

The Playwrights' Conference

WOMEN, WHALES, GOD AND GAYS

BERWYN LEWIS reports on the 10th Australian National Playwrights' Conference.

THE WORD from the Playwrights Conference, held in Canberra last weekend, is that there are still no O'Neills.

But, as drama teachers are fond of saying, "It takes 250 years for a country to produce a national playwright."

This year at the conference you could be excused for believing there's one born every minute.

Of the 140 submitted plays, 14 were accepted for workshops and readings by actors, directors and dramaturgs. What happened to the other 126, and why, is open to debate.

"The playwright with a unique voice, who creates a new reflection of this society, is being ignored," said Aubrey Mellor, artistic director of Sydney's Nimrod Theatre and one of the seven directors at this year's ANPC.

"It's the fault of the selection committee, who are still locked into old standards and still searching for playwrights who imitate the past," he said. "We're still doing what Trepliov (Kostia) in Chekhov's *Seagull* complained about more than 80 years ago."

The fact of life of the ANPC is that it has workshopped over 60 new Australian plays, had readings of 40 and sent more than 18 into professional orbits. It has unearthed, nurtured and encouraged batches of playwrights which make the conference sound like a breeder of theatre Who's Whos.

At this year's conference there was something for everyone.

John Clanchy's *By Dreams Deceived*, a TV workshop introduced this year, left no doubt in anyone's mind about the state of local boob tube fodder. Cervical cancer, swollen ankle, kitchen sink psycho-sexual stereotype dramas are still alive and well and demanding unconditional love from everyone from puppet husbands (they're still lawyers!) to neighbourly earholes who drop in at the whistle of a kettle to offer comfort over a cuppa. Cruel, wrist-slashing realism!

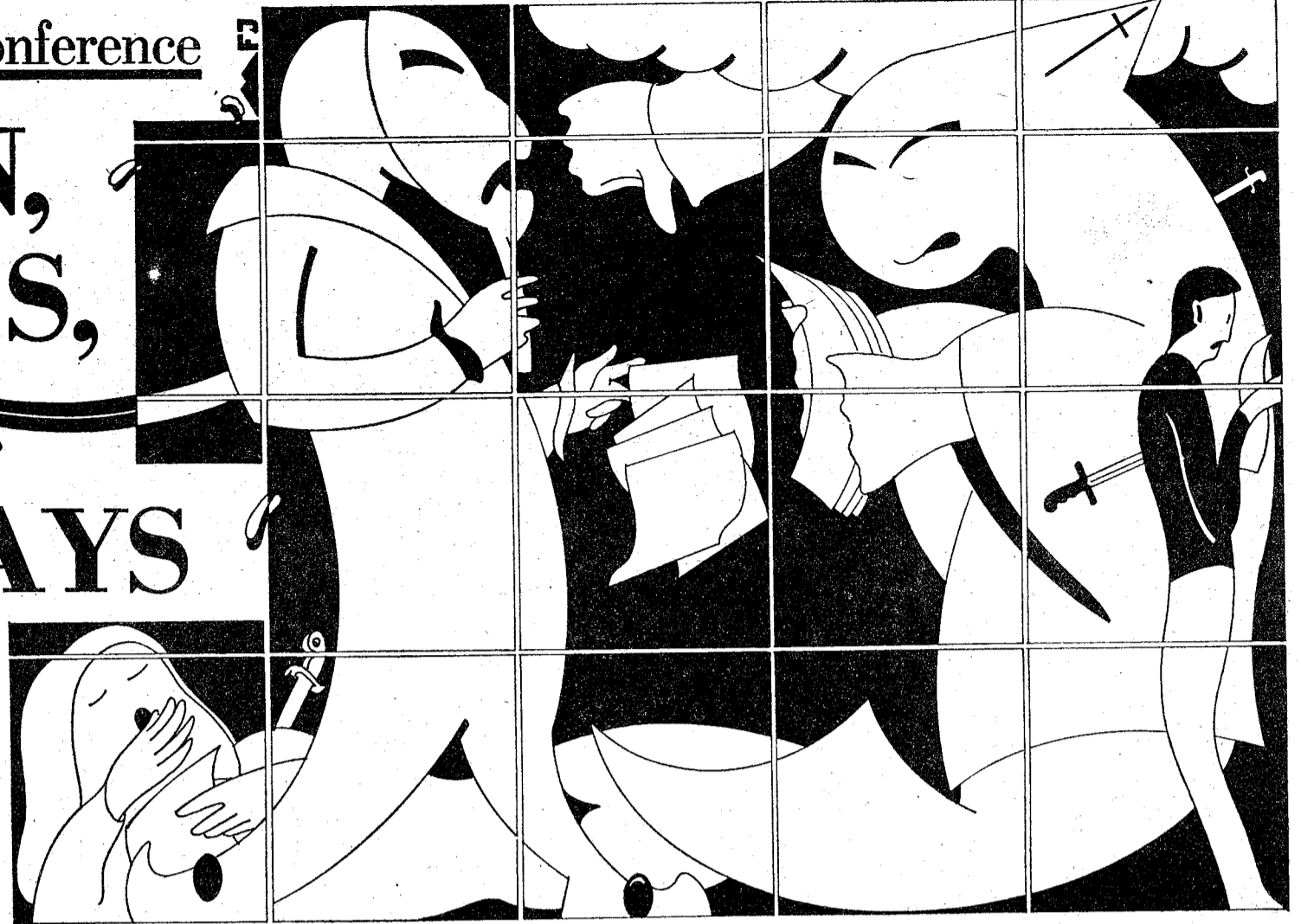
Almost as a sequel to this, the legitimacy of writing for television came up in one of the many meetings along with how to increase the theatricality of the television medium by training playwrights (videowrights?) to work in this industry.

