dismissal of their mother's love affair, the off-handed cursoriness with which they conduct their own relationships and their quick recovery from the more significant moments of the play, all bear witness to Williamson's astute observation and assessment of this particular cohort of young Australian women. However Williamson allows little flickers of sentiment, with moments of uncertainty and doubt for the mother they really do care about, to underlie their self-absorption. During the first twelve lines of Scene Three, Sophie shows her concern with "We're very glad for you, Mother", and "...we're very happy for you" and again, "I'm really very happy for you Mother" (195). These glimpses of something more altruistic beneath the veneer of selfishness, is probably fairly representative of the thoughtlessness of some young women, caught up in their own individual worlds. It is these "flaws" in character-constructs that are part of the universal attributes of "being" and this enhances the

characters' credibility. These "flaws" also exonerate these female character-constructs from claims of stereotypical representation. Although these women are drawn fairly superficially, the moment their stereotypical 'mask' slips to reveal vulnerability, they disclose sub-text, and acquire a deeper layer of meaning. These young women in *Travelling North* mark a distinct time shift from Williamson's young women of the early 70s. They are on their way to becoming the liberated young women in *Birthrights* (2003).

With *Travelling North*, Williamson moves closer to exploring the complex issues of love and responsibility with warm and loving scenes between Frank and Frances. The overall, bitter-sweet tone of the play, the characters and their emotional interaction, are something of a departure for Williamson, whose married couples usually endure somewhat fractious relationships. Some critics, while commending Williamson's move into softer, more reflective territory, were disappointed to find the play lacking in emotional depth. Radic found the Sydney production of *Travelling North* to be "deficient in psychological and social detail" ("Review") and H. Robinson concurs "we grope for meaning behind the lines, but we find none. The word glib comes to mind" ("Review"). The farcical treatment of Frank's death has already been dealt with, but Frances' seemingly glib reaction to his death also comes in for criticism. On her lover's death, after nearly four years of love and hopes and dreams, Frances stoically travels on. Williamson avoids exploring her pain and chooses instead to preserve the fast tempo of the text, in doing so he seemingly truncates her emotions. This truncation of emotions is a deliberate choice of treatment and can be explained by Williamson choosing to pull back

from pain in deference to Frank and Frances' character traits, as well as the overall theme of the play being one of regeneration and the continuance of life.

The tightly scripted text of *Travelling North* is an accurate representation of personal interrelatedness and cultural values. The strength of the play is its empathetic treatment of a segment of life that the audience recognises and with which it identifies. But perhaps more importantly, the depth of naturalism in the play deepens the level of emotional engagement and renders this play more nearly overtly naturalistic than Williamson's other plays. However, it is interesting to note that *Travelling North* while praised in some quarters and earning wide commercial success, still had its detractors who lamented Williamson's use of humour in certain serious scenes and, again, his truncation of character-constructs. The researcher validates the exploration of this play in this thesis because it reveals Williamson's skill in crafting a realistic depiction of Australian inter-generational family life. Just as *Ghosts* portrayed family values and beliefs at the turn of the twentieth century in Ibsen's Norway, so is Williamson's family representative of the Australian way. Similarly, *Ghosts* employs intersections of satire and farce to eminent advantage, as does Williamson's genre-blending enhance the naturalism of *Travelling North*.

Just as *Travelling North* is Williamson's perception of an incidence of mature love and inter-generational family life, so is *Birthrights* concerned with family matters and acute, complex decision making. Williamson, alerted to the seriousness of infertility and the accompanying emotional rollercoaster ride of IVF, through the trials of a female friend,

created *Birthrights* to address the issues. Writing from a naturalistic premise, Williamson sets out to dramatise the “delicate and sometimes brutal dance of clashing human egos” (*Birthrights* 5). The following pages reveal that once again, Williamson employs intersections of satire and farce in a mostly naturalistic text, to heighten the irony of the play, and also, to focus the audience’s attention on the many layers of emotional and psychological levels embedded in the process of IVF and its effect on, not only the couple involved, but their extended families as well.

### *Birthrights*

Ingratitude, expectations and disappointment lie at the heart of *Birthrights* and its topical relevance to that section of Australians involved in the traumatic experience of *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF). The programme notes available for *Birthrights*, commence with “The old word ‘childless’ captures the condition better than ‘infertile’, which smacks too much of the clinic. ‘childless’ gets to the yearning, the pity and the loss” (Programme Notes). Williamson, himself, in his introduction to the published script uses words like “only option”, “IFV hell”, “offers a promise”, “pumps a woman so full of fertility hormones that her body tells her she must be pregnant when in fact she’s not...”, “deep moods”, “depression”, “obsessed” and “unexplained rage” (3). Such emotional terminology, with such sober implications, resonates with human anguish. The dynamically charged universal subject matter of infertility, childlessness, surrogacy, failure, guilt and grief correlates to Pizer’s belief that the subject matter of naturalism “deals with raw and unpleasant experiences which reduce characters to “degrading” behaviour” (1). Given the human factors underpinning the play, some critics thought the text would demand a

naturalistic approach. Frank McKone and John McCallum's criticisms of a superficial approach have been dealt with in Chapter Two. The comments are representative of the criticisms levelled at Williamson over the years when critics continue to read his plays as purely naturalistic.

Certainly the play presents and explores the rich source of motivations, passions, and tensions within the framework of an "ordinary" three-generational family, and constitutes what Shepherd and Womack see as the basis of naturalism, "human drama" (277).

However, Williamson chooses a satirical approach with the inclusion of razor-sharp dialogue, shock admissions and comical one-liners to underscore the irony of the play. In doing so, Williamson recognises and represents local truths about individuals and their actions and reactions, within a particular context. This representation of personal and local truths marks them as universal and psychologically deep. A postmodern reading evokes multiple interpretations and this paradigm is particularly pertinent in the early part of this century where it is recognised that not every woman desires children and not every woman is cut out for motherhood. If Williamson's assertions about the significance of limbic emotions are correct then however the audience receives *Birthrights*, and however diverse their interpretations, the plot-line is still powered by the universal psychological truths of human experience.

While *Birthrights* may not be considered among the best of Williamson's *oeuvre*, it still presents as a highly satirical piece of theatre on a relevant social matter. Interludes of comedy juxtaposed with the seriousness of the moment provide for the deeply ironic

undercurrents that permeate the text. The effectiveness of the treatment is testament to Williamson's art in finely balancing the naturalism of the play while making potent social comment.

The social interaction between the mother and her daughters, affords Williamson the opportunity to satirise not only the modern marriage, but the institute of motherhood as well. The mother, Margaret, when told by one daughter, Claudia, that another, Helen, had felt left out as a child, glibly replies: "She was such a *demanding* little beast. The truth is that I loved going to work so I could leave her with Beryl and get the hell out of there." Stage directions advise: "Claudia *smiles*" (34). The blatant honesty of the mother's response shocks an audience into the realisation that not all women are endowed with the instinct to nurture. There may be many women in the audience who recognise themselves and the conflict of interest that motherhood induces.

Later, a scene between Margaret and Claudia, which has the potential for development into a rather poignant exchange of a private matter between the two, is truncated by an outrageous admission. The daughter, Claudia, with some difficulty, reveals why she loves her partner. She hesitatingly confesses, "He's highly intelligent, witty, ironic, radical and we're very... [*embarrassed*] compatible. Physically" (26). Here the audience anticipates extrapolation of a confidential nature or, at least, the mother's happy or congratulatory response. Instead, Williamson uses shock tactics when the mother retorts: "For God's sake, don't let *that* ever sway you. The best lover I ever had was a Japanese vibrator" (26). The audience is shocked by the incongruity of the moment when the discrepancy

between expectations and reality makes for biting social comment. Again, an intimate moment between Claudia and her mother Margaret, is given a comedic turn by an unexpected, ‘tacky’ response. Claudia confides to her mother that she thinks she is pregnant and she expresses relief that the wait is over:

Margaret:               It wasn’t your fault. Wasn’t his sperm count very low.

Claudia:                (*her voice lowered*) Yes, so low my doctor thinks I co-opted the plumber.

Margaret:               If he looks like mine, you should’ve.

Claudia:                God, did I have to work for it. Feet in the air for an hour after sex, making Martin wear daggy loose underpants so his scrotum wouldn’t overheat. (45)

This shock -tactic device has been used by Williamson from his earliest plays, with Stork’s opening line “Who’s got a fuckin’ bottle opener?” (*The Coming of Stork* 10), then Cooley’s greeting to his host, Don, “G’day Cunt Features” (*Don’s Party* 39), and Mike’s comparison of his girl friend’s orgasm to “eating zabaglione” (*Emerald City* 9). The device is effective in that it takes the audience by surprise with its grossness, creates laughter, and provides a balance with the realistic details, thereby implicitly allowing underlying ironies to emerge. As discussed in earlier in chapter One, and later in Chapter Five, this pulling back from pain, echoes to some extent, Brecht’s theory of alienating an audience so they receive the message of the play more objectively.

*Face to Face*

*Face to Face* and the process of Community Conferencing for social justice has been compressed into a drama “remarkably close to the experience of being inside the circle” (David Moore, “The Theatre of Everyday Conflict” xvi). Moore goes on to describe the process: “The T. J. A. [Transformative Justice Australia] conference is a structured conversation in a community of people affected by conflict” (Moore, xvi). The process involves assembling a group of people, in debate over contentious issues, and providing them with a facilitator who then leads them through a process designed to turn the negatives of the situation into positives. It is a democratic process with everyone involved participating in the discussions, airing their views, working through problems towards reconciliation. This scenario, rigid with its seriousness, is juxtaposed with a conglomerate of diverse characters who are ironical before they say anything. They are a disparate group of people, of differing age, background, status and nationality. The nature of their meeting is serious business and as the play reveals, they all have ‘baggage’ to fuel their attitudes.

Although *Face to Face* deals with the serious matters of criminal charges and social justice, Williamson is able to interweave the personal issues and cultural values with humorous dialogue and farcical incidents. The workplace is revealed as a place of aggression, humiliation, sexism, intrigue, hypocrisy, and greed. During the conferencing process it is revealed that young Glen’s outburst, and its consequences, went much deeper than ramming his boss’s car. Glen is the butt of workplace jokes that involve him being set up for failure with the office girls who are party to the prank. Luka and Richard are

workmates, who, in an effort to exonerate themselves from the joke, reveal that there is animosity between the workers at Baldoni's regarding wages, conditions, and promotions. During a heated moment it is revealed that Greg Baldoni, the boss, has been having an affair with his secretary, Julie. His wife Claire then accuses Greg of having had an earlier affair with Glen's mother, Maureen. Amid accusations and recriminations, the revelation of motives, the telling of stories, and the airing of grievances, Williamson presents his audience with a blue-print of themselves. The conferencing succeeds in encouraging the participants to acknowledge their contributory influences and to look at how they might have behaved differently.

Conflict resolution and reconciliation seem imminent. In a text that is underscored by criminal charges, harassment and infidelity the audience is positioned to be enlightened and edified, as well as entertained. Williamson injects the seriousness of the occasion with humorous retorts and farcical incidents resulting in pungent satirical comment. During reconciliation, Glen, the perpetrator, jumps up repeatedly to hug the other participants. The juxtaposition of the inappropriateness of this gesture at serious moments in the text, combined with its repetition, provides for farcical comedy. When the hapless Glen, whose mother, Maureen, describes as "never an Einstein at School [...] he's too trusting. He gets picked on. Teased" (13) suddenly defends himself with "...I said a lot of girls thought I looked like Mel Gibson, an' it's true" (14), the audience explodes into laughter. The seriousness of the relationship between the backward son and his despairing mother is juxtaposed with comic responses and its placement in the environs of the staid conference room reinforces the irony of the situation. However, beneath the surface, the

funny lines, and the laughter, there is a poignant moment when audiences can delve – just a little – to catch a glimpse of the desperate mother’s love that wraps its victim in a protective coating. It is these momentary flashes of humanity that encourage an audience, amid the laughter, to look further, to probe beneath the surface, to reveal something more. And again, what some critics deemed ‘stereotypical’ characterisations attain stature and a new dimensionality when they reveal their vulnerability.

Williamson’s trademark outrageous retort surfaces fairly early in the play, when the facilitator, Jack Manning coaxes Glen, the perpetrator, to reveal how the crime happened:

Jack Manning:           We’d like to hear it from you. Exactly how you remember it.

Glen:                       I rammed his bloody Mercedes. Went right up his arse with my bullbar. Crumpled like cardboard. (6)

And later:

Jack Manning:           What were you feeling at the time...Before you hit him.

Glen:                       Pissed off.

Jack Manning:           What do you reckon about it now?

Glen:                       I reckon anybody who buys a Mercedes is crazy.Crumpled like cardboard (7).

A serious situation develops when, during questioning, it is revealed that, not only has Maureen, Glen’s mother, had an affair with the boss, Greg, but so has his secretary, Julie. The potentially sombre situation with characters, literally in dire circumstances, and so

much riding on the moment, prompts a fairly explosive reaction from Greg's wife, Clare. However, Williamson opts for humour with Julie trying to ameliorate the situation by saying, "I made the moves" and Clare retorting: "You couldn't be *that* desperate" (30). Again, the unexpected retort promotes laughter and eases a potentially painful situation.

The audience is positioned to receive the hearing of a case for civil justice; and within moments they are jolted by unexpected language and a humorous take on a misdemeanour. This distancing from pain is a requisite of satirical drama, necessitated by the fact that it is difficult to laugh at a situation one can personally identify with. The emotional detachment allows an audience to laugh, and at the same time, recognise the satire objectively.

### *Conclusion*

It is apparent from the study of the subject matter of the above plays that David Williamson writes from a naturalistic premise, using irony and farce to satirise his perception of society. Williamson has always been concerned with social interaction and social patterning and its manifestations (Interview Chapter Seven), and he takes an ironic stance in order to satirise the insecurities, inadequacies and interpersonal conflicts of his characters. This genre-blending lies at the source of much of the criticism levelled at Williamson's plays over the last thirty-five years by critics who read the plays as naturalistic, and seem reluctant to look to a deeper level for satire and irony.

Williamson's choice of subject matters, namely, the socio-political roller-coaster ride of *Don's Party*, domestic violence and anti-authoritarianism in *The Removalists*, mature-age

love, *Travelling North*, sterility and *in vitro* fertilisation in *Birthrights*, and community conferencing in *Face to Face*, is treated with his own unique interpretation of naturalism. That is, naturalism with intersections of satire and farce, that create an irony which underpins the texts.

It is the contention of this thesis that Williamson's placement of his plays within their context, locates them in time and space, and reflects the codes of being and belonging specific to their time. Beneath the surface level of the plays, there is a blistering social commentary that is a representation of local truths that transcend times and spaces to embrace emotional universalities of meanings that will travel diachronically and with durability.

Chapter Five will examine the construction of selected Williamson's characters in an effort to determine the extent of their emotional depth and credibility. Williamson's stereotypical constructs will also be examined to determine whether they are, as his critics maintain, mere two-dimensional constructs used as comedic constructions to entertain his audiences, or whether they are in fact representative of the naturalistic characters he is depicting.

## Chapter Five

### Williamson's Use of Naturalistic Characterisation as a Satirical Device

*The best drama, like Chekhov's, can show us with power and clarity that we have so many inner contradictions at our core...*  
(David Williamson, Introduction to *After the Ball*)

*My object as a dramatist has always been to explore the nature of human nature itself as it manifests itself in social situations.*  
(David Williamson, Appendix 3)

The previous chapter examined the texts of *The Removalists* (1971), *Don's Party* (1971), *Travelling North* (1979), *Face to Face* (1999), and *Birthrights* (2003) to establish how their subject matter most nearly correlates with, or deviates from, the tenets of naturalism, and the effects of intersections of satire, farce, and irony on the reception of these plays. This chapter will explore naturalistic characterisations in an effort to determine the extent of emotional depth and credibility of character-constructs in David Williamson's more naturalistic texts. To facilitate the reading of this Chapter, the term 'naturalistic' will be considered synonymous with 'realistic' when describing characterisations. This is in keeping with Cuddon's assertion that "Naturalism [is]...a word sometimes used loosely as a synonym for realism" (574). The plays being considered are: *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *Travelling North*, *After the Ball* (1997) *Face to Face*, and *Birthrights*.

In addition, the use of stereotypical or two-dimensional character-constructs will be noted, with a view to assessing whether they are simply contrived for their comedic value

or whether they, in fact, assist in the construction of symbolic representations. It will be argued in this chapter that while some of Williamson's protagonists have the potential to meet the test of psychological depth required of naturalism, they are, nevertheless, deliberate stereotypical constructions used as a device to help to maintain a satirical veneer that underscores accurate sociological commentary. In addition this chapter will establish that, in many cases, Williamson uses a two-dimensional character-construct because, in fact, some groups of Australian society are indeed superficial. The extent of this capacity to recognise certain cohorts of society as superficial and depict them as such, by two-dimensional, stereotypical representation, is unique to Williamson. It is this use of stereotypical representation that leads to the accusations of superficiality in Williamson's work that this thesis is at pains to demonstrate are both unwarranted and unfair.

Margaret Williams is one critic who defends the use of stereotypes in Australian drama asserting, "the image of man in Australian drama is collective and social rather than individual ("Mask and Cage" 327). Kiernan concurs, stating that Williamson uses stereotypes to explore patterns of social behaviour, rather than individuals, and that this stems from his interest in social psychology ("Games People Play" 396). In an interview with Candida Baker, Williamson defends himself against charges of stereotypical characterisations attesting that "stereotypes have a dramatic function" (297) in supporting the structure of his plays. Certainly in Williamson's early plays, *The Coming of Stork*, *Don's Party*, *Jugglers Three*, *The Removalists*, and *The Club*, the stereotypical construct is used to reflect the limitations of the characters, who are stunted by the social roles that

society has imposed upon them. Carroll agrees, maintaining that Williamson's limited characterisation is an "ironic device to show how it constrains a self which wishes to assert itself beyond social interaction" (227). Williamson, coming from a stance of deep social commitment, as revealed in the Introduction and Chapter One, creates characters as he perceives them, not only locating them in a space and time that is uniquely Australian, but endowing them with human factors that are universal and biologically and socially determined. In an effort to explore Williamson's unique genre-blending of naturalism, irony and satire in his character-constructs, it is considered useful to look at some of the seminal attributes of naturalistic characterisations.

The first stage of this chapter will establish benchmarks against which to measure Williamson's use of naturalist characterisations. These benchmarks draw on the work of Emile Zola, Donald Pizer and W. B. Worthen as discussed in Chapters Three and Four. The concept of naturalism and naturalistic characterisations has undergone significant shifts in meaning since Zola first used the term in the mid-nineteenth century. For Zola a naturalistic characterisation was a "man of flesh and bones.... taken from reality, scientifically analysed, without one lie" (qtd. in Dukore 711). Almost one hundred years later, Pizer modifies the term, and identifies naturalistic characterisations as those that depict individuals dealing with the raw experiences of everyday life as truthfully as possible; characters caught up and determined by heredity, environment and chance (214). Generally naturalism dictates characters who are conditioned and controlled by society and heredity, and who struggle with their innermost feelings, their doubts and insecurities; their reticences and regrets.

Worthen, on the other hand, notes that naturalist characters should be driven by psychological motives as distinct from the metaphysical tendencies of the earlier neo-classicist and romantic periods (901). It appears that in the twenty-first century, 'scientific analysis' has given way to a study of mankind's inherent qualities, with psychological make-up being paramount.

