

Sydney Theatre Company and Qantas present

DON'S PARTY

by David Williamson



Teachers' Resource Kit

written and compiled by Jeffrey Dawson

Acknowledgements

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DON'S PARTY
Important Information
Schools Day Performance

Suitability:	Years 10-12
Date:	Wednesday 24 October 2007
Venue:	Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House
Pre-performance forum	10.30am
Lunch Break	11.15am
Performance commences:	12.15pm
There will be one interval.	
Performance concludes:	2.15pm
Post performance Q+A concludes 2.40pm	

CONTAINS COARSE LANGUAGE & ADULT THEMES

Schoolsdays consist of a one hour talk introducing students to the production prior to attending the full matinee performance. This is followed by a discussion with the actors in the afternoon. Schoolsdays are an instructional and enjoyable addition to the study of Drama and an exciting introduction to the world of the theatre.

This Schoolsday performance of ***Don's Party*** offsets perfectly the Core Study of Australian Drama and Theatre - Topic 1: Dramatic Traditions in Australia in the Stage 6 Drama Syllabus, particularly exploring "theoretically and experientially, the traditional and contemporary practices of Australian drama and theatre and the various ways in which artistic, cultural, social, political and personal issues and concerns are reflected in different contexts. Students investigate how different Australian practitioners use dramatic forms, performance styles, techniques and conventions to convey ideas and influence the ways in which audiences understand and respond to ideas and images presented and represented in the theatre." David Williamson's set text ***The Removalists*** offers interesting examples, contrasts and extensions to this topic.

Note for the Teacher: ***Don's Party*** is a very funny play which deals with adult ideas. As it is written in a contemporary, realistic style, strong language and sexual references are used.

Various speeches from the play are reprinted at the end of these Teachers' Notes in Section 11 for your perusal.

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Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the art form of theatre, and to excellence in all its endeavours.

STC has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The original intention was to better utilise the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the new Company comprised a small central administration staff, technical staff, workshop and rehearsal facilities. Richard Wherrett was appointed Artistic Director from 1979 to 1990.

The Wharf opened on 13 December, 1984 by Premier Neville Wran, which allowed all departments of the Company to be housed under one roof for the first time. The venue was to become the envy of the theatre world. From 1985, the Company could perform in two locations throughout the year, the Drama Theatre and The Wharf. From 1990 to 1999, Wayne Harrison served as Artistic Director. A third regular venue, Sydney Theatre, administered and operated by STC, opened in 2004.

The predominant financial commitment to STC is made by its audience. Of this audience, the Company's subscribers make a crucial commitment. The Company is also assisted annually by grants from the Federal Government through the Australia Council and the New South Wales Government through the Ministry for the Arts. STC also actively seeks sponsorship and donations from the corporate sector and from private individuals.

Under the leadership Artistic Director Robyn Nevin, STC's annual subscription season features up to 12 plays including: recent or new Australian works, interpretations of theatrical classics and contemporary foreign works. In addition STC regularly co-produces and tours productions throughout Australia, playing annually to audiences in excess of 300,000. STC actively fosters relationships and collaborations with international artists and companies. In 2006 STC began a new journey of artistic development with the inception of The Actors Company, the STC ensemble.

To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au

Sydney Theatre Company Education

Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming up to four productions annually plus a range of workshops that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers. Within the education programme Sydney Theatre Company produces its own season of plays as well as collaborates with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to all of its mainstage productions through the **schoolsdays** programme as well as produces and tours theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

STC works to support educators in their Drama and English-teaching practices. Every year dynamic **workshops** are held by leading theatre practitioners to support curriculum content, detailed resources are provided for all productions and an extensive work-experience programme is available to students from across the state.

The annual Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Theatre Company **Young Playwright's Award** continues to develop and encourage young writers. The winning students receive a cash prize and a two-day workshop with a professional director, dramaturg and cast – an invaluable opportunity and experience.

Sydney Theatre Company has an extensive **on-line resource** for teachers and students. Visit www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education.