It seemed a bit like a slow leak issue seeping down to Canberra from Sydney's Film and TV school.

"I thought the Playwrights' Conference was for playwrights," protested one participant.

This meeting tended to widen the gulf between the chosen face of TV writers and those doomed to stage. There was fear, loathing and smoke in the air, everyone worrying that someone might step on someone's toes, Bob Ellis equating standards of writing with the size of the mortgage and experts telling everyone to boil down their ideas to a few pages when seeking funding so they could be more easily digested. (How would *Gone With The Wind* have reduced down to a few pages with plot, passion and protagonist intact?)

Another meeting climaxed with Theatre In



Education (TIE) demanding their rights at the next conference.

"If we're not included we'll go ahead and call for our own scripts and writers and we'll provide our own funding," was their harsh ultimatum.

There was some debate later as to how attractive TIE's group collaborative script writing processes are to playwrights and just how censorious theatre in education has to be.

Clem Gorman, playwright/administrator of this year's ANPC, agreed with TIE.

"Radical writing areas are overlooked by the Playwrights' Conference. Since its inception it has failed to move with the times. It's mostly representative of Sydney where there's not enough radical or community theatre. It's always been the same. All the new movements come from Victoria — APG, La Mama and all the original playwrights made it in Melbourne first," he said.

"Another fault is that women in theatre don't seem to trust us. They're just not putting in their plays.

"It's now time for a whole new generation of writers to move in on the conference. Otherwise it's going to become like a dinosaur that can't turn a corner.

"I'd like to see new young women directors and dramaturgs here next year so that women



Aubrey Mellor ... "Playwrights have to realise that everyone contributes to a play. Even the audience."

writers feel confident about putting in their plays," he said. "We want women to come in, take the jobs and join the conference community."

The conference was typified by bleak and black plays.

Most highly praised were Pam van Amstel's *Are You Lonesome Tonight*, Sandy McCutcheon's *Dance In The Ashes*, Bob Herbert's airy, Milkwood-style *Last Wake at She Oak Creek*, Harry Reade's *Execution of Steele Rudd* and Michael Gow's *The Kid*.