This psychological reality provides a rich source for drama portraying the human experience with its underlying traits and conflicts. In relation to Williamson this means that his characterisations depict 'real' characters as he perceives them. Some of them meet the accepted norm of naturalistic characters with psychological depth, while others, as this chapter will establish, have either limited psychological depth as people, or are conditioned by their society to 'mask' their depth of feelings behind a veneer of glibness which Williamson himself, has labelled "the social dance" (Appendix 3). Williamson claims, "it's not that I write two-dimensional characters. In social situations most of the time we behave as if we are two-dimensional characters" (Appendix 3).

Crucial to the construction of a naturalistic character is the use of 'sub-text', which J.A. Cuddon defines as, "what is under or below, what is not said or done, what is implied, suggested or hinted at" (931). This term, while it is implied within a text, also has its application in the pauses or silences interpreted by the actor. It is the thoughts and emotions that are implied, rather than verbalised, by the actor that can be a powerful element of characterisation and a wellspring for naturalism's fully-rounded portrayals.

The playwright may (or may not) demand these in his textual instructions. As is demonstrated in this chapter however, Williamson's sub-text is crucial to satirical works. Even shallow, superficial characters can have a psychological reality of their own, though they may not engage in deep and meaningful discourse.

Don (*Don's Party*, 1971) and Maureen Tregaskis (*Face to Face*, 1999) appear to be characters that are perceived by Williamson as 'natural' and, indeed, within the contexts of their respective plays, they are. However, they are both products of their society: Don's glib handling of the breakdown of his marriage is important to him but he is a product of his society and, as a male, has been conditioned to emotionally disengage himself from his feelings; Maureen is also a victim of her conditioning, and whilst she is comfortable revealing her maternal feelings for her son, she is reluctant to disclose much about the affair she has with her son's boss. Williamson recognises this latter character's emotional limitations and depicts her realistically as a character who has a surface veneer which sometimes slips to reveal her vulnerability. In relation to this thesis, Maureen is depicted as a 'surface', stereotypical characterisation because she is, in fact, reluctant to drop her social 'mask' and, so, appears 'superficial'. She is as 'natural' as Williamson perceives her and she is therefore a representation of local truths that ironically present the audience with a deeper understanding of their humanity.

Williamson's use of superficial representations of a superficial society follows in the tradition established by Molière (1622-1673) and continued by R. B. Sheridan (1751-1816). Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) is set among the high society of Bath, a spa town

some one hundred miles west of London. There, the wealthy locals, and visitors, ‘took the waters’ that they believed would help stave off the ravages of their dissipated life-style. At Bath they also indulged themselves with masquerade balls, theatre going, and promenading. It is this society that Sheridan immortalised with characters such as, Sir Lucius O’Trigger, Mrs. Malaprop, and Lydia Languish. These alliterative names aptly define the frivolity of the scene and the sham and hypocrisy that characterised their lives. Sheridan used stereotypical, two-dimensional characterisations to make broad social commentary. Williamson does precisely the same thing.

It is of interest to note, that while the actor is the conduit through which the playwright’s text is portrayed to an audience, it is the text itself that provides the primary source of meaning. In naturalistic theatre, it is of paramount importance that an actor realise the ‘role’ or ‘character’ into a credible representation that is accepted by an audience as an illusion of real life. This requires the actor to physically reveal what the character is feeling, their motivations, thoughts, beliefs and inner conflicts. While the ‘lines’ of a text provide the vehicle for characterisations, it is often what is implied by the sub-text that contributes to building a believable psychological ‘reality’ of a character. The opening lines of *After the Ball*:

Kate:	You came!
Stephen:	Of course I came.
Kate:	You came. (1)

are an example of Williamson using eight words of dialogue to express something of the depth of a life-time of shared experiences of a dying mother and her son. The words,

literally, convey a sense of relief that the mother feels when her son arrives. The repetition of "you came" adds a poignant dimension to the moment, with the second "you came" exuding a fulfillment and contentedness of a mother's knowledge that her boy would come. Stephen's emphatic "Of course I came" cements this tie between mother and son. In addition, Williamson gets extra value from this economy of words with the irony of the first "you came!" being almost an exclamation of surprise creating an incongruity between appearance and reality.

This technique of delving below the surface to reveal further the motivations and feelings of a role provides a more complex and 'layered' characterisation and is mainly thought of in terms of realistic/naturalistic drama. However, as mentioned previously, the underlying currents in a text – its sub-text – work just as acutely for ironical and satirical plays.

Shepherd and Womack credit sub-text and its power with giving us what is "truly, ordinarily, human" (277) as the most potent force underpinning naturalistic characters. This building of characters from the 'inside out' is a holistic approach and results in characters that are 'fleshed out', fully human, and controlled by the underlying beliefs and motivations of their personalities. The audience understands these characters as 'real' and recognises the human qualities that animate them. While this is true of fully-developed characterisations, it is just as true of certain two-dimensional stereotypical constructs. In an even more powerful way than sub-text, the text itself remains the catalyst for performance, and its scope or limitations dictate the potential for the interpretation of the sub-text involved.

This chapter now moves to a consideration of the types of characterisation accessible to any playwright and addresses the differences between fully-rounded three-dimensional characterisations and the more limited, flat, two-dimensional representations. It is considered beneficial to differentiate between three-dimensional and two-dimensional character-constructs and their general use in both naturalistic and satirical plays, in order to ascertain just how adept Williamson is in finely balancing the elements of a character, the better to endorse the substance of the play.

E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), discerned the differences and discrepancies in characterisations, and proffered the idea that characters can be divided into 'round' and 'flat'. While Forster's classification of character refers primarily to characterisation in the novel, the classification is equally valid in its application to plays. His criteria for fully rounded characterisations include a complexity of disposition, the potential for further development and change, and centrality to the dramatic action of the text (143). These characters are often referred to as 'three-dimensional' characters. Forster's flat characters, on the other hand, are constructed around "a single idea or quality" (138). They are not complex and they do not develop or change over the course of a literary text, thereby giving "comforting reassurance" (139) to the reader/audience. These flat, 'two-dimensional' character-constructs can be known as 'type' or 'representative', stereotypical, thin, or sometimes even, 'caricature'. Forster attributes two advantages to flat characters; firstly, that they are easily recognised by the reader /audience and, secondly, that they are remembered by the reader/audience because they do not change.

He goes so far as to label them a “convenience” for an author (139) who uses them to make a statement, further the narrative, or enhance dialogue. It is crucial to the argument of this thesis that Williamson’s observation, mentioned earlier in this Chapter be heeded: that some individuals are in life sometimes only two-dimensional, and that accurate characterisation of these limited individuals, appears two-dimensional when, in fact, it is a credible representation.

It is perhaps useful at this point to differentiate between some of the terms used by Forster in his definitions. “A ‘character’ is a person in a story or play; a ‘characteristic’ is one aspect of the psychological make-up of a person; ‘characterisation’ is the general process of using words on a page to create the illusion of a living person” (Monahan 47). ‘Caricature’ occurs when a character is created by “exaggerating his most prominent features or characteristics” (Cuddon 118). For the purpose of this study “characterisation” will be considered synonymous with “character-construct”.

Forster’s “flat”, “two-dimensional” characters, of necessity do not portray any of the psychological depth or complexities of humanity that defines the naturalist character. On the other hand, it is the contention of this thesis that as stereotypical character-constructs, they can, and sometimes do, have a psychological depth that is not always plumbed or recognised by critics. These two-dimensional, cardboard cut-out characters may dissipate the seriousness and depth of naturalism and their ‘surface’ personae might contribute to perceptions of superficiality. This is the main source of the perceived superficiality in the character-constructs in Williamson’s plays. Critics seem reluctant to look beneath the

surface for deeper meanings and recognise that the representation is a dramatic device in its own right.

The central manoeuvre of this thesis is to establish the extent to which intersections of satire and farce have contributed to the perceived superficiality in Williamson's work and, with this in mind, it is useful to point out that thinly-drawn, stereotypical characterisations are generally blamed for this perception. As mentioned earlier in this chapter Margaret Williams noted the use of the stereotype as a dramatic device in her essay, "Mask and Cage: Stereotype in Recent Drama" (1972) when she observed that the critics had failed to recognise the point of Hibberd's *White With Wire Wheels*, as when they found the play "wanting against a set of assumptions about the intrinsic nature of drama" (328). It seems that it was precisely the deviation from the dramatic norm that made the play so powerful. Certainly Hibberd's play centres on characters who are larger-than-life caricatures, but Williams then applies her theory to more naturalistic texts and extrapolates,

It is less obvious in those plays in which the comparative naturalism of the surface has led to their being seen simply as pieces of social documentary, and yet is in just these plays that the stereotype becomes a surprisingly sophisticated dramatic device in its own right. (328)

Flat, thinly-drawn characters are frequently evident in satirical works in the Western canon where their representative capacity takes precedence over more complex characterisation, in order to hone the thrust of the satire. By contrast, more complex

character-constructions and long cathartic monologues often dissipate the impact of satire and interrupt the comic flow of the narrative or action. In addition to their value as a satirical device, these two-dimensional characters are used to great comic effect in farce, where incident, of necessity, takes precedence over characterisation. The fast-paced, comedic chaos of farcical interludes would be hampered by the presence of more fully rounded characters.

This general categorisation of characters into 'round' and 'flat' seems practical enough with characters able to articulate their motivations and inner conflicts. However, given the naturalists' need for a realistic treatment of character, as truthful as possible to real life, into which category can it be said that protagonists who do not meet Forster's criteria of complexity fall? Williamson deals capably with this issue. 'Real life' offers many examples of individuals who are inarticulate, shy or not given to circumspective thought. They may, in fact, be quite shallow individuals. Or they may in fact, prefer to remain safely behind their social mask. How then to portray the psychological reality of these characters, and of equal importance, how does the playwright portray the shallow, superficial character to a contemporary audience's specific cultural context, a context that is constantly shifting over time ?

In keeping with naturalism's tenets, Williamson recognises the principle that society conditions individuals, and as late as 1997 comments that his life's preoccupation is to analyse people in conflict (Introduction to *After The Ball*, ix). Certainly Williamson is concerned with the troubled social interaction within a particular *milieu* of Australian

middle class society. He is concerned with the social conditioning of his characters and how they perceive themselves and act according to this self-perception. It is this conditioning and its effects that lie at the heart of the characters in *Don's Party*. As Williamson has said about Don's friends and their social masks:

I believe that this cross-section may prove of interest dramatically because education has, in general, revealed to them the arbitrary nature of many social norms and institutions in a country in which these norms are enforced more rigidly than in most countries of comparable economic status (qtd. in Kiernan 97).

The social conditions that may have shaped the partygoers include the newly acquired affluence and the social mobility of the working classes through an unprecedented availability of tertiary education in the 1960s. Suddenly working class students transcended the social stratum into which they were born and became part of the professional middle classes. Many of these students were women, empowered by the second wave of feminism and the move to establish formal women's rights groups that culminated in the formation of the Women's Electoral Lobby and the Labor Government's Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women in the early 1970's. H. G. Kippax noted that this period saw the "emergence of the bored and discontented, educated housewife in the labour-saving homes of suburbia" ("Preface to *Don's Party*" 6).

These young, educated, middle class couples form the *dramatis personae* of *Don's Party*, arguably the most popular of Williamson's plays, a play which has acquired almost iconic status in Australian theatre circles. John McCallum labels it "one of the funniest

plays ever” (“Study Notes” 3) and predicts that, as an exercise in suburban sociology, it would become an historical document. Funny it is, but beneath the humour lies a bleak satirical exposè of a section of middle class society with their frustrations, discontent, disillusionment, and boredom with their affluent lifestyles, the one-upmanship of sexual prowess, and the mindless ritual of drunken partying. It is this *ennui* and its consequences that provide Williamson with the scenario to effectively satirise the fall-out from this new generation of affluent, young people educated “beyond their own capacity to take part in civilised life” (McCallum 3) and, who are, as Williamson noted “facing the fact that they are into their thirties and the map they had of their lives, much earlier in their lives, isn’t working out according to plan” (Chapter Seven).

There is Don, the host, the frustrated novelist now a high-school teacher; Evan the prickly professional; Mal who had aspirations of becoming Prime Minister and now works in administration; and the infamous Cooley, the lawyer masquerading as an idiot. These men are accompanied by their wives, or partners, and their social interaction provides the grist for Williamson’s satirical mill.

*Don’s Party* starts from a naturalistic premise with potentially serious subject matter and characters who have the capacity for complex development but are constructed as stereotypical representations. *Don’s Party* has at its centre the expectation of a Labor win in a Federal election and while the subtext hints at the social justice issues that a Labor win will address, the issues themselves are never explored. The relationship between the couples is established and their individual idiosyncrasies portrayed, but the serious social

issues underpinning the election, are never commented upon by the characters. Instead Williamson, working from a naturalist premise, chooses to use a comedic treatment with satire and farce providing the pungent irony. The title, *Don's Party*, shows Williamson using droll humour to presage the ironic tone of the play, with the "party" descending into a debacle.

The couples gathered at Don's party provide Williamson with a conduit to reveal how individuals allow their identity to be circumscribed by social conditioning. Consequently, their repressed feelings are revealed in patterns of behaviour that screen the true, inner self. The ribald conversation and sensationalised one-liners act as 'teasers', with very little being said, or implied, to denote, or even suggest, any psychological depth. This thinness of character allows the text to run at a blistering pace, unfettered by character development. Of course, the racy pace of the play, and the quick retorts, the surface treatment of serious conditions are all an integral part of this community, and these characters are 'handling themselves' and coping in the only way they know how. That is, they cloak their raw feelings under the characteristic guise of the young, bored sophisticates who value their protective 'mask', and only in extreme cases do they relax their guard.

Williamson employs the overtly surface treatment of farce and satire to identify and ironically represent this *milieu*. Many critics failed to recognise the strategy, with Leonard Radic, asserting, "This is slice-of-life drama; what is missing is an overall vision of the characters portrayed" (Review of *Don's Party*). Actually, these characters have

little, if any, “vision” at all, and that is the point of the play! Radic goes on to say “Williamson is content to depict them naturalistically, and to skirt the deeper issues that their behaviour raises” (1971). Radic’s criticism sums up effectively the perceived superficiality of Williamson’s character-constructs, that critics, both academic and commercial, have been lamenting for over thirty years. It is the characters’ evident potential for ‘roundness’ that fuels expectations of fully-developed, rounded character-constructs, and which produces disappointment when that potential fails to be realised. In all probability, these very characters would be disappointed by their own shallow behaviour but they are too shallow to be concerned. However, if the critics positioned themselves for a postmodern reading of the text, they would recognise that the perceived surface treatment is a device in itself to accurately represent the characters within their own context of middle class Australians of the 70s, and also to underscore the caustic satire of the text.

*Don’s Party*, while essentially an ensemble piece, has as its catalyst, the comedic character of Cooley. ‘Cooley’ is an ironic device in himself since, as one of the main focus points of the play, he is certainly not ‘cool’. He is a deceptively complex character, hiding his intelligence, education, and personal limitations behind the social mask of the urban Aussie ‘ocker’. The surface features of his character-construct may appear superficial, because Cooley, himself appears superficial, but despite this, there is an inner vestige of truth in the character that audiences recognise and identify with. Flickers of recognition encourage the audience to look below the surface for a reflection of the universal characteristic of low self-esteem and displacement. Over thirty years later,

Cooley has gained iconic status as a certain model of social individual still prevalent in the year 2007. On any given night, contemporary audiences can tune into *Big Brother* and see Cooley in action!

Until the mid-1960s stereotypes of Australian masculinity had been almost exclusively rural in their origin (Fitzpatrick, *After "The Dolt"* 12). The miner ('digger'), the squatter, the drover, the bushranger, and the swagman ('swaggie') were derived from nineteenth century settlement of the bush and the outback. Even the major twentieth century contribution to Australian masculine types, the trench-bound soldier borrowed his common appellation of 'digger' from his predecessors, and the myths of Anzac draw heavily upon the romance associated with the bushman's pioneering spirit and rugged individualism. Williamson, with his interest in social conditioning and group behaviour, acknowledges the value of the stereotypical 'Aussie bloke' and attempts to capture a new truth about characteristic masculinity in the suburbs.

### *The Rise of the Ocker*

Over the past thirty-five years Williamson has created a panoply of 'ockers', and so it is considered beneficial here to note something of this shift in the representation of Australian masculinity that came about in the second half of the twentieth century.

By the end of the 1960's the new, aggressive nationalism required the celebration of the Australian male in his new role, as middle class and urban. The result was the creation of the 'ocker'. The popularisation of 'ocker' as a term describing a particular type of

Australian male is attributed to a character of that name played by actor Ron Frazer in television's *The Mavis Bramston Show* (1964-1968) (*Macquarie Dictionary*). *The Mavis Bramston Show*, with its irreverent and satirical 'take' on Australian suburban life and politics, was hugely influential on the Melbourne new wave playwrights. Certainly they were quick to adopt the character of the ocker, but it is arguable that it was Williamson who endowed the ocker with more realistic/naturalistic traits and placed him at the centre of his representation of Australian urban life.

The ocker emerged from this process as an aggressively, even obnoxiously, Australian type. In his most generous incarnation he can be an updated version of the Australian working man, whose independent and free-spirited nature is tempered by the basic decency and resourcefulness derived from his working-class, bush origins. In his other, more urban manifestations, however, he is loudmouthed, boorish and uncouth, and his friendly good humour is often transformed into a chauvinistic emphasis on 'mateship'.

The ocker was evident from the early output of the new wave playwrights, notably in Hibberd's *White With Wire Wheels*, Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* (1969) and *The Front Room Boys* (1970); Williamson's own *The Coming of Stork*, and John Romeril's *The Floating World*, (1974). The creation of such characters was a conscious choice; part of the playwrights' recognition that in order to maximise their audience appeal the 'character' was a crucial means by which they could signal that new forms of locally relevant theatre were at hand. Indeed the figure of the ocker became intrinsically associated with the emerging nationalistic theatre of the time, with Jack Hibberd

declaring that ‘ockerism’ was part of a deliberate attack on “the old pseudo-English repertory-elocutionary-mannerist mode of theatre” (Palmer 129).

It is clear that audiences responded favourably to at least some elements of the ocker, enjoying the thrill of seeing this new and identifiably Australian character in a theatrical context. Indeed such was the depth of audience engagement with these characters that Fitzpatrick speculates that it is difficult to determine whether the ocker was socially in evidence before the new wave playwrights mythologised him in the theatre, or whether he only gained popularity as a social type subsequently (*Williamson* 31). The ocker’s popularity rapidly spread to other modes of cultural production, and he enjoyed his greatest success in the cinema. This came from filmed productions of Williamson’s own plays (*Stork*, 1970, *The Removalists*, 1974, *Don’s Party*, 1976, *The Club*, 1980, *Travelling North*, 1986, and *Emerald City*, 1988), and from such notorious and iconic characters as Barry McKenzie (*The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972)), Alvin Purple (*Alvin Purple* (1973)) and Mick Dundee (*Crocodile Dundee* (1986)).