We encourage teachers to subscribe to regular e-news to keep informed as well as access **heavily discounted** tickets and special offers.

For further information on STC Education programme, please contact the Education Manager Helen Hristofski at hhristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au

Cast and Production Team

Sydney Theatre Company and Qantas present

Don's Party

By David Williamson

Cast

(in order of appearance)

Don	STEVE LE MARQUAND
Kath	MANDY McELHINNEY
Simon	GLENN HAZELDINE
Jody	FELICITY PRICE
Mal	CHRISTOPHER PITMAN
Jenny	ALISON WHYTE
Mack	TRAVIS McMAHON
Evan	COLIN LANE
Kerry	CAROLINE BRAZIER
Cooley	RHYS MULDOON
Susan	JACINTA STAPLETON
Election commentary	RICK BURCHALL
	GARETH WILDING-FORBES

Production Team

Director	PETER EVANS
Set and Costume Designer	DALE FERGUSON
Lighting Designer	MATT SCOTT
Composer and Sound Designer	BASIL HOGIOS
Assistant Director	NAOMI EDWARDS
Voice Consultant	DEBBIE PHYLAND
Production Manager	NEIL KUTNER
Stage Manager	MILLIE MULLINAR
Assistant Stage Manager	EVA TANDY
Production Photography	JEFF BUSBY

Background Information on the Production

The Playwright, David Williamson

A “wright” is a type of artisan who makes things that people can use. Just as a wheelwright makes wheels, a playwright makes plays. The play text is used by other artists such as actors, directors and designers who participate in the final realisation of the play on the stage.

David Williamson's first full-length play, *The Coming of Stork*, premiered at the La Mama Theatre, Carlton, in 1970 and later became the film *Stork*, directed by Tim Burstall.

The Removalists and *Don's Party* followed in 1971, then *Jugglers Three* (1972), *What If You Died Tomorrow?* (1973), *The Department* (1975), *A Handful of Friends* (1976), *The Club* (1977) and *Travelling North* (1979). In 1972 *The Removalists* won the Australian Writers Guild AWGIE Award for best stage play and the best script in any medium and the British production saw Williamson nominated the most promising playwright by the London Evening Standard.

His success continued in the 1980s with *Celluloid Heroes* (1980), *The Perfectionist* (1982), *Sons of Cain* (1985), *Emerald City* (1987) and *Top Silk* (1989); the 1990s produced *Siren* (1990), *Money and Friends* (1991), *Brilliant Lies* (1993), *Sanctuary* (1994), *Dead White Males* (1995), *Heretic* (1996), *Third World Blues* (an adaptation of *Jugglers Three*) and *After the Ball* (both in 1997), *Corporate Vibes* and *Face to Face* (both in 1999). *The Great Man* followed in 2000, then *Up For Grabs*, seen on the West End starring Madonna as Simone, the art dealer in an American setting, premiered in 2001. *Soulmates*, a representation of the literary world, was David Williamson's 30th play. It was followed by *Charitable Intent* in 2002 and *Birthrites* in 2003.

Williamson is widely recognised as Australia's most successful playwright and over the last three decades his plays have been performed throughout Australia and produced in Britain, the United States, Canada and many European countries. A number of his stage works have been adapted for the screen, including *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *The Club*, *Travelling North*, *Emerald City*, *Sanctuary* and *Brilliant Lies*.

David Williamson has won the Australian Film Institute film script award for *Petersen* (1974), *Don's Party* (1976), *Gallipoli* (1981) and *Travelling North* (1987) and has won eleven Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Awards. He lives on Queensland's Sunshine Coast with his wife, writer Kristin Williamson.

David Williamson – Playwright

Reference: Paul Galloway from the STC Program for Don's Party

Perhaps David Williamson regrets once describing his role as 'storyteller to the tribe' – certainly, it has been thrown back into his face often enough. And a description can fit so well that it becomes a straight-jacket. For over thirty-five years the tribe has expected Williamson to sing their song to them, tell them who they are, or at least, *where* they are – how they are getting along and where they might be headed. And yet he has performed his self-appointed role dutifully, struggling to know them as they have struggled to know themselves.