The latter presented a series of tips of icebergs, which punched out at unemployment, despair, homosexuality and involved a bunch of quirky characters bumbling through life. Described as a unique, new voice this play asked questions but did not offer neat answers.

Gow, an actor, had to be written out of two weeks' episodes of *Young Doctors* so he could attend the conference. It left him feeling a little bitten off, chewed up and spat out.

"It seems like you work really hard and then it's all over. You're all used up and it's time to go home. Almost like they turn their backs on you. But it works," he said. "The response to my play has been great."

The scarcity of entrepreneurs and agents, with the exception of M & L and the ubiquitous John Timlin, made one wonder if there is life after the Playwrights' Conference.

"We don't want entrepreneurs coming here snapping up products," said Gorman. "We're desperately against it. It's not a showcase. It's a process for playwrights to learn their craft by working with top professionals. We don't want to put playwrights under pressure. We concentrate on producing quality writers who'll be remembered long after we're all dead."

Little murders took place whenever workshop post-mortem forums were thrown open. Insensitive, banal and bitchy bashings in the guise of constructive criticism made you wonder if you'd accidentally wandered into a creative Klu Klux Klan amateur hour.

What was worse, disciplinary action was minimal and these crucifiers seemed to get away with it. Do artocrats think playwrights can write, tough it out and stay sensitive? Many a playwright limped home with bruised ego and manuscript afterwards.

But they weren't the only ones licking their wounds.

A Nuremberg II trial took place which mau-maued the recently defunct and deficit Theatre Australia editorial staff. Everyone wanted to know why \$30,000 wasn't enough to keep this document of Australian performing arts alive and kicking.

Cairns boat dweller and playwright, Harry Reade, also copped it. His craggy face remained impassive as he sat in shorts and thongs being

savaged by freezing Canberra conditions and observers of his play.

Reade concluded he'd been made to feel like he'd written a "piece of poop". He had actually written an epic about gluttony, fornicating, slothing, envying, stealing, lying, hanging and killing before the eyes of an indifferent and suspect God.

"I can't understand what they're talking about," said Reade. "All that dynamic framistan sexplicious of the mispockspiel stuff. The best criticism came later in the bar."

Ex-2JJJ radio announcer Sandy McCutcheon's *Dance In The Ashes* left everyone drawing upon Commedia del Arte references and McCutcheon's nouveau dingo-cockroach infested futuristic black post-holocaust romantic melodrama.

His trick-on-trickster fast writing had actors slipping masks and sex changes and left realists reeling and a little out of breath.

Ron Blair described this play as a ritual dance in the ashes. Hence its title.

So, apart from the sometimes dubious encouragement to go on, what does the conference offer the playwright to take home?

"We aim to serve the playwright."

"More emphasis on the writer!"

These were the cries. But meanwhile actors felt pressured to perform despite the fact that scripts were slashed seconds before scheduled readings and workshops. It seemed to slip the assembled collective unconscious that the basic run-through and re-run-through theory would best benefit the playwright.

Hiss! Hiss! Someone mentioned the dirty word — "critic". It was generally agreed that there was a need for more informed appraisal, more talking to writers and directors and a need for something more than a stab in the dark when doing a review.

Playwrights were accused of not coming out of their closets often enough and not talking more to any of the aforementioned.

Aubrey Mellor summed it all up.

"There are specialised people here who can encourage playwrights to spearhead their way into the unknown. The conference can give a writer help to break out of constricted forms and find a voice.

"But playwrights have to realise that everyone contributes to a play. Even the audience. It's not just adding paint to canvas and working in isolation. Playwrights need people to talk to and bounce off."

And that is what the conference, given all its accolades and assassinations, is all about: getting playwrights to come out wherever they are and realise that if in the beginning there was the actor there was also, the word.

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