As these examples indicate, comedy lies at the core of the ocker’s appeal to audiences. Particularly in his bolder manifestations the ocker draws upon his range of anticipated character traits (a generally ‘blokey’ demeanour, a disregard for authority, a scatological sense of humour, a fondness for drink and vulgar language) to project himself as a comedic diversion in any social situation. Indeed it is arguable that because of his deep roots in national stereotypes it is almost impossible for the ocker to overcome his comic function. He is created and used *because* of his two-dimensionality, and despite the

occasional variations, he will always be seen as a type rather than a fully realised individual.

It is interesting to note that Williamson's early ockers of the 70s, such as Stork (*The Coming of Stork*), Cooley (*Don's Party*), Kenny (*The Removalists*), Graham, Neville and Jamie (*Jugglers Three* (1973)), and Harry (*What If You Died Tomorrow?* (1973)) gradually matured, and with maturity came modification. In the 1980s and 1990s somewhat modified ockers emerge: Kevin (*Sons of Cain* (1985)), Mike, (*Emerald City* (1987)) and Brian (*Brilliant Lies* (1993)). These protagonists assumed a veneer of civility, while remaining feisty, impulsive and oozing raw energy; they were still ockers at heart. Williamson perceived these ockers as very real characters and his alleged stereotypical portrayals of them goes a long way to contributing to his unique depiction of naturalism.

Williamson, in creating Cooley in *Don's Party*, is fully aware of the audience's expectations of the humour and entertainment associated with an ocker character. Cooley has his genesis in the infamous Stork (*The Coming of Stork*) in that he is the perennial adolescent, sex-obsessed and foul-mouthed, and shows no indication of imminent maturity. Cooley's character is also reminiscent of the "sexual scoring, car-flaunting and beer-drinking" (Carroll 270) flat mates of Hibberd's *White With Wire Wheels*, who conceal themselves behind the camaraderie of their aggressively male social rituals. Cooley's defensive mask is observed by Margaret Williams ("Snakes and Ladders") as a "dangerously thin repressive crust under which the tensions of insecurity, sexual

inhibition and sexual predatoriness” build up, resulting in unsocial, aggressive behaviour (179). He is representative of the young, irrational, defiant, and sexually motivated ocker who has status only within his group. He is loud, vulgar, uses obscene language, is eminently likeable, and instantly identifiable by the young university types who mostly comprised Williamson’s audience in the early 1970s.

Williamson’s technique for creating his early ocker characters relies on a number of well-known theatrical ‘slapstick’ devices that set him up for comedy. That is, obvious physical differences (Stork’s height), sight gags (Stork’s notorious party trick oyster, recycled for the older ocker, Kevin, in *Sons of Cain*), farcical comings and goings to the bedrooms, exaggerated dialogue, subversive behaviour, characters talking through and over each other, quick repartee and the shock factor of obscene language and vulgar gestures. These contrived theatrical devices, all farcical in design, provide the framework for Cooley’s characterisation, which is the comedic focus of the play.

Cooley is potentially an exemplar for naturalism’s tenet that characters are shaped by their social conditioning. Certainly, Cooley is a character worthy of analysis and the internal exploration demanded of a naturalistic portrayal. Williamson, however, chooses to ‘construct’ him as he perceives him: the two-dimensional, outrageous comic ‘turn’ of the play, with little on his mind but sexual competition and his own self-image as a larrikin Australian male. Beneath Cooley’s coarse, unsubtle representation is a complex range of emotional and psychological reverberations that are only hinted at. It is these little ‘cracks’ in Cooley’s veneer that audiences glimpse, recognise, and identify with.



Mal:                   Why not?

Cooley:               You're in a shit because you've been swinging your dick at anything available and missing by yards. (73)

However, on another level, Cooley, and to some extent Mal, are presenting the audience with deeper truths about humanity and the glib responses certain types indulge in, rather than face the pain of their own insecurities and inadequacies.

Scenes abound where characters have the opportunity to peel away their 'mask' and reveal something of their inner selves. However, they don't, because they are the products of their conditioning and, to do so, would be entirely out of character. It is this point that is quite crucial to this thesis and one that critics fail to realise when they continue to see the satirical and farcical interludes as superficial through inadequacy on Williamson's part, rather than by his design.

This reticence of the Australian male to verbalise his feelings helped cement the image of the laconic Aussie ocker. If anything, the smart retort, the throw-away gag, the overt camaraderie that masks the underlying pain, arguably render the moment more meaningful, more significant. However, this takes insight and reflection, and critics are not always willing to dwell on the moment to reveal the potent sub-text.

When Cooley approaches Mack with, "They tell me you've left your wife?", Mack replies, "She left me" (47). Here, it might be expected, in a purely naturalistic text, that two old friends sharing a sensitive situation, might indulge in sympathetic dialogue, but

Cooley, ever conscious of his image, replies “You’re better off without her” and goes on, with some detail, to tell Mack how his wife had “screwed me... I was bloody near dragged to bed” (47).

Similarly, when Evan and his wife Kerry have an altercation at the party:

- Evan:                   What time are you coming home?
- Kerry:                   I thought we’d discussed all this.
- Evan:                   I’m not putting a curfew on you. I just want to know whether it’s worth waiting up.
- Kerry:                   I knew our marriage would be a disaster.
- Evan:                   It’s not a disaster.
- Kerry:                   Why don’t you put a ball and chain on me? [...] Did you get my pizza?
- Evan:                   *(Throwing the pizza on the floor)*. There’s your pizza.  
*He storms out as Don approaches:*
- Don:                    Troubles?
- Kerry:                   Mmm.
- Don:                    So’s Whitlam. (62).

This droll retort of Don’s is a reference to the poor polling results of the Whitlam-led Labor Party in the elections being televised at the party. Don’s smart rejoinder breaks the seriousness of the moment, dissipates its gravity, and distances the audience from its potential emotional impact. Don, Cooley, Mal, and Evan are products of their times and,

ever wary of maintaining their 'masks' of coolness, do not reveal anything of the anger, disillusion and anguish accompanying the breakdown of a marriage or the disappointment of a Labor loss. This reticence, under emotional pressure, is perhaps best epitomised by another iconic Australian, Roo, in Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1957). Roo, also a product of his social conditioning, when he is totally displaced by the loss of his lover, destroys the seventeenth doll in an inarticulate rage against the loss of his lover.

Williamson's ockers embody multiple moments of belonging and are located firmly in the chronological space that they represent. They hold meaning and significance through temporal shifts because they embody the essence of their times and their social circumstances. The characters have become symbolic of times and places because they are manifestations of real people, and it is for this reason that they will endure.

Similarly, Williamson's ubiquitous bickering couples (*The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *Jugglers Three*, *What If You Died Tomorrow*, *A Handful of Friends* (1976), *Travelling North*, *The Perfectionist* (1982), *Emerald City*, *After the Ball*, *Face to Face* (1999), *Up For Grabs* (2001), *Soulmates* (2002) and *Birthrights*) reveal very little of the conflicts, dissensions, anguish, and disillusionment that accompany the breakdown of a marriage. The underlying malaise is never fully addressed by Williamson and so the audience must rely on their own perceptions of the multi-layered complexities that contribute to the disintegration of a relationship. Williamson's superficiality-by-design gives the audience a canvas upon which to paint their own recognitions.



Don: They were supposed to make you happy. Bloody shit-house tablets.

Kath: Lay off. And try and show me a little bit of affection tonight, will you?

Don: I show you a lot of affection. You just don't notice it.

Kath: Neither does anyone else. (17)

And later:

Kath: Why did you marry me if I'm so bloody mundane?

Don: I didn't want my personality swamped. (17)

This scenario, depicting a private moment between an unhappy wife and her 'she'll-be-right' husband, has all the potential for an in-depth examination of marital discord.

However there is an emotional reticence. This is a characteristic of Williamson's work and appears to be his reluctance to fully explore the emotional pain and personal anguish of his characters. Characters frequently engage in potentially significant dialogue about serious issues, which is suddenly truncated by flippant, trite or comic remarks. The response, as demonstrated above, is humorous, the audience responds with laughter and the seriousness of the moment is lost. However, as previously mentioned, the smart retort is not a 'deflection' line, rather it is a deliberate representation of that individual and how such a person would comment in such a situation: Williamson's perception of a naturalistic character-construct within a certain social situation. This point is made by Williamson when he discusses *Birthrights* during the interview in Chapter Seven.

Extending his metaphoric use of the phrase "peeling the onion" Williamson defends himself against criticisms of "truncation of emotions" and "pulling back from pain", by

saying “I’m not trying to deflect the onion; that’s the real line that that woman would have really said”.

Character development and psychological reality appear to be sacrificed in favour of comical dialogue that comes in snatches throughout the play as the women circulate at the party, however, as previously mentioned, this scenario is Williamson’s take on reality as he perceives it. Fitzpatrick notes the desultoriness of the play and puts forward the notion that Williamson may have contrived to create characters who were easily recognisable and identifiable by audiences (*After ‘The Doll’* 120). This factor of identifiability is a major element in the popularity of Williamson’s plays and has been dealt with in Chapter Two. Audiences recognise the characters, identify with them, and engagement takes place. In addition to identifiability, these women – smart, attractive and savvy – are thinly-drawn, satirical models representing the shallowness, selfishness, and insularity of certain female types of the times.

Similarly, the male characterisations who provide the fulcrum of the play are more representative of Forster’s thinly drawn, flat, two-dimensional characterisations, in that they are easily recognised and remembered by an audience. There is no doubting that the identifiability of these stereotypical characterisations by the audience, and the comic effects of their antics, contribute to the popular success of *Don’s Party* and its iconic status in Australian theatre. John McCallum, writing for Currency Press, labelled the play an “historical document” and predicted it would become “one of the classics of Australian comedy” (“Study Notes” 4). The smart responses, outrageous comments and

humorous repartee, are all designed to create a fast moving, satirical evocation of a particular cohort of young Australians ironically presenting us with deeper truths about our humanity.

Kiernan, notes the superficial characterisations in *Don's Party* and recognises that what the play “reveals about the self's need to interact adequately at this superficial level” (“Games People Play” 397), is Williamson's original way of depicting naturalistically shallow personalities in shallow circumstances. And this observation is precisely what Williamson intends to acutely represent the males of the times. Williamson allows the balance of tension between naturalism and satire and farce to fall in favour of sure-fire humour and audience appeal. He has the opportunity to represent identifiable Australians on stage in situations that immediately evoke recognition within a certain group of Australian society. The audience, safely removed from the stage moment, enjoys the familiarity.

This tendency towards caricature is apparent in the representation of characters in *The Removalists*, where the three protagonists are each the product of their social conditioning and who, “clothe themselves in ‘appropriate’ social roles for a given situation” (Carroll 222). The action of the drama is an interplay of masculinities where the characters act out their ‘roles’ according to what they have learned or what they feel is expected of them. These characters do not live in the authenticity of emotional awareness and the notion of these males being in touch with their ‘feminine side’ is still a long way off.

The irony of the play is confirmed by Williamson, when he relates a chance conversation he had had with a removalist who was working for him. The removalist had experienced what he considered a 'great day', when he witnessed a brutal police bashing of a man in custody ("A Conjunction of Limitations" 389). Irony pervades *The Removalists*, yet some critics look only at a surface level and fail to recognise the discrepancy between appearance and reality that makes for fuller, deeper meanings.

Sergeant Simmonds, one of the protagonists of *The Removalists*, is among Williamson's most unforgettable characters and his representation borders on caricature. The play tracks his journey at a potentially life-changing moment, and while he discloses certain information – about his marriage, his attitudes to the police force, and his own masculinity – only a limited knowledge of his psychological state is revealed. His true feelings are cloaked in a tough, defensive shell that protects his insecurities and vulnerability. In effect, Williamson's superficial portrayal of Simmonds' superficiality foregrounds this shell.

Simmonds is constructed as a stereotypical representation of the 'red-necked', old-timer police officer. He is a braggart, a bully-boy policeman labelled '*homo suburbiensis*' by Kiernan (*David Williamson* 6), and uses his masculinity like a club to chart a primitive drive of assertive individualism that tolerates no competition (Carroll 180). Simmonds is a product of his Australian working-class conditioning where the macho image dominates, and he is presented as a limited individual, inarticulate, and emotionally

repressed. He is also unique in Williamson's work in that he exposes a darker, bleaker under-belly of violence with little provocation. There are many moments in the text where Simmonds has the opportunity to express something of his psychological state; however, he chooses to remain guarded, and constantly hides behind his 'macho' mask by truncating his emotions with the humorous, aggressive response. For example, an opportunity to reveal, with some sincerity, something of his feelings for his daughter is lost when he talks of her marriage and motherhood, "...she couldn't afford to be choosy. Not bad looking mind you, and a good arse, but she's an irritable bitch. Her mother all over again" (35).

Sergeant Simmonds embodies one of the classic tenets of naturalism: he could in fact be a real person. He is all macho camaraderie on the surface, until his mask is shaken and then he reveals his more sinister traits. This 'mask' locks "its victims into their adoptive roles through the very ritual patterns that seemed to afford security" (Williams, "Mask and Cage" 329). In limited exposition he reveals that he is married, his wife is Catholic, and that he has never made an arrest during his twenty-three years in the force. However, these snippets of information serve to construct a representation of the stereotypical, authoritarian police officer who reveals very little about his psychological state. Indeed, it is likely that the very word 'psychological' would not be part of Simmonds' vocabulary. If it came up in conversation, Simmonds would, no doubt, treat it with derision, and so, for Williamson to allow Simmonds to reveal anything much about his own state of mind would not be true to Simmonds' characterisation.

Simmonds mercilessly uses his authority to provoke and intimidate Ross, the rookie policeman, about his father's occupation, "What's he do?... God, he must be a nightman or something. Slinging shit" (34), and he reveals himself as lascivious when he playfully tries to flirt with Kate: "Well that [Fiona's impulsiveness] can be a delightful fault at times, Mrs. Mason. Are you a little bit impulsive too?" (53).

Simmonds is a potentially complex character who is central to the dramatic action of the play. However, he reveals very little about his inner feelings and attitudes and at no time during the play does he show any potential for change or development. Williamson chooses to present him as a stereotypical character, constructed as a comic representation of how the audience perceives a 'top banana cop' with his rigid thinking and biased attitudes. This character becomes something of a prototype for Williamson's later, older Australian males: Frank (*Travelling North*), Ron MacCrae (*After the Ball*), and Greg Baldoni (*Face to Face*) all have their genesis in Sergeant Simmonds.

The character of the young rookie, Constable Ross, is a further example of a hybrid character, combining a distinct potential for naturalism along with the limitations of stereotypical representation. Williamson is prescriptive in his stage directions for Ross, ("*wide eyed*" (38), "*embarrassed, uncertain*" (39), "*defensively*" (40), "*hesitantly*" (48), and "*shame-faced*" (51)) and his deferential speech, "what would you like me to do, Sarg? (33), and "I think we'd better do these photographs again, Sarg. The bruises didn't show up too well" (58), in order to set him up as representative of the stereotypical young rookie cop. Although Ross does lose his naïve manner in the latter stages of the play

when he yells at Simmonds, “Well good God, wouldn’t you be depressed if your wife just walked out on you without a word of warning?” (115), he is still a stereotypical representation of what society perceives as the young, raw recruit on his first job.

Towards the end of the play, both Simmonds and Ross, appear as grotesque caricatures of themselves. Ross appears as the fall-guy to Simmonds’ straight authoritarian representation. Simmonds engages in status-play when he talks about a previous police recruit: “Got one boy posted out here, who walked in and said I’ve heard about you, you great fat heap of shit”. The disingenuous Ross responds, “Why did he say that?” to which Simmonds (“*looking closely at him*”), replies “hope you’re not a smart-arse, Ross, because there’s no room for that here. There’s only one person in authority and that’s me” (39). This status-play is cloaked in an insidious humour that leads the audience, unsuspectingly, to the bleak *denouement*. In a naturalist text the final scene of the play – with Kenny dead and Ross out of control – Simmonds might be expected to show some duty-of-care and loyalty to his young off-sider. However, Simmonds is depicted as not only nasty and duplicitous, but cowardly as well: “I’m not helping anybody, boy. You did it!” (127). Simmonds’ response catapults Ross into hysteria, and so the scenario descends into frenetic farce with comical incidents overtaking characterisation.

Williamson’s use of ‘black comedy’ in the final scenes of *The Removalists* has been dealt with in Chapter Four. The placement of the comic scene in the austere ambience of the police station creates an ironic reversal and this incongruity between what appears and what is actually happening provides the biting irony of the piece. The farcical intersection in the naturalistic context is critical to the perception of the characters in *The Removalists*

for two reasons. First, Sergeant Simmonds, Constable Ross and Kenny are all conditioned by society to play their “role”. They hide behind their ascribed masks without revealing the truth of the situation. For Simmonds, the authoritarian, to get nervous and apprehensive about Ross’s violence early on, would be completely out of character. Had he done so, the play would take on an entirely different meaning. If Kenny could have dropped his ‘tough guy-I-can-take-anything’ image, said that he was sorry, and resisted the baiting from Simmonds and Ross, then, again the play would have a different ending. This is Williamson’s perception of the reality of the moment. Events follow on because of who the characters are and how they are deliberately drawn. They remain true to their roles. Second, by cloaking the enormity of the closing scene in *Black Comedy*, Williamson allows the audience some breathing space. Comedic incidents are juxtaposed with extreme violence that takes the audience by surprise and renders them somewhat unsettled. The humour, as in Brecht’s work, acts as a distancing/alienating effect that gives the audience some relief, and helps to maintain some objectivity. Critics who lament the superficial treatment of the serious issues in *The Removalists*, fail to recognise Williamson’s understanding of the “limbic system” as previously alluded to – an ancient system of biologically innate emotions that lies at the core of individuals in every culture, and is mostly stifled by social conditioning. They also fail to recognise the adept craftsmanship involved in the deceptively simple construction of the characters, and the complexities of the power-games and ritualistic interaction between the three males involved. As Williamson laments “If anyone can’t spot what I am really trying to say there [*The Removalists*]... [that] the human being is a lethal time bomb in certain circumstances,[they] would have to be not reading the play very closely” (Interview

Chapter Seven).

*Farce as an Ironic Device in a Naturalistic Text*

The comic overlay of the denouement is foreshadowed during the first act of *The Removalists* where Williamson has the ‘straight guy’ setting up the ‘sidekick’ for the punch lines, reinforcing the audience’s belief in both the rigid, authoritarian attitudes of the police force and in their stupidity. This device of setting up authority for a fall is a time-honoured comic device in theatre, reminiscent of *commedia dell’arte*’s Capitano and the Zanni. These characters satirise the worst aspects of the police force, with its aggressive masculinity and endemic potential for violence. They also provide entertainment to an audience only too willing to have a laugh at the constabulary. *The Removalists* is Williamson at his ironical best, using the incongruity of the scene to satirical advantage. These elements of satire and farce, while disrupting the pure naturalism of the text, are nevertheless valid within a naturalistic text as demonstrated by the previous analysis of *Ghosts* in Chapter Two.