But who is this tribe? After his earliest plays such as *The Removalists* and *The Coming of Stork*, exuberant larrikin comedies of clashing classes and attitudes, Williamson settled into satirizing the Anglo-Celtic middle class, his own urban, ambitious, literate tribe. This is not everyone, nor is it a majority, but it is a large section of Australian society and an even larger proportion of the audiences who flock to each production.

A couple of years ago he announced his semi-retirement from stage writing, and if he never produces another play – a thankfully unlikely prospect – he can rest on the thick mattress of his laurels. For thirty-five years he has been this tribe's myth-maker, part skeptic, part psychoanalyst and part Shaman, exposing its follies, diagnosing its neuroses, and interpreting its dreams. He has analysed the group dynamics and power plays within its organisations (*The Club*, *The Department*, *Corporate Vibes*), criticized its institutions (*Sons of Cain*, *Top Silk*), and constantly probed the state of its marriages (*Don's Party*, *Jugglers Three*, *What If You Died Tomorrow*, *A Handful of Friends*, *The Perfectionist*, *Money and Friends* and *Soulmates*). In the nineties he began to examine the intellectual nine day wonders that absorb his tribe: post modernism in *Dead White Males*, biological determinism in *The Heretic*, sexual harassment in *Brilliant Lies*. But within the tribe there are cliques and subgroups – the art world in *Up for Grabs*, the literary business in *Soulmates*, the disenchanting political left in *The Great Man*, and the legal profession in *Top Silk* – that Williamson particularly loves to dissect. 'I like those tribal communities and their mores,' he said in an interview a few years ago 'That ferocious self-absorption. It gives rise to good humour and good drama.'

Most of all, he has a talent for picking up the mood of the moment and finessing it into the spirit of the age. Looking back, *The Removalists* and *Don's Party*, with their ocker aggression, seem to capture the rebellious, over-compensating assertion of 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*.

Placing Williamson's works in the right perspective is difficult. His popularity obscures the view. For decades, he has been the only Australian playwright that many can name off the top of their heads. Thus, as the tallest of poppies, he is ripe for scything. Surely, the suspicion goes, no one so box-office friendly and who produces work so regularly can be that good. He is also victim of the assumption that those who make us laugh lack depth, the corollary of the old fallacy that solemnity is the same as seriousness. A common criticism is that one Williamson play is pretty much the same as the next, a patent myth dispelled by a glance at his body of work. It contains more variation in style, setting and subject than the work of many playwrights. Admittedly, there is a sort of stylistic common ground to which Williamson returns. He claims the

realm of social satire. The setting is often a boardroom or a living room furnished with a door or two to admit complications and a drinks cabinet to fuel the enmity; the plot throws in precisely timed revelations; and the characters, each sequestered in an entrenched position, contend robustly and comically together. Literate, funny and acerbic, the Williamson dramatic world is a touch or two larger than life.

And yet, more regularly than we give him credit, he thwarts our expectations, for example, when Barbara steps forward to directly address the audience in *The Perfectionist*, or when Shakespeare makes his surprising appearance in *Dead White Males*. In *Siren* he created broad farce, in *Sanctuary*, a pressure cooker atmosphere that exploded into violence, and in *Sons of Cain*, a mood sombre enough to give weight to the injustice of corruption. In his three community conference plays *Face to Face*, *A Conversation* and *Charitable Intent*, he pared his drama down to a row of chairs, a group of characters and a central conflict. Not completely justified, either, is Williamson's reputation for emotional coolness, an occupational hazard for a satirist. He has often surprised us with his tenderness. One recalls the last-chance love affair in *Travelling North* or the elegiac mood of *After the Ball*.