Farcical intersections also disrupt the seeming naturalism of *The Removalists* at other crucial moments of the play. In the closing scene, Sergeant Simmonds and Ross are attacking each other in a verbal frenzy when they think that their captive, Kenny, is dead on the floor. Suddenly Kenny, speaking with great difficulty, moans, “Did you two pricks think you did me?” Williamson directs that Ross “*runs over to Kenny and almost kisses him*” (116). The highly charged emotional moment is dissipated by this comical gesture. The irony of Ross, who has consistently brutalised Kenny, almost kissing him in relief

that he is not dead, allows the audience to express their own relief with laughter. They are shocked and hurled into a serious awareness that what is happening has far deeper ramifications. This extreme gesture of Ross's, together with the repartee when he and Simmonds beat Kenny to a pulp and then hand him a beer, with Simmonds asking, "What do you think of Ross' potential?" and Kenny, near death, replying, "What as? A welterweight?" (123), is evidence of Williamson's expertise in combining farce and satire in one ironical incident.

Kenny's horrific death as a result of police savagery is a mortally serious moment (and not just for Kenny) and one that is received by the audience with sickening horror and silent condemnation. The incident is constructed for its comedic effect by having Kenny 'die' twice. After the first 'death', which results in the aforementioned frantic accusations and ferocious arguing between the two policemen, Kenny takes the cigarette out of his mouth and exhales. The effect is comical and the response from the audience is one of incredulity and disbelief. A little later, however, Kenny does indeed die and the policemen start pounding each other in order to provide themselves with an alibi for their murderous behaviour. Under pressure from the calamitous events that have occurred Simmonds and Ross panic, and in so doing allow their social masks to slip, exposing their raw 'limbic' emotions. This scene with its sickening brutality juxtaposed with farcical incidents and sharp, humorous dialogue confronts the audience with the disquieting reality of a death in custody. In a postmodern reading, the audience, although a collective force, receive this violence individually according to their own beliefs and values and the response is powerful. It is possible that audiences receiving the full and intended impact

of the final scenes of *The Removalists* will be changed forever. The sheer tragedy of the moment, with three ignorant, artless men – all playing self-imposed ‘roles’ – senselessly allowing the scene to deteriorate to the point of murderous criminality is just so overwhelming. This researcher found herself, as so often happens in truly horrific circumstances, wondering at what point it all went wrong and what could have been said, or done, to make it different.

The truly horrific, closing moments of *The Removalists* are made more poignant with the inclusion of humorous dialogue, and this provides some relief for the audience, as well as some objectivity, to view the situation. This ‘distancing’ of the emotions of an audience from the issues of a play, underpins Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect where the intent is to focus on the issues of a play ‘objectively’, and this is in direct contrast to the mandatory ‘subjectivity’ of naturalism. Subjectivity, however, is anathema to satire where the main aim is to ridicule through humour (Cuddon 828). As mentioned in Chapter One, Hugh Walker contends that satire is weakened when it delves beneath the surface and probes for in-depth meanings (18). By maintaining emotional distance, the audience is better positioned to receive critically the censorial thrust of the play.

Williamson’s propensity to distance the audience from emotional pain is not as extreme as dictated by Brecht, but is nonetheless effective in that the detachment allows the audience to laugh and at the same time recognise the local truth of what happens when the repressed emotions in certain sections of society give way to brutal aggression.

The ironic title of *The Removalists* is significant in that it draws attention to the laconic

character of the removalist himself, who sees as normal the abuse the police officers deal the hapless Kenny. His thinly-drawn character is something of an 'everyman' and is used by Williamson, to some extent, as a Brechtian device to break the emotional tensions of the brutality throughout the play. The removalist goes ploddingly about his job of shifting furniture. After some particularly brutal punches, Simmonds is moved to say, "They don't bruise Carter. You'd think they would, wouldn't you, but you can take my word for it. (*To Ross*) That's something they didn't teach you in training school, eh?" (81).

Witnessing this sickening scene, the removalist is quite unaffected, remarking "Hate to interrupt mate, but I've got ten thousand dollars worth of machinery tickin' over out there in the drive" (81). This callous indifference can be interpreted as society's de-sensitised attitude to the police and their bully-boy tactics. The removalist's inertia correlates to the perceived indifference of society to anything that doesn't directly involve them. The matter foremost in the removalist's mind is maximising the return of the money outlaid on his removal van. His continued comings and goings, each time reducing the amount of furniture in the room, and his repetitive "I've got ten thousand dollars worth of machinery tickin' over out there in the drive" is an absurdist device correlating to M. H. Abrams prescription for "tragic farce" in which "events are simultaneously comic, brutal, horrifying and absurd" (87).

Certainly, the females of *The Removalists* show little real emotion. Their representation is so marginal that their contribution appears merely to facilitate the plot. While Fiona, the abused wife, does evoke a sympathetic response from the audience, her characterisation is limited. She seems content to be led along by her sister Kate and Sergeant Simmonds.

In exposition it is revealed that Kate met Kenny at a beer festival in Germany, that he is a mechanic, and that they have a daughter, Sophie. Although Kate is distressed, very little is learned of her emotional state, her inner misgivings, and motivation. In fact, during her actual departure from her husband and the family home, she says very little. As previously argued, Kate is a victim of her social conditioning and she may well be a shy, inarticulate person, traumatised into automatic mode. Fiona also is a victim: this time of her own pretensions. Her attitude bears a distinct likeness to the early Australian male ockers, in that she cannot lower her 'mask' for fear of damaging her image.

The character-constructs in *The Removalists*, while stemming from naturalistic roots, are mainly stereotypical and representative of certain individuals at a significant time in their lives. Certainly, the three male characters, in spite of their limitations, reflect their local context and establish codes of situational belonging. It is these qualities that posit *The Removalists* within a diachronic framework that holds meaning and relevance over times and spaces.

In contrast to the central characters in *The Removalists*, Frank, the elderly protagonist of *Travelling North* is more credibly drawn. Frank has a number of similarities with Sergeant Simmonds, in that he is authoritarian, reactionary, opinionated, and racist. Frank differs from Simmonds, however, in that he is an educated, retired engineer, and this middle class background acts to soften his demeanour. We learn that he is given to visiting art galleries, and he notes rather sensitively that the "edge of the lake is thick with black swans and ibis" (201). Although Frank lacks Simmonds' bleaker traits, he is nonetheless an extension of the stock Williamson character of the assertive, bullying male

– or as he is labelled in the play by his partner Frances, a “very arrogant and irritating old man” (239).

The audience learns somewhat more about Frank than is the case with Simmonds, and his portrayal is sufficiently rounded to evoke greater empathy and personal understanding.

The play reveals that Frank, in spite of his education, is the product of the social conventions and values of an Australian male society that idealises the taciturn ‘bloke’: a man whose worth is reckoned in mateship, pub camaraderie, and sporting and sexual prowess. Frank’s character is a naturalistic construction. He is the protagonist in a naturalistic play, and although he is the product of his society, he does reveal something of himself and his feelings. Frank has the potential to be realised as a fully-rounded ‘flesh-and blood’ portrayal. However, his character is in danger of burgeoning into caricature as Williamson sheaths his complexities in a superficial cloak of overblown irascibility. His self-centred rudeness and disregard for the feelings of others should deem his character unsympathetic. However he is carefully contrived by Williamson to appeal to audiences who Williamson realises will recognise his type immediately.

Frank is an ideal example of Williamson glossing over unsavoury traits to create characters who are more palatable to an audience. Therefore while he indulges his characters in various easily identifiable follies, they are more likely to be seen by the audience as charming foibles rather than selfish, curmudgeonly behaviour. As mentioned in Chapter One, this technique of Williamson’s of ‘sugar-coating’ the flaws of his protagonists to render them more palatable to an audience, is described by Fitzpatrick

(“Styles of Love” 413), as administering “sugared placebos” and supports a major premise of the argument of this thesis.

No matter how naturalistically Frank is constructed, the audience is not privy to any psychological deliberations on his part. Given Frank’s age and ‘type’ it is understandable to the audience that someone of his generation would not be given to circumspective reflection. Despite it being a most significant time for Frank, as he juggles commitments to family and his lover, and deals with difficult issues regarding his future, none of this evokes a sense of personal catharsis, nor an occasion for any expression of self-doubt. Frank prefers to ‘soldier-on’ rather than indulge in any emotional outpourings. Having grown up in pre-World War Two Australia, he is a product of his times, reflecting his local context, and he becomes a symbolic representation of that time and place. Although Frank does not reveal much about himself, he embodies many of the beliefs and values of the times and these universalities of meanings transcend their context and remain constant in the third millennium.

Frank’s partner Frances, receives one of the most fully rounded treatments of any of Williamson’s female characters and it is interesting to note here her naturalistic treatment. The text follows Frances’ journey as she marvels at her new-found love, deliberates over commitment, and succumbs to the doubts and insecurities that accompany her decision. She is realistically presented in order to reveal something of her inner conflict; her guilt over her decisions as a sole parent and her new romance. She explicitly confesses to being troubled with “I’ve dodged my responsibilities when I was younger, but I’m not

going to do it now” (216), she talks of her difficult years “they were very grim” (223), and she grows in feeling, “Frank, how many times do I have to tell you? I love you and I’m staying with you...” (233).

Only in her final scene do Frances’ emotions become somewhat blunted. However, her rather placid acceptance of Frank’s death seems in keeping with her more pragmatic character. Immediately after his demise, she draws back from the pain of the moment with the stoic response “I’ll go travelling further north” (249). Frances, in such a grievous moment chooses not to sentimentalise her feelings about the love, death, and loss she has experienced. The off-hand finality of her last line shows that she is ready to shoulder her grief and move quickly forward. This is not a truncation of emotions for convenience or audience appeasement but rather the reaction of a naturalistically drawn character, who prefers to keep her feelings private.

It is interesting here, to note the treatment Williamson uses in the closing scene of *Travelling North* and Henrik Ibsen’s treatment of the final death scene in *Ghosts*. Both playwrights, over one hundred years apart, are dealing with the gravity of a death scene in the closing moments of their plays. Williamson relies on the shock values of the ‘double demise’ of Frank, and the slightly irreverent commiserations of his mates as they toast him with champagne. Frances too, the grieving widow is almost pragmatic in her final lines. Not for Ibsen the ‘boozy’ Aussie send-off. Ibsen milks the scene for every drop of sentiment he can, with a sunrise, glowing mountain ranges in the distance, and Mrs. Alving pulling at her hair, stammering “no. no. no...yes! no.” and, Oswald barely

murmuring “the sun, the sun” (102). The maudlin tone of *Ghosts*’ final scene was covered in Chapter Two where it is established that it is representative of the times and, in the mode of the contemporary melodramas, designed to entertain. Williamson’s shock tactics are also designed to entertain, but, as with Ibsen, the audience is encouraged to delve beneath the surface to find layers of meaning and social comment. In a postmodern context, where there are not one, but many truths to social reality, the audience is likely to respond to both plays as they receive them.

While the protagonists of *Travelling North* are depicted as more nearly naturalist character-constructs, Williamson underscores the satirical tone of the play with his treatment of the serious concerns of the younger generation. The “smart-set daughters Sophie and Helen, with their broods of little Tarquins, Tobiases, Janessas, and (almost) Orianas” (Fitzpatrick, *Williamson* 153), have their genesis in the bored, frustrated, and lonely women at Don’s party. They are a fairly mean-spirited, whingeing progeny, and their concerns are touched upon, but not developed. These thinly-drawn characters provide Williamson with the richness of three generations of family and are used adeptly to satirise the ambivalence and uncertainty of modern marriage. While they act as a foil to the mature-age relationship of Frank and Frances, their presence, dialogue and interrelatedness reinforces Williamson’s ironical treatment of marriage and relationships.

Williamson revisits a family scenario in *After the Ball* (1997), a play concerning an elderly woman and the recriminations and atonement of her two adult children at her death-bed. This play, similar to *Travelling North* in its delving into familial relationships,

is also similar in that it has its genesis in autobiographical detail. While *Travelling North* deals with a story inspired by Williamson's mother-in-law and her partner's relationship – and the partner's untimely death – the subject matter of *After the Ball* concerns the death of Williamson's own mother (“Introduction to *After the Ball*” viii). The play comes from a naturalistic base but quickly reveals itself as a biting critique on family values and their damaging consequences.

The play opens with a commercially successful writer, Stephen, returning from overseas to Australia, to the death-bed of his widowed mother, Kate. This character is a favourite of Williamson's, appearing in *Don's Party*, *What If You Died Tomorrow?* (1973), *The Perfectionist* (1982), and *Emerald City* (1987). In a series of flashbacks, over a time span of thirty years, the drama follows the journey of Kate and her husband, Ron, and their children Stephen and Judy. These protagonists start from a purely naturalistic base with serious familial conflict underpinning the text. However Williamson employs genre-blending to achieve a biting satiric comment on married life.

Although he was created by Williamson some thirty years after Sergeant Simmonds, Ron MacCrae, the deceased husband/father of *After the Ball*, is a man of similar ilk to both Simmonds and Frank. Ron is once again a product of his times. Having experienced the Great Depression and the effects of World War Two he is imbued with attitudes that place him at odds with the younger members of his family. He is, for example, chauvinistic; in reply to an inference that he speaks to his wife badly, he excuses himself

with “I’m her husband” (19), and he is also racist, echoing the beliefs of that other iconic Australian, Alf Cook, from Alan Seymour’s 1962 play *The One Day of the Year*.

I’m proud to be Australian. This is the best country in the world, but only because our origins are British... we’d be a lot better off if we’d stuck to being British instead of importing the refuse of Europe... by and large all we imported were the dregs... Bringing their Neanderthal quarrels with them. (7)

As is so often the case with Williamson, however, the scene revealing Ron’s racism is brief and the potential conflict is truncated by Kate’s off-hand comment, “You’ll never change him, Judy. Get off your high-horse, Shakespeare” (19). This reference to the inconspicuous Ron as “Shakespeare” has the effect of dissipating the difficult moment with laughter and is evidence of Williamson’s droll take of the scenario.

Ron is also lecherous: Judy, his daughter, reveals to her brother how she came unexpectedly upon their father when, “I ducked out of my room... and there he was in the kitchen with Claire [her Mother’s bridesmaid], one hand on her bum and the other up her dress...” (15).

Stephen: Did he see you?

Judy: Peripheral vision is quite restricted when you’ve got your nose stuck in a cleavage.

Stephen: Especially Claire’s. (15)

Here Williamson is employing irony by creating discordance between what the audience expects and what the reality is. The audience, present at the death-bed of Kate, hardly





In the penultimate scene of *After the Ball*, with Kate lying near death and Stephen, her son, playing her favourite music, Stephen says,

I'll take your ashes up to be with Dad. The water will bubble and fume and you'll both be at it again for all eternity, but don't feel you have to hang on. It's too hard now and too painful. Go peacefully. Please. Go peacefully. (71)

Kate with her last breath murmurs, "Yes".

This is moving naturalistic theatre. Williamson has created, with skilfully crafted, minimal dialogue, a fully-realised, significant scene with psychological credibility. The fullness of this scene with the characters establishing a moment of psychological reality is evidence of Williamson's ability to create fuller characterisations when he wants or needs to, and accounts for the emotional rapport between mother and son in the mother's dying moments. Along with Frances, (*Travelling North*), Kate is drawn realistically with warmth and affection.

*Birthrights* (2003), is a play based on "truths", namely the truths about fertility, surrogacy and biological parentage. Once again, Williamson shows courage in attempting a play on personal matters that are sheathed in controversy. Just as *The Removalists* deals with the contentious issues of violence and anti-authoritarianism, so *Birthrights* deals with the troublesome questions of IVF and maternal love. While the seriousness of the subject matter lends itself to a purely naturalistic approach, Williamson eschews this in favour of a comedic treatment to satirise the many complex issues the play incites. It is interesting to note Williamson's choice of satire to convey his feelings about the themes involved. Perhaps it is that a satirical take is one he is familiar with and, perhaps, he altruistically

feels that he reaches more people with his comedies. Whatever the intent, the play received mixed reviews which have been dealt with in some depth in Chapter Two. The characters of *Birthrights* comprise the mother, Margaret, her daughters Helen and Claudia, their partners, Martin and Mark and one, IVF baby, Kelly. The emancipated women are independent and empowered and they drive the narrative along with their needs, opinions and insecurities. The scenes between the sisters, and between the mother and one or other of the daughters, bear a distinct resemblance to corresponding scenes in *Travelling North*. The plot lines differ, but not significantly. In *Birthrights*, Margaret has been a single parent left to raise two daughters. She has found the going tough, has not always done the right thing by the girls and even, at times, neglected her responsibilities. She remarks, “I wish I’d done a lot of things differently. Been a better mother to you two” (65). Frances, in *Travelling North*, also a single mother experiencing hard times with two dependent daughters, has similar regrets when she says “I dodged my responsibilities when I was younger ...when the pressure got too much for me I gave them away... I sent the children away, because I wanted some time to do the things I wanted to do” (216). Frances is the more fully-rounded character-construct, while Margaret remains a thinly-drawn stereotypical representation.

Similarly, the daughters in *Birthrights*, while more empowered than Williamson’s earlier female characters, remain symbolic representations of real people. They are representative of the young, independent, professional women of the third millennium. Certainly, they are characters conditioned by their environment, but this time it is a different conditioning. Not the repressed conditioning of the 50s and 60s but the

contemporary conditioning of the 90s where women were emancipated and encouraged to 'have it all'. That is, a profession and motherhood. Unfortunately, some women attending to their professional lives have trouble embracing motherhood at a later age and therein lies the crux of the conflicts at the heart of *Birthrights*. Helen Thomson, writing for *The Age*, commented that the play revealed Williamson's "unerring instinct for inherently dramatic situations and conflict" and thus raised audiences' expectations of a play that explored these issues in some depth ("Review of *Birthrights*"). Kate Herbert, reviewing the Melbourne production of *Birthrights*, for the *Herald-Sun*, was one who was disappointed, complaining "the problem is that the script lacks any true emotional engagement with the characters" (68) and this comment is similar to much of the previously noted criticism levelled at Williamson's plays.

While *Birthrights* may not be one of Williamson's strongest plays, it is still a treatise on a problematic and fast-growing social phenomenon. It starts from a naturalistic base with intersections of genre-blending and for this reason it has been included in this thesis. The play deals with 'real' people at a significant time in their lives and it resonates with the emotional conflicts accompanying the serious issue of IVF and its effects on all members of a family. Again, the satirical approach to a naturalistic premise, has critics lamenting the effects of the genre-blending without recognising Williamson's *modus operandi*.

The characters' aspirations, successes and defeats are dealt with in Williamson's familiar satirical manner with emotions truncated by the short pithy comment and outrageous rejoinders. The political background of the play, with references to Keating's Labor

Government and the illegal immigrant/refugee issue, set the play firmly in its time, but as with *Don's Party* these political issues are only touched upon. Williamson is more concerned with the interactions between the women involved and the repercussions of the surrogacy birth. The two young women involved, Claudia and Helen, are representations of modern, young, middle class Australian women, whose ideological differences are neatly balanced by the pragmatism of their mother, Margaret.

Act Two, Scene Sixteen of *Birthrights* is a short scene between the father and mother of the IVF baby (now a teenager), and the aunt who is the surrogate mother. The scene is a hospital waiting room, and the situation sombre, as it is revealed that the daughter has overdosed on “ecstasy and alcohol”. With only ten lines of dialogue Williamson captures something of the anxiety, desperation, and misgivings that emanate from such an occasion. However, the painfulness of the situation is truncated by the action cutting to Scene Seventeen, a rocky outcrop overlooking Sydney Harbour some months later. The opening line is “It’s a wonderful place to have your ashes spread” (74), and this proves a suspenseful teaser because, in fact, it is the old grandmother’s ashes that are being disposed of, while the audience has been positioned to receive the funeral as that of the daughter, Kelly. Again, Williamson uses shock tactics and an incongruous context to jolt his audience into the realisation that something more than is immediately obvious, might be happening. The incongruity between what is expected and what is realised, provides a deeply ironic tone.

Similarly, later in the scene, when it is revealed that the surrogate mother and her long-

time partner have split up, the treatment is glib:

Claudia: I'm sure your new lady'll do it for you [spread his ashes].

What are you doing now?

Martin: Website design.

Claudia: Lots of money?

Martin: Field's too crowded. Luckily my new lady is a doctor. (74)

Here the expectation is that there will be some discussion, some lingering doubt, or nostalgia, to mark the moment when two people actually address their problem. But Williamson cuts short the sentiment with a sensationalised remark from the IVF daughter, Kelly: "I hope those really *were* Gran's ashes" (74).

In *Birthrights*, Williamson once again runs the risk of inviting accusations of 'surface treatment' and 'pulling back from pain' by truncating the deeper, fuller discourse the text invites, and true to form, critics again accused him of glibness and superficiality. What may appear as artistic negligence is, in fact, Williamson's depiction of a socially representative type. This surface treatment of the subject matter of *Birthrights* has been discussed at some length in Chapter Two. In defence of Williamson's approach, it must be reiterated that the critics have failed to receive the play on its several levels of meaning. While naturalism has been dissipated in favour of ironical satire on a surface level, this points up the discrepancy between what is expected and the reality of social rituals. With a postmodern reading, it would appear that Williamson has taken a serious topical issue, given it a highly sophisticated humorous veneer, and left the audiences to make their own interpretation. No doubt the emotional rollercoaster ride – of the

realisation of a couple's infertility; of the uncertainty of what to do next; of the gratitude to one's sister when a surrogate mother is found in her; and of the eventual joy at the birth of the baby – is territory that is traversed daily by the many couples who have resorted to the IVF programme.

It is evident from this exploration that Williamson's panoply of characters comprises those with the potential for fully rounded, three-dimensional characterisations, as well as more thinly-drawn stock representations. The plays under review start from a naturalist platform with serious subject matter and a realistic ambience, and so there is an expectation of fully-rounded naturalistic characters. While several of the naturalistic protagonists go some way to meeting Donald Pizer's and E. M. Forster's criteria for realism and credibility in naturalistic characterisations, others – Frank and Frances (*Travelling North*), and Kate (*After the Ball*) – most nearly depict the depth and psychological exploration demanded by Pizer. Each of these protagonists is a complex character-construction with a life-time of experiences that have influenced and shaped their personalities, their motivations and actions. However, Williamson's reliance on stereotypical character-constructs meets Forster's criteria for two-dimensional constructs in that they are easily recognisable and memorable and, importantly, they facilitate the pace and rhythm of the satirical texts. In addition, it is reiterated that Williamson has chosen stereotypical representation of these characters because that characterisation most nearly replicates the traits of the individuals depicted.

Williamson, himself, deemed *After the Ball*, a “Drama from the Well of Life” (Metro 6). He contends that the “best drama” can show “with power and clarity that we have so many inner contradictions at our core...” (“Introduction to *After The Ball*”). This statement gives expectations of a naturalist treatment reminiscent of Ibsen’s art of “seeing into something, and through it” (Adams 351) and some critics are disappointed when they discover that Williamson has given the issues an overlay of irony and satire. They fail to understand that Williamson is both social observer and commentator, and that his observations are not mere glib representations of certain aspects of Australian society, but are reflections of surfaces that have layers of meanings that are masked by this ironical humour. The surface features of the plays may appear superficial in some sense but the deeper awareness, making audiences look beneath the surface, finds the subject matter to be iconic and symbolic and a reflection of the universal human condition.

Williamson’s use of stock or stereotypical characters, along with comical dialogue, reinforces the satirical thrust of the selected texts, while the farcical incidents provide the audience with comic relief and entertainment and space for reflection. Williamson’s own emphasis on social interactions and his assertion that “I have been having a continuous tilt at the hedonism, the materialism, and the competitiveness of urban middleclass life” (Kiernan, *David Williamson* 297) signals his intention to use satire as social commentary. It is the premise of this thesis that the critics who read Williamson as a naturalist find him superficial because they do not detect the satire and – especially – the irony that permeate the plays under discussion.

This chapter has looked in some depth at the various character-constructs in Williamson's more naturalistic plays and it is here concluded, that while Williamson has indeed sacrificed the fuller character development demanded by a pure naturalism, he has done so as a satiric stratagem to highlight modern social and moral problems. Williamson's genre-blending is a deliberate treatment of the concerns, values, and inter-relatedness of certain cohorts of Australian society over the past thirty-five years.

The following chapter will reflect on the diachronic sense of meanings within the selected Williamson plays and determine the fact that, over times and spaces, the meaning of the plays has remained constant. The chapter will explore how Williamson *re*-presents society to itself, as well as examine how his characters have become symbolic of times and places.

## Chapter Six

### Iconic Representations

*It was probably fortunate that the overwhelming majority of Shakespeare's plays were written to please the great cross section of humanity which attended the public theatres, rather than for the coterie group at Blackfriars, for in appealing to this heterogeneous audience Shakespeare also learned to appeal to what is essentially, and therefore perennially human in all men.*

(Roland Frye,)

*Finally there is an acceptance that material rooted firmly in this [Australian] environment is to be welcomed rather than feared.*

(Williamson, *Meanjin* 1974)

This chapter will illustrate that despite continual criticism arising from the extent to which satire and farce contribute to the perceived superficiality in David Williamson's oeuvre, his work is indeed universal in a social and cultural sense because he reflects the realities of his time. The chapter will also examine the notion that Williamson's perceived 'flatness' arises from his naturalism, which is ironic, and at the same time deep social commentary. In particular, Williamson's naturalism is demonstrated in what some commentators call superficiality, but is, as established in Chapter Four of this thesis, his perception of reality, and that this is to a large extent a reality he shares with his audience.

The selected plays, *The Removalists* (1971), *Don's Party* (1971), *Travelling North* (1979), *After the Ball* (1997), *Face to Face* (1999), and *Birthrights* (2003) are social commentaries on diverse topics, questioning the social mores of various aspects of

Australian society over a period of thirty years. Williamson's characters embody multiple moments of belonging and are located as cameo-studies of the chronological spaces that these plays inhabit.

Kippax's notion, used as the epigraph to the Introduction to this thesis, addresses the limited cultural and social importance of some genre of theatre, notably the more esoteric and didactic plays. He credits Williamson's popularity with attracting "a widening and increasingly loyal popular audience back to theatre" ("Williamson Dutiful" 11). This chapter will focus on how Williamson also learned to appeal to what is essentially, and therefore perennially human. Certainly Williamson's plays attract a section of the Australian public who have remained loyal to him over the years. This is attested to by his thirty-fifth play *Influence* grossing more than \$1.7 million dollars for the Sydney Theatre Company in 2005. This researcher suggests that beyond the gala glamour and excitement that comes with a 'Williamson opening night', the fun and laughs during the performance, and the 'post-mortems' that continue in the foyer afterwards, it is necessary to recognise the playwright's ability to examine the perennially human interactions and patterning of individuals in a social context.

The notion that popularity and 'art' are inimical is one that requires some attention.

Writing of Shakespeare's work, Roland Mushat Frye attributes his enduring greatness to his ability to capture what is deeply pertinent to fundamental human nature, thus ensuring his work is never out of date (17). The humanity in Shakespeare's plays withstands temporal shifts because it not only shows a sense of location and identity that is so much

a part of the characters' contexts, but reflects the essence or centrality of the human condition. Michael Wood, commenting on the universality and endurance of Shakespeare credits him with, "holding up a mirror to human nature" (255).

It is interesting to note that four hundred years after Shakespeare, Peter Fitzpatrick commends Williamson's ability to "hold a mirror up to the Australian middle class" ("Styles of Love" 426). While Williamson's *oeuvre*, in the main, represents middle class Australia, he is, as Shakespeare is, a recorder of his immediate social context. Just as Shakespeare is of his time, and for all time, so Williamson's selected plays are essentially of their time, and it is the underlying contention of this thesis that they too are likely to endure because they are universally true.

Wood discusses Shakespeare's universality by extrapolating from the instability of Elizabethan Stratford, and uses a parable of the supposed "defacing" or "covering-up" of the great medieval religious paintings to make a point. Queen Elizabeth I wished to transform her country back to her father Henry VIII's religious "reformation" and so decreed that all Catholic paintings be destroyed. It was discovered later that the Stratford authorities had indeed protected the artwork, by suggestion only, with a thin veneer of covering. Underneath they remained intact. Woods uses this parable to lead into a discussion of Shakespeare's time and work: "What lies under the whitewash? What lies behind the actions and words in an age when covering up, concealment, and dissimulation became the order of the day?" (11). It is not too far a stretch of the imagination to connect this tale of whitewashing to Fitzpatrick's "sugared placebos" in

Williamson's *oeuvre*. In an effort to entertain as well as edify his audience, Williamson's plays are reflections of the codes of being and belonging endemic to his society.

In an interview with the researcher which can be read in full in Chapter Seven, Williamson discussed his need to get the "surface" of his plays/characters right. He believes that the surface of a play must be correct in order to spark the "recognition of truth" in an audience, and in doing so he aligns himself with Chekhov, who also realised the value of getting the 'surface' right.

Despite the commonplace in everyday Russian life of which he wrote, with everything "familiar...truthful... nothing new" (Fen 7), Chekhov's plays were "full of action, not in their external, but in their inner development. In the very inactivity of his characters a complex inner activity is concealed" (Fen 7). Williamson feels that the role of the characters in his plays is twofold: they are speaking to the social conditioning and the emotional behaviour of the audience, while at a deeper level they are speaking to the inherent power of what he terms their "limbic" system.

It is significant that Williamson enjoys an enduring popularity that over time and space sees the meanings of his plays remain constant. This is reflected in the hugely popular revival of *Don's Party* in both Melbourne and Sydney in 2007, as will be discussed later. The universalities of emotional meanings, along with the playwright's deliberately constructed meanings, make his messages identifiable and relevant in any age. This researcher holds that the capacity of Williamson's plays to remain relevant in every age

will emerge; in the future these plays will be deemed as iconic reflections of the Australian psychological and social landscape.

Williamson's characters are located within a specific space and time, and possess a pattern of belonging to the social context of their time, whether it be in the larrikin Cooley on election night at *Don's Party*, or in the beleaguered boss Greg Baldoni in *Face to Face*. These diverse character-constructs have a sense of identity, a sense of belonging within their social demographics; of accurately portraying the cohort they represent. They are characters with patterns of behaviour that reflect the society of the times, who show a sense of location, identity, and history that makes them iconic exemplars of that time and place.

Perhaps then this is the wellspring of Williamson's success. The strutting exhibitionist loudmouths in the plays of the 1970s, with their 'in your face' language and gestures (*The Coming of Stork*, *Don's Party*, *Jugglers Three*), and the more duplicitous, smooth-talking operators of the late 1980s (*Sons of Cain* 1985, *Emerald City* 1987, *Siren* 1990), are constructs that audiences recognise, and with which they can identify. Despite the shock value of language ("Stick it up your arse, Ross" (*The Removalists*)) and action (the sexual prosthesis produced by Manny (*Up For Grabs*, 2002)), audiences have gone the distance with Williamson, seeing in his productions representations of scenarios in their own lives, that if not experienced personally, certainly have been experienced vicariously through friends, associates, and an ever-changing world laid bare by the ruthless media.

The ever-changing world with mass media, Internet technology, and the striving for globalisation, means that themes and ideas are transmitted instantly through time and space to generations throughout the world. Everything has changed but human universalities remain constant. Wood, marvelling at Shakespeare's universality in a fast changing world says,

New worlds are discovered, old worlds are lost; the people rise up; kings are overthrown; women speak up for equality with men; black people find a voice in England. Ships sail across the world loaded with people, spices and ideas, potatoes rain out of the sky; tales are told of Lapland sorcerers, Persian emperors and embassies to the Pigmies. Off Sierra Leone, African dignitaries watch Hamlet on a British ship; the Native American Princess Pocahontas attends a masque in London. (13)

Shakespeare's plays covered the whole spectrum of humanity with characterisations so universal in their range of emotions and experiences that Ben Jonson was prompted to declare, "Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all time" (qtd. in Frye 16). Shakespeare's plays, whether tragedies or comedies, deal with the beliefs and values of his time; and are manifestations of real people and the real concerns of both kings and the masses.

Shakespeare's texts preserve for us, in the third millennium, something of the nature of society in the sixteenth century. That the plays are a conduit to another time, another place, is Shakespeare's legacy and it is because of this enduring gift through the ages, that this researcher was afforded the pleasure of receiving the *Shakespeare's Globe Theatre's* production of *Macbeth*, in London, in 2001. The production, directed by "Master of the Play", Tim Carroll, was a contemporary piece with many innovative devices. The

Scottish warrior is presented in formal 'tie and tails' and Lady Macbeth, in silver lamè and stiletto heels, yet she still delivers:

...Come thick night,  
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
 To cry "Hold, hold!" (Act I. Sc. V p.15)

with a timeless bloody, intending evil. This translocation of Lady Macbeth to the twenty-first century renders her jealousies and rapacity all the more obvious and meaningful. The audience receives her murderous atrocity in stunned silence, her contemporary representation facilitating their recognition, and fuelling their abhorrence of evil. Similarly the Witches, are given a contemporary, third-millennium treatment as androgynous musicians whose dreaded prophecies are no less potent for their modernity. This production is a long way from the inaugural production at *The Globe* before King James I at Court in 1606, but no less effective in locating and impacting on an audience in a different time and place.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* traces the rise and downfall of a plausible, if overly ambitious, Scottish family of the eleventh century and in that sense they were naturalistic character-constructs for their time. However, it is what these constructs represent that assures their endurance: their overwhelming ambition, their lack of concern for others, their commitment to each other, are all universal human traits which can be cast in any era without loss of credibility. This relocation of an audience in another time and place is

dynamically evidenced in a Channel ITV1 production for television of Shakespeare's *Othello* (2001). In a foregrounding of the politics and racism of the play, the role of the black Moor is transposed to that of London's first black Commissioner of Police. Desdemona becomes a lycra-clad jogger, exercising along the banks of the Thames with her bodyguard. The play covers issues only too pertinent today with its themes of racism and jealousy and man-made evil. Life and its humanities were grist for Shakespeare's playwriting mill, prompting Wood to declare him, "a sponge: stories of the street, things he saw, people he met, news of the day, sermon and tract, all went into the mix" (Wood 275). The researcher, pondering the universality of Shakespeare, deduces that he was, in fact, "storyteller to his tribe" much the same as Williamson who also takes local culture and shapes it into symbolic meaning claims to be. Williamson has become a teller of tales of his "tribe". He provides more than an ethnographic recounting, but rather, in the realms of his plays, he takes the audience into an exploration of the symbolic sense of self. The tribe that is his audience is entranced as it witnesses his shamanistic skill in traversing the realms of Australian consciousness across time, space, and place.

Williamson has sustained a relevant relationship with models of society over a long career and in that sense he is master of his craft. Quite naturally, not all of his plays have worked for him, yet this is not significant for this thesis. *Top Silk* (1989), *Money and Friends* (1991) and *Corporate Vibes* (1999) were considered by the critics to be formulaic and insufficiently developed. *Dead White Males* (1995) and *Heretic* (1996), both plays of ideas, received scathing criticism, with John McCallum in 1995 summing up the hollow treatment of the serious issues of the plays, "It is all simply supposed to be

fun” (article in the *Weekend Australian*). Adverse criticism centres on the serious issues underpinning the plays where questions are raised and never fully explored or answered. Some critics feel that investigative exploration of serious issues is truncated by comic attractions and humorous one-liners. A representative selection of adverse criticisms of Williamson’s work has been dealt with in some depth in Chapter Two. When asked about his character-constructs, Williamson responds, “I think of a group of people in a situation and I start from there” (qtd. in Palmer 104) and he goes on to explain that his “Australian” voice ranges throughout a few sub-cultures: from the suburban sub-culture (*Don’s Party*) to the academic (*The Department* (1975)); the sporting culture of *The Club* (1977) to the literary (*What If I Died Tomorrow* (1973), *Emerald City*, and *Soulmates* (2002)); and from journalism (*Sons of Cain* (1985)) to the constabulary (*The Removalists* and *Siren* (1991)).

Eleven young professionals are brought together in *Don’s Party* to foreground Williamson’s recurring theme of expectation and disillusionment. Hopes for a Labor victory are subsequently thwarted and this becomes a metaphor for the hopes and aspirations of the guests. Williamson satirises the inner failings of the characters, their conflicts, foibles, sexual frustrations, and professional ambitions, all universalities that transcend the limits of their initial context. Williamson’s exemplary use of a satirical treatment of what he perceives as the superficiality and disillusionment of a certain cohort of Australian society, is a testament to his assertion that “acute observation, perceptive observation... can be very potent in illustrating... the nature of humanity” (qtd. in Zuber-Skerrit 201). Williamson eschews a purely naturalistic approach that would have the

protagonists embroiled in deep and meaningful discourse, in favour of an ironic approach that energises the satirical impact. He foreshadows his treatment of the play with his ironic title – *Don's Party* – for a gathering that quickly descends into a debacle. It is this researcher's opinion that Williamson, as a social observer and commentator of the times, has chosen a supposedly 'surface' treatment because the characters he is representing – that cohort he chooses to present – do in fact behave in this superficial way. Similarly Richard Brindsley Sheridan's choice of satire to chronicle the hypocrisy and artificiality of a certain class of society – a cohort – in mid-eighteenth century England in his 1777 play *School for Scandal* mirrors the antics of the characters and relocates the audience in another time, another place. This matching of form with character-constructions is almost onomatopoeic in design.

One of Williamson's early ironic constructions, matching form with the disposition of the character, is Kate, the socialite sister of the battered wife, Fiona, in *The Removalists*. Kate accompanies Fiona to the Police Station to report domestic violence. The scene is laden with the doubt-riddled mood of the moment: the uncertainty of the victim, her unwillingness to say much against her husband, the perpetrator of the violence, her embarrassment at revealing parts of her body to the inquisitive police officers, and the general unpleasantness of a marriage break-up. Yet the supposedly supportive Kate seizes the opportunity to flirt with the lascivious Sergeant Simmonds, (55). Here is Williamson at his ironic best, with the discordance between the expected reality and the reality that eventuates providing the audience with an undesirable, but tangible truth: Kate's

shallowness of character, her ego-centricity, does not allow her to totally empathise with her sister's plight.

Similarly, the character Simone in *Up for Grabs* from 2001, opens the play with a tender and loving scene with her husband. Simone is Williamson's representation of the young, go-for-broke, modern, empowered female corporate operator of the third millennium. The audience is positioned to receive her as a totally committed, loving wife. However, the incongruity of how she 'presents', and her ensuing behaviour, provides Williamson with his ironic platform. Simone reveals her superficiality throughout the play with various incidents where she debases her values in favour of monetary rewards. Her moral decline is complete when, in the final scenes of the play, she is lured by the promise of thousands of dollars to perform a sex-act on one of her clients. She obliges. Williamson parallels Simone's superficiality with the superficiality of the art world and succeeds in ironically exposing the pretensions of both in a presentation of the eternal verity of greed. This expose of the superficiality of the art world by a seemingly "superficial" satirical treatment is evidence of Williamson marrying form with content, and this concept lies at the heart of this thesis. *Up For Grabs* reflects not only local context, but also universal humanities.