Williamson's fame as a playwright completely eclipses his career as a screenwriter. And yet, on the strength of his film and television credits alone, he would deserve recognition as a major writer. Besides successful translations of his own plays to the screen, Williamson's scripts have done much to strengthen the hold of certain national myths on the public imagination – *Eliza Frazer*, *Gallipoli*, *Phar Lap* and *The Four Minute Mile*. His telemovie adaptation of Neville Shute's *On the Beach* was nominated for a Golden Globe Award and he also co-wrote, with Christopher Koch, *The Year of Living Dangerously*. This writing, so far removed from the middle-class banter to which his name is associated in the theatre, reveals the true breadth of his writing talent. It is just that in his stage work, he has chosen to stick largely to depicting the people he knows best: the contemporary Australian middle class – affluent, urban, literate and perplexed.

Writer's Note

When I write a play it is usually sparked by some event or happening that I have experienced as being emotionally intense. I was a young married man with a young child and living in suburbia where legend has it that nothing of interest ever happened. I found this definitely not to be true. I had attended several parties, two of them on election nights, where alcohol had released tensions of ambition, frustration, envy, sexual desire and thwarted idealism, which were always there under the façade of the white picket fence. People who had married in their early twenties, as was customary those days, were now hitting their thirties, and the edges of their lives were fraying as the love they might have once felt for the person they married was in terminal decay and the grandiose dreams they had held for their futures were crumbling before their eyes. It was an era in which feminism had barely dawned and the sexual revolution promised by the swinging sixties was being revealed as little more than a male fantasy of unbridled promiscuity. Deep down the eternal needs of love and commitment and decency and responsibility and parenthood, derided as being the remnants of a sterile old culture, were still pressing for expression. The tensions between the excitement of casting old norms aside and the guilt and anxiety when one did could generate mood swings, depression and despair.

Don's Party is called a comedy, but there's a lot of sadness at its core. When we laugh it is at the self-deceit the characters allow themselves to exhibit, for we recognise all too well that self-deceit is a necessary survival tool for all of us. We are all actors playing in a highly competitive game whose stakes are status, respect and love. To lose this game is a form of social extinction, so the stakes are very high. Luckily we are also a resilient species. Our defence mechanisms allow us to turn defeat into retrospective victory and save our fragile egos. And therein lies hope. We can make total fools of ourselves, as most at Don's party do, but most of us live to fight another day. It's called the human comedy.

Don's Party is part social history, recalling a time when we were living lives more restricted by social norms than they are today, but hopefully it's also part of the eternal drama where ego and self-interest fight with decency and compassion, and most of us finally muddle through.

David Williamson - December 2006

Context of *Don's Party*, 1969

Don's Party, of course, is not a political play. Its one political comment, made implicitly, is that people like Don and his friends tend to regard a political contest as something very like a sporting event, an occasion for cheers when the right team wins and glum silence if it doesn't.

HG Kippax, introduction to *Don's Party* (Currency Press)

The 1969 federal election (25 October 1969) fulfils all the criteria for a non-event. The incumbent Liberals who were widely expected to win, did so, giving a government that had already been in power for twenty years permission to continue for three more. It was close, closer than the Federal Liberal Party would have liked, but only those Labor True Believers who, buoyed by some late newspaper polls, had allowed their hopes to leave the ground and head skywards, had any reason to be let down by the result.

Once some hindsight was applied, however, the significance of the 1969 election emerged. Many now see it as a watershed in Australian politics, signifying not merely a temporary shift in the electorate's affections, but a permanent shift in the electorate itself. Previously, the fortunes of the major parties had risen or fallen with the health of the economy. Yet in 1969 the economy was booming, growing at a healthy six per cent per year. Wages were surging upwards without having any apparent effect on either inflation (rock steady on two per cent) or unemployment (one per cent). With new equal pay laws women were beginning to enter the workforce in large numbers, and immigration levels were high, yet there were plenty of jobs to go round. Under such conditions the Government ought to have romped in, yet they suffered a seven per cent swing against them, had their House of Representatives majority slashed from thirty-eight to seven seats, and needed DLP preferences to prevent a humiliating loss.