The social conditioning and defensive mask of many Australians in the 1970s has been examined previously in Chapter Five; such people are products of their time and prefer to conceal their true feelings and inadequacies under a conforming anonymity. How incredulous and inappropriate would Don, the disappointed, disillusioned, and frustrated

host of *Don's Party* be, if he indulged in the 'stream-of-consciousness' flow of inner thoughts and feelings ascribed to Colin (*Emerald City*)? Don, the archetypal young left-wing supporter, given the emotional disengagement in the dominant models of masculinity in the 70s, would never have divulged his frustrations and anxieties to his mates. However, he could, with very little effort, have *evolved* into the emotionally engaged, articulate writer, Colin, of the late 80s. Williamson, as always, is in touch with his representations and well aware of the particular times and places of their contexts. Just as Romeo and Juliet are forever the star-crossed lovers, Capulet the possessive angry father doing what he thinks is best for his daughter, and Hamlet the self-doubting melancholy prince, so they are representatives of their 'types' and easily identified by societies of most cultures. So, too, is Don representative of his type. As Williamson attests when comparing the bitterness at the centre of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* with the prevailing frustrations and bitterness of the couples at Don's Party: "people have visions of the future that never materialise and it does turn them sour and it does turn them disillusioned." (Interview Chapter Seven). Don's disappointments and frustrations are depicted with painful clarity and intent, and are pertinent to human nature and therefore, over times and spaces, his emotions will remain constant and hold universal meaning with enduring power.

Historically, Don, along with Williamson's other ockers – Stork (*The Coming of Stork*), Cooley (*Don's Party*), Kevin (*Sons of Cain*), and Mike (*Emerald City*) has become a symbolic representation of the Aussie male; unable to reveal his emotions and 'appearing' to become the shallow stereotype he pretends to be. It is this researcher's

contention that Williamson astutely judges these characters, and deliberately presents them as two-dimensional constructs: as representative of their 'type'. However, with skilful construction – the cocky gesture, the pithy retort, the obscene language – Williamson's subtext indicates that these characters' parts are somewhat more than their whole, and it is this hint of something more, that audiences recognise and identify with. This is the quality that places these characters within their contexts and enables them to be relocated as cameos of the chronological spaces that the plays inhabit.

The bickering couples of *Don's Party* become familiar grist for Williamson; they appear in *Jugglers Three*, *A Handful of Friends* (1976), *The Perfectionist* (1985), *Emerald City*, and *After the Ball* (1997). They are unhappy with themselves, and with each other, and they make feeble efforts to hide their frustrations behind the social mask of raunchy behaviour and smart repartee. With astute observation and attention to significant details Williamson creates a complex milieu of characters representing constructs of ordinary people coping with life's adversities in their own differing ways. Audiences recognise themselves, or their acquaintances, and so identify with the characters on several levels. On one level, there is the purely physical recognition of seeing real 'flesh and blood' characters acting out familiar experiences. And with this recognition, comes an awareness, on a far deeper psychological level, of dormant or repressed aspirations, disappointments, disillusionments and resignations.

In recognising themselves, the disillusionments, the uncertainties of newly-redefined gender issues, and the 'trapped' feelings within a dissolving marriage, the audience is

calling on core emotions which are universalities. Lying at the core of the human condition is the individual's concern of how to cope with life's challenges and conflicts and people will address their situations in their own unique ways. However, at the theatre they are drawn to the challenge of knowing themselves vicariously on deeper levels. Williamson, exercising a deep connection with the interrelatedness of society and with his audiences, evokes psychological resonances in those audiences which should dispel the critique of superficiality that persists.

*Don's Party* premiered at the Pram Factory in Melbourne in 1971, and has had its latest revival at the Playhouse, in Melbourne's Arts Centre, on January 11, 2007. In the intervening thirty-six years it has been played many times across Australia to disparate audiences, who, despite differences of age and gender, are still able to identify with the characters. *Don's Party* survives and succeeds, because Williamson's play shows a true sense of Australianness and *re-*places its characters not only in location, but in space and history. It is true that many things have changed since the 1970s but it is equally true that there are many things that have not. In the fast-moving world of the twenty-first century, life for young people is in many ways tougher than the 70s, with enormous strains on marriages through professional ambitions, the redefinition of gender roles, and the shared responsibility of domestic issues, but this is a change in magnitude rather than substance.

Recognising the shifts in time over this period it is clear that *Don's Party* concerns itself with the matters of people becoming disillusioned with their lot. The reality of professional and academic achievement, the balancing of jobs, home and families, have

fallen short of expectations, and young people are again (or still) questioning their roles both at work and at home. Relationships become increasingly complicated and the ensuing demands on a relationship create new and additional tensions and this has always been so; these are concerns that transcend times and places. Williamson's evocation of the fraught scenario in *Don's Party* creates moments of being and belonging in its audiences, and over the years these manifestations of real people with real concerns, have become symbolic of various times and places. It is significant in assessing Williamson's contribution to theatre that these verisimilitudes are recognised as a reflection of the diachronic sense of meanings inherent in his selected work.

It will be valuable to mention the persistent realities of disappointment, disillusionment, love, and anger which underscore Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). The play is a vitriolic account of an unhappy marriage. As in *Don's Party*, the play observes the unities of time, place, and action, this time within the drawing room of George and Martha's home in American academia. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* differs from *Don's Party* in that there are only two guests, and it is less a celebration of human foibles and insecurities. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a sad indictment of marriage commitment, responsibility, and one woman's feverish decline when she realises that the husband she married for his potential academic-status has turned into a second-rater. The diabolic treatment of the husband, George, by the shrewish wife, Martha, is revealing in that it acts as a catalyst to identify the disappointments and frustrations of the other young couple involved. The play is a scorching revelation of a disintegrating marriage, fired by verbal brilliance and gut-wrenching emotions. While it

is not suggested that Williamson's treatment of disintegrating marriages and the social veneer that disguises them resonates with the same intensity and impact as Albee's play, both plays are concerned with the human condition and appeal to what is "essentially, and therefore perennially human" in all people. Williamson, speaking in interview with the researcher, reveals how "electrifying" he found Albee's courage in "letting far more of the limbic system into the surface than I had ever seen before on stage" (Interview Chapter Seven).

In contrast to the surface humour in *Don's Party* is that "essential and therefore perennially human" factor in Williamson's *The Removalists* which explores the aggressive instincts of intimidation, authority and police brutality – and the accompanying apathy – that were prevalent in the 1970s and are, unfortunately, still of concern today. As noted earlier in this thesis the genesis of *The Removalists* lies in an encounter that Williamson actually had with a removalist. The deeply unsettling attitude and apathy of the furniture mover in Williamson's play has already been related in Chapter Five. Of equal significance and pertinence however, is the incident of the death in custody of Mr. Neil Stanley Collingburn in Melbourne in early 1971 (Victoria Police "Past Patterns"). This case of alleged police brutality parallels and informs the behaviour of Sergeant Simmons and Constable Ross in *The Removalists*. It is pertinent to note the irony of the whole premise of *The Removalists*: two sisters take refuge in the safe haven of the Police Station where they report a case of domestic violence perpetrated against the young wife. By the conclusion of the play, the police officers have revealed themselves as far more irresponsible, vindictive, and violent than the young man from whom the

women sought refuge and against whom the charges were laid. This gap of incongruity between what was expected, and what actually happened, provides the irony that underpins the work. It is an irony that persists for contemporary audiences in light of similarly brutal events that have ensued and continue to hold society's attention.

Williamson's main focus in the play is the representation of patterns of behaviour of three 'ordinary' men who have been conditioned by a society that condones certain cults of violence. Street bashings, rape, gang warfare, contact sport and institutional abuse of power all exist in society when the socially-conditioned 'mask' cracks to reveal the primal energy of the limbic system. As Ian Turner, in "Reflections on Violence" says, "Williamson has put his finger on a pulse of violence existing at deeper levels in Australian Society" (9).

Williamson's prescience and courage in alerting the public to certain behaviour, seemingly endemic in the Victorian Police Force in 1970, is given contemporary significance given the exposure of systemic corruption concerning senior members of the police force in present times. Of note is that on February 21, 2005, The Police Integrity Commission commenced an investigation into claims of police brutality within the New South Wales police force. It was alleged that Allan Frederick Hathaway had been severely bashed by officers from the Wagga Wagga Local Area Command after his arrest for a traffic infringement. Magistrate Bill Pearce raised concerns about Mr. Hathaway's treatment while hearing charges against him and referred the matter to the Commission. Mr Pearce "found that police had lied in court about Mr. Hathaway's arrest, and had

turned away ambulance officers who arrived to treat his injuries. He found one officer had bashed Mr. Hathaway to within an inch of his life, resulting in severe injuries” (“Police Brutality Inquiry to Open”). It would appear that Sergeant Simmonds and Constable Ross are alive and well in Wagga Wagga. Themes of abuse of power, anti-authoritarianism, and apathy, remain constants, giving rise to questions of violence in Australian society and the culture of acceptance that allows it to happen analogous to those asked by Williamson over three decades ago in *The Removalists*. This dark side of Australian culture exposed by Williamson is further testament to the inherent limbic system that exists in individuals in every culture. Williamson discusses this in some depth in the interview in Chapter Seven.

Williamson’s examination of authority and violence in Australian society in *The Removalists* and his evocation of the ‘boozy’ camaraderie and disquiet at *Don’s Party*, should have gone some way to answering his critics’ accusations of superficiality and surface treatment of serious subject matter. However, criticisms of glibness and thinly drawn character-constructs remain. Williamson, with consideration, chooses to observe “beneath the surface” the incidents that track Simmonds and Ross’s behaviour. The deeply-rooted, repressed violence that lies beneath the surface in some areas of society – the same sort of limbic anger and brutality that William Golding recognised and immortalised in *Lord of the Flies* (1954) – is not easily detectable and Williamson should be lauded for his persistence in locating and portraying it.

Williamson recognises this underlying malaise and manifests his concerns in the tangible form of a play. His treatment of the serious subject matter with intersections of satire and farce, (which has been dealt with throughout this work), and stereotypical character-constructs demonstrates that as early as 1971 he was a master of his craft. It is not too much a stretch of the imagination to see that the scenes between Simmonds, Ross, and Kenny in the truly disturbing denouement of *The Removalists* could have been handled with the same ‘boys-will-be-boys’ ockerism that redeems the appalling behaviour at *Don’s Party*. However, nothing redeems Simmonds and Ross. Audiences of the play will never forget the atrocious imagery of the final scenes. Williamson’s characters become symbolic representations of corruption and depravity and over times and spaces their meaning become even more relevant and terrifying.

Similar resonances of corruption and depravity reverberate through *The Christian Brothers* (Blair, 1976), which also deals with social conditioning and suppressed feelings. The protagonist, the Christian Brother, is a product of his time and his culture. Like Sergeant Simmonds, he hides his frustrations and anxieties under a veneer of civility. In spite of his religious vocation and years of training and commitment, the Brother abandons his ‘duty of care’ mantle and abuses his power with corporal punishment and sexual innuendo. It is interesting to note that the researcher saw *The Christian Brothers* in Perth, Western Australia, during its national tour in 2003. Almost thirty years had elapsed since the play’s inaugural performance and during that interval it had lost nothing in its chilling recounting of some of the baser qualities of mankind. The tangible manifestation of the Christian Brother, the protagonist of the play, creates for the audience a real ‘flesh

and blood' representation of a character who personifies the evil that most people have only read about. To be confronted with it, in the intimacy and immediacy of the theatre, has a powerful impact on an audience. Blair in *The Christian Brothers*, just as Williamson in *The Removalists*, peppers his horrific play with intersections of satire and face, and with the same powerful effect. Both plays have concreted their position in the history of Australian theatre.

This researcher's argument that Williamson's art is in the location of his character-constructs in a social circumstance that holds meaning and significance over different times and spaces, is strengthened by an examination of the playwright's *The Jack Manning Trilogy*, (1999-2002). In a prefatory essay entitled "A Justice That Heals", Williamson illuminates the forces within him that created *Face to Face* (1999), *A Conversation* (2002) and *Charitable Intent* (2002). He had correspondence with David Moore and John McDonald, the organisers of Transformative Justice Australia, the aim of which group was to provide an alternative system of justice and resolution by way of community conferencing. This system provides those most affected by crime, both perpetrators and victims and their families, with a safe, controlled environment to talk through their problems.

Williamson was inspired by Moore and McDonald's approach to social justice as it confirmed perceptions he had acquired when studying psychology at university in the 70s (xxi). These perceptions promoted the idea that emotions are central to one's existence and that all basic affects, like excitement, love, anger and fear are involuntary responses

inherent in all of us. Williamson refers to these emotions as “limbic” emotions. The programme of work being carried out at *Transformative Justice Australia* made sense to Williamson and he used the dynamics of ‘conferencing’ to write his trilogy. The subject matter of *Face to Face* has been dealt with in some depth in Chapter Four but it should be noted again that Williamson, notwithstanding his knowledge of psychology, chose to use intersections of satire, farce, and irony, in what is basically a hyper-naturalist play.

Williamson’s genre-blending is a conscious act in deference to the theme and situation of the community conferencing. The round-table discussion with a mediator chairing the meeting does not lend itself to long and detailed exploration of character traits.

Williamson relies instead on the dialogue for exposition and pace. Again the social patterning of the characters is foregrounded with ironic lines and clever interaction. The characters in *Face to Face* are products of their social environment, and their social conditioning is replicated in their somewhat limited character-constructs. The compression of the conference into a continuous ninety-minute scene means that the audience – like participants in such a conference – once engaged, has no respite from the confrontational, emotional outpourings. This prompts David Moore to observe that the drama was, “remarkably close to the experience of being inside the circle” (xvi).

Williamson’s repetition of farcical lines and gestures, his “comedy of errors” with the protagonist’s wife, and his *inamorati*, all present at the conferencing, are evidence that Williamson, like Ibsen is maintaining audience interest while presenting an artless representation of reality.

*Face to Face* was first produced by the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney, on 20 March, 1999. Since then it has been widely performed – in Philadelphia and Baltimore in the United States of America; in Brazil; and, of course, throughout Australia. David Moore, in his preface to *The Jack Manning Trilogy*, commends Williamson for his constructive treatment of the sort of conflict “that affects us all at some stage in our lives”, (xix), and predicts that Williamson will “remain as perceptive as ever about which big issues now, will remain big issues in years to come” (xix). It is interesting to note that this recognition of a continuum of social relevance in Williamson’s work – a recognition that underpins this work – should come, not from a theatre critic, but from someone immersed in the social actualities that the plays present. No accusations of superficiality here.

David Williamson’s characters are robustly Australian and his plays embrace a multiplicity of persistent themes capable of transposition across, and applicable to, the people and incidents of various times and places. The plays are a social commentary with satire and comedy, and with character-constructs of the social self of their time of composition, that bear juxtaposition with the social selves of the always mobile now, and are as potent today as they were when first written. This would not and could not be so if the plays were superficial. Purely superficial plays do not endure. Plays acquire meaning and become ‘symbolic representations’ of other times, other places, when they are located within the continuum of history and they become representations of common being or belonging in the real world of changing times.

In further support of this thesis' contention that Williamson's work is both iconic and durable the researcher puts forward the criteria that the renowned Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami (Western order) deems necessary for a "writer of national stature" in Japan (xix). Murakami devised his paradigm for national stature while evaluating the works of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (Western order) (1892- 1927) for national recognition as a writer. First, Murakami deemed that the works must "vividly reflect the mentality of the people of his or her age" (xix). Second, the works must have the "depth and power to survive at least a quarter of a century" (xx). Carroll's contention that Williamson has the ability to provide a "certifiably accurate representation of contemporary manifestations of Australian society" (221) is explicit endorsement of Williamson's meeting of these onerous criteria. This thesis has provided convincing evidence of Williamson's success in these matters during a career spanning thirty-five years.

The third criterion for national importance by Murakami's reckoning is that the writer should have inspired widespread respect, or strong sympathy, and that as an individual he or she "had embraced" an awareness of the great questions of the age, and had accepted his or her social responsibility (xx). Although the premise of this thesis concerns accusations of perceived superficiality in Williamson's work, Chapter Two provides ample justification of the praise heaped on him by critics from his first play *The Coming of Stork* (1969) to the present. The range of Williamson's themes may not be considered "the great questions of the age" by everyone but he certainly deals with themes and issues that deeply concern certain cohorts of society on one level, while on a deeper level, revealing these themes and issues to represent common truths that persist over times and

places as has been noted earlier and often. Finally for Murakami, it is necessary that a writer of national stature should have written “not only solid classics but popular works that appeal to a broad audience” (ix). Evidence of Williamson’s compliance with this requirement for popularity is attested to in the opening lines of this thesis where it is noted that his thirty-fifth and purportedly final play grossed more than \$1.5 million dollars for the Sydney Theatre Company.

Murakami expounds his theory by prescribing that a writer of national stature should have works that are handed down from teacher to pupil, included in tertiary examinations, made into films and attain almost iconic representation of their culture. It must be said that a Williamson play has been almost mandatory on English, English Literature, and Drama Studies/Theatre Arts syllabi in Australian high schools since the early 1980s, while *The Coming of Stork*, *The Removalists*, *Don’s Party*, *The Club*, *The Perfectionist*, *Travelling North*, and *Emerald City* were all, over nearly three decades, made into highly professional films winning both critical and commercial acclaim. Clearly Williamson’s *oeuvre* meets all of the above criteria.

In conclusion this thesis has demonstrated that Williamson’s work is immensely accessible, popular and lasting. The issues that underpin his plays are as topical as his characters are identifiable, and such topicality and identifiability have displayed enduring diachronic qualities as the issues with which they deal persistently remanifest themselves. Audiences may be shocked by the crude language and brutality, and unsettled by the moral culpability, however, they do recognise reflections of themselves, and this

recognition of reality underpins the plays' success and acclaim. By presenting plays that are relevant to his society – in whichever decade he may be producing – Williamson has been successful in alerting that society to its own needs, conflicts, beliefs and values. In doing so he has given society reason to question and evaluate its experience of the world.

## Chapter Seven

### An Interview with the Playwright

This interview had its genesis in a chance encounter with David Williamson when the researcher visited Sydney in July of 2007. While walking at Circular Quay, near the Writers' Walk, the researcher's friend alerted her that Mr. David Williamson was approaching. Recognising something of the serendipity of the moment the researcher, hesitantly, stepped forward and introduced herself to the playwright. After allowing her to explain that she was finishing a Ph. D. on his work, the playwright graciously accepted this as a compliment and invited the researcher to contact him if he could be of any help.

Deciding that an interview with the playwright would add substantially to the dynamism of the thesis, the researcher sent a letter (Appendix 1) identifying the thesis and requesting an interview with Williamson. This letter evoked an unexpected initial response from Williamson who was offended by the title of the thesis: *Sugared Placebos: The Effect of Satire and Farce in the Plays of David Williamson* (Appendix 1). The researcher then explained the title and the intention of the thesis and Williamson was mollified. He apologised for misinterpreting the title, which he hoped could be seen as understandable after having spent so many years defending his work. He then suggested, so as to avoid further misinterpretation, that a question mark be inserted, in the title, after *Placebos*. After traversing the correct administrative channels, this was done. And so the title now reads: *Sugared Placebos? The Effect of Satire and Farce in the Plays of David Williamson*.

An interview was arranged at Victoria University, under the direction of my supervisor, then sent Williamson a hard-copy of the thesis which evoked from the playwright a most complimentary response (Appendix 2). It is gratifying to note his comment “As social players we’re like jugglers having all those balls in the air doing our intricate and difficult ‘social dance’, and this is true of all cultures at all times, not just Australia now” (Appendix 2). This comment substantiates the researcher’s premise on which this thesis is based, that Williamson’s naturalism is his perception of local truths that are a microcosm of universal truths and, even when they are presented as superficial, contain psychological depth.

The interview took place at the Victoria University Footscray Park Campus at 4.00 p.m. on 1 November, 2007 with the Researcher and Doctors Tarquam McKenna and Mary Weaven present. The researcher found it encouraging during the interview, when the playwright endorsed this thesis’ premise that he is both social observer as well as social commentator, and that his plays reflect fairly accurately “the surface interaction patterns of Australian society”. He also endorses the researcher’s belief that his plays “have an impact, and it’s not just an impact of recognition on surface behaviour, but an impact of truth, of core behaviour”.

This is a complete transcript of the interview:

*Hello*

Oh hello. Is this David Williamson?

*Yes it is.*

This is Tarquam McKenna. I am calling from Victoria University and I have Elvira Sammut on the phone.

*Oh right, sure.*

Just realised with the time difference you're probably not expecting us for another hour. Is it appropriate for us to talk now?

*Yes. I thought it was coming at 4 pm but that's fine.*

Thank you very much. I just have to advise you that we are recording the conversation. Is that still ok with you?

*Yes that's fine!*

Thank you very much, I will pass Elvira on.

Mr Williamson, it's Elvira.

*How are you? Congratulations.*

I am well thank you. May I start by introducing my two supervisors, Dr Tarquam McKenna, with whom you just spoke, and Dr Mary Weaven

MW - Hello David

May I start by saying I admire your work – I think that’s fairly obvious after four, nearly five years working with your plays, and I would like to say how much I have learnt from studying them. The study has been enriching, not just intellectually, but when I thought [about it] probably socially and emotionally as well. So I thought I would say that straight off David

*That’s a very generous thing to say – of course writers hope they will have an impact like that, so thank you very much.*

Now the very first question I would like to ask seems to be a little bit redundant now. I was going to ask you would you like to comment on any insights that you deduced from the thesis, but you did write a very generous reply that I must say bowled me over. I was hoping you would like it and you were very generous in your praise and it’s given me confidence that the argument was strong, because ultimately that’s what would get my thesis passed.

*You homed in on the central issues that have annoyed me all these years where very superficial critics, who just don’t seem to stand that my plays are popular, because to them the theatre is a temple of earnest suffering. Yeah, what surprised me about your thesis was that you realised that what I am doing is not “naturalistic” drama in a sense that “naturalistic” drama is being defined usually, which is we put characters on stage there, we let them interact and we peel the onions – peel the layers off the onion – and we find out what’s truly there at their deepest core. And if you’re not doing that, then you are writing two dimensional characters. I think that my fascination with drama has been the*

*interaction processes ever since I was a psychology student working in first-year psychology. I am fascinated by the way people use language to manipulate, deceive – sometimes to deceive themselves – in social situations. I'm not trying to peel the layers off the onion, which seems to be the mandatory thing that you are supposed to be doing. I have been observing social interaction as you point out in your thesis. Letting the audience see glimpses of what's underneath the surface but not interrupting the flow of drama as it really would happen – to suddenly start “exposition” about what's there below the onion. Because to me that seems like the most unnatural drama because I really want to depict the reality of processes that happen in social situations on the surface, and as you so accurately pointed out, and I've been waiting for someone to say it for years, the characters that I write aren't two-dimensional because characters in social situations are themselves, and usually behave in what appears to be in a two-dimensional way because their social defences are on high alert; they are deflecting criticism, they are boosting their own status, they are doing all these kinds of operations, they are not stopping to talk earnestly about the deepest anxieties at the heart of their soul – as so much which I consider fairly phoney and contrived writing does. There is no doubt to me that there are layers but as I said to you in my email I am pretty sure I know what those layers are already. I am much more interested in showing how people disguise what's underneath; disguise their self-interest in fake altruism; or disguise their anxiety by false confidence. I am interested in the processes of people using language, language in a social situation, and sure, there are... I mean, one of the instances you spotted when you picked out one of my so-called most naturalistic plays, one of them was Birthrights, and you said that in a typical naturalistic play, that when one of the daughters opened up a*

*little to her mother and said – when the mother is really puzzled about why she is staying with this guy whom the mother can't stand – so when the daughter finally opens up and said “we are very physically compatible” a normal naturalistic play would take this as an entry point into peeling-the-onion-type conversation about sexuality, and about all of that, whereas the mother in my play says “Don't let that sway you. The best lover that I ever had was a Japanese vibrator”. Now that's not a deflection line, that's not trying to deflect the onion; that's the real line that that woman would have really said, in that real social situation. I'm not distorting for the purpose of veering away from any deeper levels of communication – I am making a point about the character of the mother, and that's what surprised me about your thesis: that you understood that... that I am not writing two-dimensional characters. I'm accurately observing how real people would behave in real circumstances; real social circumstances.*

Well thank you, because... thank you for that explanation. I have read little bits and pieces for my research of your philosophy and what you were trying to do, but hearing you say it now brings it home with a more forceful impact. David, I was particularly interested when you wrote in your email to me that under the surface patterns of behaviour conditioned so strongly by society, are the enduring and universal emotions we carry as our human baggage from our deep past and that reminded me of something that I thought was very moving really and very forceful was – when I was researching Henrik Ibsen as a way into your work and naturalism – and Ibsen said the same as you're saying, now. He said “we sail through life with a corpse in our cargo”.

*Absolutely*

Which is a bit chilling, but it's quite true and it is exactly what you do, in fact, say here [in the email] when you talk about universal verities.

*Well, universally, humanity has a very ancient limbic system which comes from way back in the evolution past and is very powerful. We are motivated, energised, and we act on the desires of our limbic systems, our powerful and emotional systems that come from our past, in very much the same way, for very much the same reasons, in every society, and even though society conditions the surface differently, the universals are still underneath and... I did a bit of study in this – I am essentially a psychologist and that's what I trained in and that's what I would still be doing if writing didn't take off. So I know a lot of stuff and one of the studies I quoted was those who believe we are totally socially constructed, who according to everything I have read, are deluding themselves. We are partially constructed but we are very much biologically constructed – that's where biology comes from, that powerful system – so that when the social structuralists say, "Ah, look at the Japanese, they don't get angry like New Yorkers do when someone pinches their car parking space". They've done studies showing when something anger-inducing, something happens to New Yorkers and to other cultures and to the Japanese, exactly the same social, emotional anger is set into motion, when the anger-inducing incident happens, but the Japanese's social conditioning against demonstrating anger is so strong that the cortex rapidly clamps down the limbic system and says "Ah, no, you're not allowed to do that". The anger is still there – the social mask's just hidden it. That's*

*what my plays are about – the social mask hiding that stuff but you glimpse the powerhouse underneath – particularly the plays like The Removalists. If anyone can't spot what I am really trying to say there, is that the human being is a lethal time bomb in certain circumstances, would have to be not reading the play very closely.*

Yes I see that. May I just refer to my questions - the third one - the thrust of my thesis has been that your characters embody multiple moments of belonging and are very much located in their time and place, and of course with our discussions I've seen looking at Ibsen from a Norwegian background, and you're an Australian with an Australian background. [There are] one hundred years separating you [and Ibsen] and yet you both come up with the same idea, which is that we are conditioned by our society. However, on a surface level, your characters are very much Australian, their psychology and their internal mechanisms show universal motivations and traits and things, but would you say that the Australianness of your characters, the ockers, and the Australian identities, with the larrikin with the "she's-alright-mate", and the "let's-party-on", and "open another stubby" or something, do you think that it is still relevant in contemporary multicultural Australia?

*Well the current audiences at Don's Party seem to be finding it relevant. They seem to be enjoying it more than the first outing of the play but I think it was Flaubert who said, "All great art is provincial". I am not saying mine's great art but it's supposed to be art and I think what he is saying has meaning, but you have got to get the surface right. You have to get the surface right to spark the recognition of truth of that surface behaviour from your audience, because the players are speaking to two things: they're speaking to the social conditioning and to the surface emotional behaviour and at a deeper level, they're speaking to the power of the limbic system - whose universal emotions drive us all. So on one hand I was always trying to get the surface right, on the other hand I know I am*

*writing about enduring truths that would apply to any culture as well as ours. Surface behaviour can sometimes be exotic but the thrusts and motivations are universal – I have been trying to capture those two things. What has surprised some critics on the re-run of Don’s Party – They said, “Gee the surface has changed but gee, the behaviour isn’t all that different.” Of course it’s not. Behaviour is never really different from age to age – we still lust after the opposite sex, we still in fact experience envy, we are still highly competitive, we are still acquisitive, and we still face the existential life problems. And what the characters in Don’s Party are facing is the fact that they are into their 30s and the map they had of their lives, much earlier in their lives, isn’t working out according to plan – the dreams of glory – the dreams of successful career – their dreams of perfect marriages – the wonderful children – their friendships – all of those dreams are being questioned at Don’s party and that’s universal in any society. When people hit their 30s their life dreams come crashing down and into contact with reality, and what they actually have achieved, and what they are likely to achieve in the future.*

Oh gosh when you say that, I see my life flashing before me at this moment. One of the things that came to mind, that I put in one of my questions, is that I was very impressed with the production at the Melbourne Theatre Company this year *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. I have, over the years, studied the play and I have seen it several times, but I thought this production, this year, was very tight and very strong. It reminded me a lot of the couples in your plays, and I have mentioned in my questions the bickering couples in *Don’s Party* or *Emerald City*, *After the Ball*, *Soulmates* and *Up For Grabs*. Edward Albee talked about middle class illusions and the soured American Dream for his

dysfunctional protagonists and I just wondered what you would like to say about your dysfunctional couples?

*Yes. Exactly. The sourness at the centre of Albee's play is that the husband and wife had married... the academic husband hadn't turned out to be a stellar high-flying academic, as she had hoped, and in that time a lot of the status that she anticipated would be gathered through her husband – rather than herself – and instead of him becoming a hugely successful academic, he turned into a second-rater, and so the status she hoped to gain for herself never materialised – and it made a bitter biting time. Yeah, it's the same thing. People have visions of the future that never materialised and it does turn them sour and it does turn them disillusioned. I think what was electrifying about Edward Albee, and what electrified me when I first saw his work, was he let far more of the limbic system into the surface than I had ever seen before on stage. I mean the social surface was still right but he let so much of the defences drop and so much of our ancient motives come tumbling through there – and in a very powerful way – and I think my plays still keep the social surface more intact than Edward [Albee] does but he is a great writer.*

I am glad you say that because I thought he was, too. Now Mr Williamson, what about my second question, which was “What role do you think your own work might have had in shaping Australian culture as we see it today?”

*I think I have been reflecting over 35 years now fairly accurately the surface interaction patterns of Australian society that I have perceived, and how they changed with times,*

*but as I said before I also have charted the eternal underneath that surface pattern. But in terms of how it's affected Australia I wouldn't be bold enough to countenance. So all I can do as a writer, is to put it out there and to feel gratified when it is having an impact, and hope that the impact – and it's not just an impact of recognition on surface behaviour, but an impact of truth, of core behaviour.*

Mr Williamson, when I have been researching your work and people's essays and interviews [with] you, you have talked about playwrights, and certainly in Chekhov there are familial patterns, discourse, and interactions that are similar [to your work]. Would you like to say anything about any other playwrights who have influenced you over the years?

*I think the major ones have been Albee, Chekhov. I used to love and still do the Restoration comedy writers Sheridan and Goldsmith... Bernard Shaw I was never as fond of.*

A little bit didactic perhaps?

*Yes, I think the characters are a little too much mouthpieces for their author, but he is still a very fine writer, very good writer of social comedy at the same time just a little... not quite my taste really. Chekhov, I think, let social commentary into his work, but he had wonderful observation of character and orchestration of character – it's like, as I said, what I think... social life is the constant juggling of three of the deepest of human*

*needs and one of them is our egocentric selves. We seek status, power, love, affection; all of those things we are very egocentric, but we are all highly social creatures. Secondly, we don't like to be disapproved of and that comes from our deep tribal past – if we were disapproved back then we were shot out of the tribe and we were in a really bad way. Thirdly we are verbally capable of empathy – we actually don't enjoy, unless we are psychopathic, watching other people suffer particularly as a result of our actions. So I think we try to juggle our egocentricity with our need to be socially loved and with our need not to hurt people. That's a very intricate piece of juggling and Chekhov got that juggling so right, from moment to moment.*

We have spoken about the playwrights now, and I know you're a busy person and drama is probably your life, as well as your family, of course, but what about authors, contemporary authors or authors in the past. Have any had an influence on you?

*I love Dickens, Dickens was often criticised for having too larger-than-life characters but his characters are so full of life and so full of truth and I think he is a wonderful writer. And I loved his answer when someone said “but your characters are so two-dimensional” – but there was another word they used, it wasn't two-dimensional but it meant the same thing – “far larger than life” and Dickens's wrote back to them and said “Well you haven't lived much, have you?”*

It's very accurate really, isn't it?

*I think Dickens is fantastic and a great story-teller and humorous at the same time.*

Mr Williamson I have come to the end of my questions but I would really like to hear a little bit more from you if you don't mind. Do you have anything else to add that you might like to see me put in [my thesis]? Could I just explain to you: as you saw from my thesis, it's fairly much complete. My supervisor had the idea that it might be a little bit refreshing and dynamic to have something from you, as a living author, and the subject of my thesis, so now we are going to incorporate an extra chapter with this interview. Would you like to say anything else? Have you covered everything? Would you like to put anything else, to see in print, or been dying to say, or whatever?

*No, it's just refreshing – and this is not just because of you... oh, it is, of course, partly because you approve of my work, but it's because of the insight. That you realised that I was writing about social process rather than writing about anything else; observing social process accurately and constructing characters who behaved accurately in social circumstances, rather than unnaturally as is evidenced in a lot of writing, when reality will suddenly stop and the characters will start to debate deep issues ad infinitum amongst themselves in a way that will never, ever happen in real life –and the irony is that **that** is called naturalism when it is quite unnatural – in stopping the action to demonstrate, in a very overt way, the writer's supposed deep knowledge of human psyche is annoying. I think its much better to show that knowledge tangentially, in flashes, and let the social parade whirl on, which is what my plays have always wanted to do. So I was very pleased that you had the insight, which has been sadly lacking in some quarters,*

*of actually working out what it was that I was trying to do, rather than telling me what I should be doing, which is ironic. Many critics attack me for **not** being Ibsen, where as you pointed out, Ibsen also injected satire and farce into his work because it was theatrical, but that's all forgotten. They haven't seen a production recently or haven't closely read Ibsen and so they say "Look, we wanted you to be Ibsen but you're not because people laugh at your stuff and there is satire and there is sometimes farce, so you're **not** Ibsen - so you deeply disappointed us". That's the thing, of so much of the negative criticism over the years where, in fact, as you spotted, Ibsen works in a fairly similar way to what I do, mixing genres for theatrical momentum, and also that he gets social surfaces very, very accurately without distorting his characters.*

And Mr Williamson you have been very generous giving me compliments for my insight, but I have to say I have had the guidance of my supervisors who obviously have a great knowledge of drama and insight into human nature, and they have often steered me along the lines of the thesis. However I have to say that I was always able to cotton on quickly to what they have said – I hope – I am not very modest, but I must say that I had no trouble once we hit on [a concept], when we talked about things and sort of tried to get to the core or the nitty-gritty of what you were trying to do with irony and farce in your plays. I tried to look at the different sorts of humour. I felt it was not enough to say “it's funny” or a “comedic device”. I sort of tried to identify the different types of comedic devices – some were farce and some were irony and some were verbal irony and some were situational irony but I was able to [substantiate each one]. I was really pleased with myself, if you don't mind me saying it, [that] when I read the plays, particularly the ones

I selected to discuss, I was able to spot those bits – I could sort of visualise them. A lot I had seen of course, but I was pleased that I could spot that irony – I could just spot the moment it turned into farce and the moment that it came quickly back to biting verbal irony. So I had help, and I have needed that, and I am really pleased that I did get it together, because often you can have passions and endeavours and they don't come about, as we know. But it has come together, and I am very grateful to you for your time and I know you're busy, and I know you probably get tired of explaining what you do, but it has helped me, and I am hopeful with my supervisors' help that this thesis, which is all but finished, will go in by the end of this year and then, hopefully, I will get a couple of nice examiners who endorse your work, and what I have said about you, and, hopefully, I pass. And maybe when I get that letter that says I have attained my PhD I may take the liberty of emailing you again. Is that alright?

*Absolutely and thank your supervisors for their support and I wish they had been writing newspaper critiques for the last thirty years.*

Yes, you have three fans here Mr Williamson.

*Yes... that other thing, about when you move into irony, as a writer, you're trying to say something about the human condition – our proclivity for egocentric behaviour our inflated sense of self-importance, and whenever you move into irony its not just for theatre effect, its for an illumination of the underlying human condition, rather than the surface condition and I think that's what your supervisors themselves have been about.*

Thank you very much. On behalf of my supervisors can I just say thank you, and I would really like to prolong it but you have said what I wanted; you have answered the questions. You have said things that now I can work with. I will draw some conclusions from what you have said and thankfully they are, sort of, along the lines I was travelling anyway. So I hope that will enrich what I have already said [and] add, as my supervisor said, a nice dynamic to the thesis and... well... thank you.

*Thank you for spending so much of your time examining the work – as I said its always flattering to an author that someone does that, so I am really glad that you got in touch.*

Thank you so much. ...And thank you.

*Thank you... bye bye.*

Bye.

## Conclusion

*Williamson is a deeply parochial writer and his genius has been to define for us, in advance of our own recognition, the qualities which make up the Australian character...*

(Katharine Brisbane, "David Williamson: The Looming Giant" 36)

*Deep down I'm a very shallow person.*

(Charles Haughey, three-times Prime Minister of Ireland)

This thesis has sought to define and critically evaluate the claims of superficiality made against David Williamson's plays, chiefly, the truncation of characterisation and a glib, surface treatment of serious issues. Paramount to this study is the reading of the term 'superficiality' which underpins the notion of the inability of language to pin down fixed meanings and representations of reality due to the constant process of multiple interpretations by a modern audience.

By analysing six of Williamson's most naturalistic texts, this thesis has established that he is both social observer and social commentator, capable of consistently identifying and representing local truths that have become iconic symbols of universalities of meaning. Further, it is suggested that these iconic representations will hold meaning over times and spaces, locating Australians in moments of being and belonging in the chronological spaces that his plays inhabit. It is interesting also to note that there is a distinct relationship between naturalism and genre-blending. In recognising this relationship, this thesis has departed from existing accounts of Williamson's work. Those critics receiving

Williamson as a naturalist playwright are inevitably disappointed because they note only the humorous intersections of satire and farce and fail to perceive the underlying currents of ironic social commentary.