In the wash up it became accepted that personalities had played their part, though to what extent could not be agreed. **The Prime Minister, John Gorton**, was well-liked by the public. His craggy, battered face, the result of crash-landing his Hurricane during the battle for Singapore in 1942, distinguished him with the voters as both a war hero and an ordinary bloke, not a bad image to project to the Australian electorate. Among his own parliamentary colleagues, however, he was less popular. When Harold Holt drowned off Cheviot Beach two years earlier, Gorton had been the grudging compromise candidate and he never pooled together enough loyalty to present an assured and unified front to the people. He was not one for big picture politics, nor stirring rhetoric, and during the election campaign he fancied the television broadcast as the medium best suited to his personality, because it gave him the opportunity to chat to the people. In this his judgment wasn't wrong, but, added to the disunity of the party behind him, it gave the Liberal campaign a low key and uncertain texture.

If appearances were the only thing to go on, one would pick the beer-swilling, chain-smoking, slightly crumpled Gorton as the Labor leader and his **opponent, the tall, patrician and intellectual Gough Whitlam**, as the Liberal. Whitlam's aloof and distinctly superior bearing cut a figure as far from the man of the people as any Labor leader is ever likely to cut. In 1969, even after two years in the leadership and seven as deputy leader, the electorate was still not sure how to take him. The campaign of 1969 was his turning point. On the hustings, his dynamism, flair and wit were impressive; his ideas were the old Labor ones promoting social equality, yet, broached in terms of equal opportunity, they came up fresh as paint. To an increasing number of electors, Whitlam's height and haughtiness began to seem like stature.

Yet it wasn't so much what Whitlam was talking about that caused the tide of public feeling to turn his way; it was whom Whitlam was talking to. No politician before Whitlam had thought of targeting the young middle-class voter and, truth be told, neither had Whitlam in 1969. It was more by chance than design that his message struck a chord with young professionals. Only later, when the results were analysed, was it clear that the middle-class vote was splitting along generational lines.

The experience and attitudes of the older middle class had been forged in economic depression and war. They responded best to the language of scarcity, sacrifice and caution, the belt-tightening rhetoric of the federal budgets of yore. By contrast, the younger middle class, the twenty and thirty-somethings just getting their careers, families and mortgages underway, had only ever known economic prosperity. Many had grown up in the working-class, given the leg-up of a university education through the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme, and thus held no traditional loyalty to the Liberal Party and shared none of its aversions to the Welfare State. Unlike the old middle-class, they were not afraid of political or social change; indeed, having never experienced it themselves, they were apt to find the prospect attractive. They were looking to the future and expecting it to deliver, and Whitlam's policies stressing shared abundance, an Australia that would be both prosperous and fair, spoke directly to them.

David Williamson, then, was right on the money in depicting in *Don's Party* this emerging demographic phenomenon. In 1969 there weren't enough young professionals to get the ALP over the line, but three years later, a little more numerous and a lot more dissatisfied, when the Labor campaign slogan declared 'It's time!', they came to the party.

Election night 1969 was full of drama worthy of a play and accordingly has been made into one. *Don's Party* hinges on the mounting optimism among a group of Labor supporters and their disintegration as the late count saves the Gorton Government. If Whitlam and his closest associates shared their disappointment there was no despair. The political significance of the play is that Williamson perceives that in 1969 a significant number of Australians experienced a new interest and involvement in the fortunes of the Labor Party in a way that had not been felt since 1954 and had not been felt by the post-split generation at all. This was the real achievement of the 1969 campaign.

Graham Freudenberg, from *A Certain Grandeur; Gough Whitlam in Politics*

1971

Don's Party was written by David Williamson in 1971

Today's demonstrators would be tomorrow's conservatives. The change in attitude came when a young person married, had children and took on responsibilities.