This thesis clearly makes a significant contribution to current critical commentary in that its substantial evidence rejects the erroneous assumption that Williamson is superficial. In addition, through thinking comparatively, and defining multiple viewpoints of meaning, it has demonstrated that Williamson's genre-blending is a unique style of modern Australian naturalism that the playwright perceives and utilises in constructing characters within their particular culture and social circumstance. Critics tied to the notion of naturalistic plays dealing with serious subject matter, and peopled with fully-rounded, serious character-constructs, somehow miss the point that 'real' life embraces a full range of emotions during social interaction. Shepherd and Womack maintain that English audiences viewing naturalistic drama need to be "tickled with theatrical tricks" (272), and they are correct. They comment on George Bernard Shaw's belief that realistic drama should be unadorned, and maintain that this position of Shaw's illustrates a greater malady, whereby English audiences are in denial regarding the existence of comedic interludes in naturalistic drama. This thesis has demonstrated that many critics are also in denial of humorous interludes in naturalist drama. Shepherd and Womack credit the Irish playwrights J. M. Synge (*The Playboy of the Western World* (1911)) and Sean O'Casey (*Juno and the Paycock* (1924)) with authentically including humour in ostensibly naturalistic texts. They conclude, "At its most precise and vigorous, naturalism is rescued for the theatre by the denaturing power of the audience's laughter" (274). This point has

been demonstrated in Chapter Three of this thesis in its exploration of genre-blending in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*.

During the course of this study it has been noted that naturalism, as a genre, has undergone considerable changes, from the purely scientific analysis of human beings and their nineteenth century environment, to the broader application of modern naturalism which is most often synonymous with realism. Similarly, satire, which has been dealt with in some depth in Chapter Three, has metamorphosed from its earliest Roman days when Juvenal (4BC) called it a mish-mash of styles, through Dr. Johnson's seventeenth century explanation of satire, as a "poem where wickedness or folly is censured" (Cuddon 827) to the present, where so much irregular behaviour is taken as acceptable, that satirists mainly resort to caricature in stand-up comedy, cartoons, and television skits (831). Contemporary audiences tune in on a regular basis to the shenanigans of Kath and Kim as they cavort around "Fountain Lakes" in their stretch capri-pants, diamante g-strings, and plastic "mules", discussing everything from fertility to sexual satisfaction (Turner and Riley).

The thesis also concludes, based on the work presented in the Introduction, that the concept of "postmodernism" is useful in understanding the changing way that literary genres have been constructed over historical periods. For instance, the superficiality of the "Comedy of Manners" genre, preoccupied with the codes and mores of the middle and upper classes of the Restoration period (1660-1800) has markedly changed by the beginning of the twenty-first century, where middle class society is familiar with on-stage

nudity (*Oh Calcutta* (1972) and *Equus* (1973)). Today, middle class audiences receive, in the comfort of their living rooms, live televised ‘reality’ shows (*Big Brother*, 2005), and can be seen in public, enjoying a chardonnay served by bare-breasted waitresses in gentlemen’s clubs and certain less reputable hotels across the country.

It is further contended that Williamson, writing from a naturalistic base, adeptly constructs his characters realistically and that this provides its own irony. He is constructing ‘superficial’ representations because the characters portrayed are, themselves, superficial or appear to be so. While humour, of necessity, ‘thins’ characterisation, and possibly detracts from the treatment of serious issues, it is contended that Williamson’s characters appear ‘thin’ because they hide behind their socially-conditioned ‘masks’ – and this is something with which Williamson himself concurs. However, when the mask slips to reveal vulnerability, then Williamson is not just dealing with the perceived idea of ‘stereotypical’ constructs but with real people. This thesis has shown that Williamson, intent on exploring patterns of social behaviour in certain cohorts of Australian society, has legitimised the use of stereotypical character-constructs in naturalist drama.

An evaluation of Williamson’s literary accomplishments in the texts studied requires an understanding of his impact on Australian audiences. From his earliest plays, *The Coming of Stork* (1969) and *The Removalists* (1970), Williamson has bewitched his audiences with his particular take on their society. In fact, it was his immediate commercial success that contributed to his exclusion from the more alternative, collaborative Australian

Performing Group in the 70s. There is no doubting that Williamson's use of comedic devices makes his plays more accessible to audiences, and that this in turn, translates into popularity. This study establishes that Williamson's audiences respond positively to his plays because they recognise themselves and identify with the social dilemmas, the flaws, farcical foibles, and vulnerabilities of the characters. As Katharine Brisbane sums up Williamson's appeal to audiences "his works have chartered the problems which the breaking up of political, domestic and moral patterns over the past twenty years in Australia have caused our progress as a nation" (Brisbane, "The Looming Giant" 36).

This thesis contends that recognition and identifiability will be the basis for Williamson's literary reputation and endurance with his audiences of the future. Augustus Boal identifies this phenomenon as crucial to meaningful theatre when he says, "they [the audience] see themselves here and imagine themselves there; they can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow" (xxvi). Given Williamson's popularity over such a long period of time, and the genuine sense of loss that the theatre-going public felt when he announced his retirement in 2006, it is evident that he has earned his place as Australia's foremost playwright.

During the course of this study of 'superficiality' in a postmodern world, it has been noted that the frustrations that David Williamson has endured, arising from the perceived superficiality of his work, is by no means confined to Drama, or modern-day critics. The researcher, during the process of this study, was interested to note a correlation between Art and Drama in the mid-nineteenth century that still persists today. The Realists' vision

of art at that time was grounded in the concept that only what the artist knows, and can see, should be considered “real”. All else was pure artifice, that is, fiction and illusion. The early Impressionists in Europe, looking for a new way to depict reality, attempted to record the instantaneous impression of what they saw. The resultant blurring of the details of the scene into a plurality of brush-strokes and colour was initially perceived as superficial and shallow.

Emile Zola, the father of naturalism and ever the naturalist purist, lamented the spontaneous style of the new Impressionist movement, and encouraged the painters to create complex paintings of modern life that were the result of “long and thoughtful preparation” (McKee 3). In this respect Zola was misled. Far from being spontaneously thrown together, the Impressionists laboured long and hard over their “spontaneous” works. Impressionist paintings were the result of careful and methodical observation of light and colour, combined with precise composition and high levels of technical skill. The “art” of the painting lies in the very effect for which it was criticised. This concept, applied to Williamson’s plays, provides the basis for this thesis.

In 2006 a synchronistic and parallel process in another art form occurred. While viewing an exhibition of Impressionism at The National Gallery of Victoria, where coincidentally, the images that were historically criticised in the nineteenth century were housed, this researcher was struck by an insight that can be valuably applied to this research. As the researcher viewed this exhibition it became clear that a valid comparison could be drawn between the reception of George Seurat’s (1859-1891) work, *A Sunday Afternoon on the*

*Island of La Grande Jatte*, and the adverse criticism of superficiality levelled at Williamson.

Seurat's painting is an exercise in Pointillism, where the artist uses newly discovered optical and colour theories rendered in tiny, precise brush strokes of different colours, close to one another, so that they blend when viewed from a distance. Critics were suspicious of this technique, lamenting its lack of form and structure. "Bedlam", "scandal" and "hilarity" were among the adverse epithets they used to describe what is now considered Seurat's greatest work (Art Institute of Chicago). Seurat's style is intensely personal and what others saw as a playful *mélange* of colourful dots, were, in fact, a tangible surface, precisely and laboriously executed, that became the basis of his vibrancy and luminosity. Meyer Schapiro commenting on *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* has this to say: "... an image-world where the continuous form is built up from the discrete, and the solid masses emerge from an endless scattering of fine points – a mystery of the coming-into-being of the eye" (1). Apart from the amazing innovation of this technique, the picture appears to be, at a casual glance, a charming nineteenth century landscape. On further consideration layers of meaning unfold. This thesis evokes the luminosity, vibrancy, and aliveness of Williamson's characters that resonate for the discerning spectator.

With the advent of The Industrial Revolution in France in the nineteenth century, many middle class people were freed for leisure and recreation. Seurat's picture is actually a treatise on class structure, representative of the social tensions between the city people of

different social classes, all mingling in the same public space. However, they do not interact and the outline of the factory chimney pots on the other side of the River Seine is a grim reminder of an acute social divide. Again, a work of art that may appear superficial at a glance, attains deeper layers of meanings with further consideration. It is argued here that the same may be said of Williamson's work.

This thesis' most valuable contribution lies in the analysis and evaluation of the persistent allegations of superficiality levelled at Williamson's *oeuvre*. The subsequent conclusion is that the intersections of satire and farce that critics found disruptive are, in fact, deliberate devices used by Williamson to ironically present audiences with deeper truths about their shared humanity. This thesis further suggests that the perceived 'flatness' or 'thinness' of Williamson's character-constructs arises from his naturalism, which is ironic and at the same time makes deep social commentary.

This thesis provides significant evidence of David Williamson's importance as one of Australia's leading literary figures. His work is a reflection of local context and universal humanity in the chronological spaces that his plays inhabit. Williamson's *oeuvre* displays what Gaskell deems the "permanent core of truth" (140) necessary for all great plays.

Williamson proves his worth by writing from a naturalist base and employing intersections of satire and farce to ironically present local truths that represent Australian culture and social patterning in a highly accessible mode. Murakami's prescription that a "writer of national stature" should "vividly reflect the mentality of the people of his or

her age” is more than adequately filled by Williamson who has used his Australian society, to create a psychological microcosm that reflects the universal verities of all cultures, at all times. In her essay, “Conversations with Truth”, Anne Coombs looks at the relevancy of intellectuals in Australia and ponders their role and motivations. She concludes that intellectuals are not only relevant in Australia but are capable of adding to our culture. She sums up her findings: “intellectuals who engage with issues of wide public concern are fulfilling their most important role: doubting, questioning and confronting and, in so doing, encouraging other citizens to do the same” (6). David Williamson has been doing all of this over the past thirty-five years.

The implications from this study are two-fold. First, that educators and students in both secondary and tertiary institutions will recognise Williamson’s plays as deeply ironic representations of local truths that have become iconic through their universal humanity and are therefore deep, even when they are presented as superficial. Second, and more importantly, that Williamson, freed from the mistaken perception of superficiality, will be accorded his position at the forefront of Australian drama.

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## Appendix One

### Correspondence with David Williamson

*First letter to David Williamson*

13 September 2007.

Dear Mr. Williamson,

I am the lady who accosted you at Circular Quay back in July of this year and told you that I am working on a Ph.D. on your work. The thesis is all but finished now and at the prompting of my supervisor, Dr. Tarquam McKenna at Victoria University, I wondered if it would be possible to meet with you to discuss some elements of the thesis.

The title of the thesis is "*Sugared Placebos: The Effect of Satire and Farce in the Plays of David Williamson*". I could make a copy of this work available to you if you would like to read it.

I am available to visit you within the next six weeks at any time (or place) convenient to you. I feel personal contact with you and the ensuing chapter would add substance and a certain dimension to my thesis.

Many thanks for your consideration.

*David Williamson's Reply*

**To:** Elvira S

**Sent:** 20 September 2007 2:34:45 PM

**Subject:** From David W to Elvira S

Elvira, it would be hard to interpret your title as anything but a dismissive account of my work. I'm not sure why I'd want to talk to you given the obviously hostile attitude inherent in the title. I don't want to waste time defending my work. Go and see Don's Party at the Opera House and see for yourself whether there's something a lot more savage than placebos being said. DW

*Subsequent Emails*

**To:** David Williamson

**Sent:** Thursday, September 20, 2007 3:10 PM

**Subject:** Re: From David W to Elvira S

Dear Mr. Williamson,

I am so shocked that you've interpreted my title this way. On the contrary, I argue coherently and passionately to establish you as Australia's leading playwright. I started my Thesis at Curtin University in Perth and as you're probably aware, one has to have an

argument of some sort for a Ph.D. After several attempts we came up with this one. I'm hopeful that you'll be flattered by the thesis. I'm not so brave as to approach you with a contentious thesis! Will you please reconsider seeing me.

**To:** Elvira S

**Sent:** 20 September 2007 3:40:29 PM

**Subject: Re: From David W to Elviras**

Elvira, I'm glad to hear that, but the imagery of your title makes it hard for me to come up with a positive interpretation. Not only is my satire merely a placebo but it is also sugar coated to make it even more innocuous. Or that's how it reads. I'd be delighted to hear an interpretation that didn't seem to be saying what that title says, but a placebo that's sugar coated seems to offer nothing of any use to anyone. But I'd be happy to hear your interpretation of what it means. Best David W.

**To:** David Williamson

**Sent:** Thursday, September 20, 2007 5:40 PM

**Subject:** Re: From David W to Elvira S

Dear Mr. Williamson,

The "sugared placebos" phrase came from a suggestion of Peter Fitzpatrick, from his

book "Williamson". He contends that some critics saw your likeable anti-heroes as placebos. I took on board the critics who sometimes saw your work as superficial and working on six of your most realistic plays, refute the superficial tag. You come out good - believe me! To allay any misinterpretations, I have attached my conclusion for you to read. I have sent it "rtf" because I have an eMac and it's not always compatible with other PC's. I'm really sorry we've had these crossed wires. Regards, Elvira.

**To:** Elvira S

**Sent:** 21 September 2007 4:25:44 PM

**Subject: Re: From David W to Elviras**

Elvira, I couldn't have wanted a better conclusion than that. It's what I've felt about myself throughout my writing career. I have always thought that underneath the surface entertainment I was conducting an examination of the nature of human nature itself, so it's gratifying to see someone acknowledging that. I'm sorry, but that title threw me. I thought I was seeing yet another attack on my work assuming that entertaining always means superficial. thanks for that. I'd be glad to communicate. I can answer written questions by email if you like as I'm up here in Queensland most of the time. alternatively I'm on skype. Very best and sorry for the reaction. Very best David W.

**To:** David Williamson

**Sent:** Wednesday, October 17, 2007 10:09 AM

**Subject:** Re: From David W to Elviras

Dear Mr. Williamson,

Thank you for your prompt reply. The University will be posting the Thesis to you, either tomorrow or early next week. In any event you should receive it by the end of next week.

If for any reason it doesn't arrive, would you let me know? I'm looking forward to our talk on 1st November. Regards and thanks, Elvira.

## Appendix Two

### David Williamson's Final Endorsement

**To:** Elvira S

**From:** David Williamson

**Date:** 28 October 2007 10:46:25 AM

**Subject:** To Elvira from David Williamson

Dear Elvira,

I've just had the pleasure of reading your thesis and I'm writing to congratulate you on what I think is a deeply perceptive and well argued account of my work. Ever since I studied psychology formally I've always felt that the most satisfying explanations of the enduring mysteries of human nature are located in our powerful emotions, a legacy of a long evolutionary past. This of course is why I responded so strongly to David Moore and John McDonald's work as they put our emotional legacy at the core of their method.

Under the surface patterns of behaviour, conditioned so strongly by society, are the enduring and universal emotions we carry as our human baggage from the deep past. The Japanese may not express the anger they feel when somebody steals their parking spot as volubly as New Yorkers, but high speed camera studies have shown exactly the same initial anger responses in their faces before their social conditioning, emphasising politeness, takes over. My object as a dramatist has always been to explore the nature of human nature itself as it manifests itself in social situations. I've had no interest in

naturalistically “peeling the onion” to show what lies underneath. I think I know what lies underneath. I don’t think it’s any great mystery anymore, so why endlessly pursue naturalistically puzzles that have already been solved. It’s been my aim to try and show the audience the raw power of our limbic emotions lurking underneath our conditioned social responses and sometimes breaking through and overwhelming them. As you have discerned, it’s not that I write two dimensional characters. In social situations most of the time we behave as if we are two dimensional characters. At core I am saying beware, we can be a very dangerous species, as the history of humanity has shown. We are egocentric, tribal, ambitious, acquisitive, enormously sensitive to social status and social exclusion, and seek power and influence for its own sake. Fortunately we are also empathetic. Most of the time we don’t like to see others in pain and we don’t like to cause that pain. Also our deep need for social approval keeps our more outrageously egocentric traits in some kind of check, and a sense of humour can often make the incongruities and ironies of existence in some kind of perspective. When I’ve been writing I often see it as depicting the social dance people eternally play. Juggling their egocentrism against their need for social approval and their genuine guilt when their actions hurt others. As social players we are like jugglers having all those balls in the air doing our intricate and difficult social dance, and this is true of all cultures at all times, not just Australia now. This as you perceptively see, when many others have chosen to ignore it and belittle me, makes my work drama that shows eternal human verities, not just the Australia of here and now. As I said, why I find so much theatre boring is that the writers are still working under the assumption that their task is to uncover the “three dimensionality” of characters when all that’s to be found underneath is the same old universal emotions the Greeks

used in their drama. I've always found it more exciting to explore the social dance itself, rather than stopping the action to have endless debates about things we already know. I'm so sorry I misperceived your work as an attack on me when I read the title. I now think it's the most perceptive view of my work I've yet read, and that's not just because it's supportive. You have cracked the code of what my drama is about and shown yourself much more perceptive than the po faced and hidebound legions of drama critics still living in what they think is the age of Ibsen, but as you have pointed out they'd do well to read their Ibsen more closely. I hope this thesis gets the attention it deserves. The current huge success of the revival of Don's Party in Sydney adds weight to your thesis. It's on the way to taking a fortune at the box office. By the way the final box office figures for "Influence" were 1.7 million in Sydney, not 1.5. The play, same production and cast, was brought back for a week soon after the initial run in Sydney, hence the figure of 1.7. This can be checked with Rob Brookman, the general manager of the Sydney theatre company whose email is rbrookman@\*\*\*\*\*.com.au. Very best and I look forward to our discussion. Feel free to use anything I say or have written to you, as per this email, in your argument. Very best David Williamson.

### Appendix 3

#### Interview Questions for David Williamson

Would you like to comment on any insights that you may have deduced from the Thesis?

What role do you think your own work might have played in shaping Australia culture as we see it today?

The thrust of my Thesis has been that your characters embody multiple moments of belonging and are very much located in their time and place. Would you say the Aussie ockers, and the other Australian identities depicted in your plays, are still relevant in contemporary, multi-cultural Australia?

When I saw *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* recently I was reminded of your ubiquitous bickering couples in plays like *Don's Party*, *Emerald City*, *After the Ball*, *Soulmates*, and *Up For Grabs*. Edward Albee blamed middle-class illusions and the soured American Dream for his dysfunctional protagonists. Do your couples and their marital malaise stem from a similar source?

Would you like to talk about the playwrights – or authors – that have had a major influence on your work?

**Appendix 4****The Plays of David Williamson**

*The Coming of Stork* (1970)

*The Removalists* (1971)

*Don's Party* (1971)

*Jugglers Three* (1972)

*What If You Died Tomorrow?* (1973)

*The Department* (1975)

*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)

*Siren* (1990)

*Money or Friends* (1991)

*Brilliant Lies* (1993)

*Sanctuary* (1994)

*Dead White Males* (1995)

*Heretic* (1996)

*Third World Blues* (1997, an adaptation of *Jugglers Three*)

*After The Ball* (1997)

*Corporate Vibes* (1999)

*Face to Face* (2000)

*The Great Man* (2000)

*Up For Grabs* (2001)

*A Conversation* (2001)

*Charitable Intent* (2001)

*Soulmates* (2002)

*Amigos* (2004)

*Influence* (2005)