**Federal Minister for Shipping and Transport, Mr Nixon,
Sydney Morning Herald, July 1972**

In the early seventies there was much talk about the New Wave of Australian drama, but a wave delivers its power only if it breaks. In 1972 it broke with three plays by David Williamson. *Jugglers Three*, his latest, packed them in at Russell Street for MTC, while in Sydney, Nimrod's production of *The Removalists*, re-staged by Harry M Miller, played to a commercial-sized audience, and the Old Tote's *Don's Party* settled in for a three month sell-out season at the Parade Theatre before departing on a greatly anticipated national tour. With the work of one playwright, the New Wave had rolled into shore, finding an audience beyond the tiny backstreet theatres in which the new writing had been nurtured. From some comrades back in Carlton came cries of 'sell out', but if the idea was to create a popular Australian theatre there could be no complaint. The three plays were richly vernacular and exuberantly Australian. People who ordinarily never went to the theatre were queuing to see them. Journalists who ordinarily never wrote about theatre were writing about the fact that people were queuing to see them. The monster fed itself. Williamson was the new big thing.

1972 is considered David Williamson's wonder year, but all the artistic breakthroughs occurred the year before. In 1971 Williamson was a twenty-nine year-old Swinburne engineering lecturer writing in his spare time for La Mama and the Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory. He had already made a reputation around Carlton for his revue sketches and a couple of fringe plays, including *The Coming of Stork* that had pulled good, enthusiastic audiences for its ten shows in the tight La Mama space. The filmmaker Tim Burstall was an early fan and Williamson had already completed a screen adaptation for him that, when the film, *Stork*, came out a year later, would gain a few extra garlands for the Williamson juggernaut.

In January 1971, however, there was no juggernaut, just a caravan in Rosebud where Williamson and his young family were enjoying the summer holidays. Finding himself some quiet and shade, he scribbled on a clipboard the dialogue for a new play based on the election night parties he knew from the sixties in which alcohol combined unstably with left-wing disappointment.

Had anyone in the theatre scene in Melbourne liked *Don's Party* when he first showed it around, Williamson's career – and Australian theatre – might have taken another path entirely. Both La Mama and the APG passed on it – 'too bourgeois' was the condemnation. Not bourgeois enough, apparently, for Melbourne Theatre Company which recoiled at the strong language. Stuck with a dud play, Williamson was forced to start work on another. He looked for a grittier subject that the fringe companies would go for. About this time he moved house and the removalist told him about a job he once had where a couple of cops helped a woman leave her husband. When the husband came home and got upset, the cops sorted him out. Police brutality – that was more like it. La Mama liked the play and scheduled *The Removalists* for production in the first available slot.

In fact, everyone seemed to like the new play better than *Don's Party*. The push behind *The Removalists* got things moving. Director Malcolm Robertson, then assessing scripts for the Arts Council, showed it to John Sumner, who invited Williamson to submit a proposal for a script workshop at the end of the year. The idea for a Vietnam play that Williamson suggested became, after the workshop turned out to be a crash course in writing for a mainstream audience, *Jugglers Three*, the hit of MTC's season. Robertson also sent a copy of *The Removalists* to John Bell at Nimrod who instantly asked for the Sydney rights for a production that October.

The generally negative opinion about *Don's Party* around the Pram Factory had deterred Graeme Blundell from reading it when Williamson sent it to him, but with La Mama buzzing about the upcoming production of *The Removalists*, he finally took a look. Although he perceived greater merit in it than his colleagues, Blundell saw *Don's Party* more as an opportunity to move the APG from the hyper-inflated larrikin style of performance towards something more naturalistic. Blundell's production opened at the Pram Factory just a few weeks after *The Removalists*.

It was the one-two punch of these hit shows in mid-1971 that got Melbourne's theatre world talking. A new Australian voice had been heard. The same combination in Sydney – *The Removalists* at Nimrod and *Don's Party* at Jane Street – pushed the excitement over some unseen tipping point where it caught the attention of the bloke in the street. Within a year Williamson had become a cultural phenomenon that his screenplay for *Stork* and MTC's production of *Jugglers Three* (a smash hit all the way) did no more than confirm.

See another Williamson biography in the STC Program for *Don's Party*, edited by Laura Scrivano.

Overview of the Director - Context

After reading the playwright's script, the director decides on an overall vision for the production. The director meets with the creative team to achieve a unified look for the sets, costumes, lighting, sound and other elements. The director oversees the actors in rehearsal, often with the help of an assistant director and always with stage managers.

Interview with Peter Evans, Director *Don's Party*

Reference Gemma O'Donoghue, "Sex and Politics," in *Currents*, STC's Subscriber Magazine, Vol.25, No.3, June 2007

Don's Party, one of David Williamson's best known earlier works, invites us to a suburban Melbourne lounge room for a party on election night 1969. A group of mostly Labor voting friends have joined together to see if the long run of the Liberal government will come to an end. In the process they eat, drink, argue and contemplate the discrepancies between what they thought they would be and what they actually are. In many ways it is a period piece, but has undeniable topicality and relevance. "This is the year to do it" says Peter Evans of *Don's Party*. Peter is the new Associate Director of The Melbourne Theatre Company and director of *Don's Party*, a collaboration between The Sydney Theatre Company and The Melbourne Theatre Company – "There are so many parallels between 1969 and now".

Don's Party is not only a play about politics, it is also a very biting yet funny Australian play about friendship, relationships, getting older and getting drunk – "it's a really good night at the theatre with a dark seam running through it," says Peter. It is a snapshot of the seventies but also begs some very pertinent questions of current day audiences. Peter comments that it was a challenging production to "wrangle" but he is "really pleased" that they have brought it to back to the stage, and introduced it to younger audiences- "let the next generation have a crack at *Don's Party*".

Since David Williamson announced his retirement Peter says there has been a "feeling floating round" the major theatre companies that there should be a revival of some of his earlier work. Peter had not thought about *Don's Party* in a long time, but after re-reading it last year he was not only struck by its current political and social relevance but was also "completely knocked out" by its structure, style and vigour – "It's got quite a lot of grunt to it and quite a lot of rage and there is joke after joke...it felt right that it was coming back".

Despite his extensive and enviable directing career, Peter admits to feeling some "extra pressure" doing a David Williamson play, "especially a revival of one of the biggies". He talks of "the balancing act", of finding the comedy and the farce but of also finding the reality in the quieter, darker moments, and the characters. Peter comments that one of the things that "put him at ease" was David Williamson's support, kindness and openness.

Along with finding the right performance style, another challenge was getting the 'logistics' of the play correct. The play is set in real time and most of the characters are on stage for all its duration – "with this kind of play you just have to choreograph it". Much of play consists of short punchy scenes between two characters, so there was the dual challenge of establishing a party atmosphere whilst moving the focus to and from these smaller interactions. From the beginning of the rehearsal process, the actors were up and moving round the set figuring out where everyone would be and what they would be doing.

The concept for the set, designed by Dale Ferguson, was “quite naturalistic” and gave the actors a ‘real’ house to perform in. There was always the idea of having the television “bang in the middle of the stage, delivering the election results. The election results reflect the characters experience of the night, and of their lives – ‘optimism at the start, and despair at the end”.

For Peter, despite the comedy, *Don’s Party* is essentially a play about disillusionment. “It’s about a group of friends in their thirties reaching a certain point in their lives- they’re not doing the jobs they hoped they would be doing, they haven’t been as successful as they wanted, they haven’t got the same love in their marriages as they had”. Their underlying rage and dissatisfaction gets expressed sexually, through their language and their jokes. Peter suggests that *Don’s Party* is mainly a character driven piece about “domestic relationships and friendships”. Politics plays a vital but a secondary role to these other issues- “the politics is a kind of hook going through the play...there is this wonderful device of mirroring the election results with the emotions of the characters”.

Of particular interest to Peter are the female characters. Although Williamson has sometimes come under criticism for his female characters, Peter comments that although the play is undoubtedly male-driven the female characters, although smaller, are “really good acting parts. The women are so well defined, with very real attitudes and dilemmas...and they get some really good jokes”.

Indeed, the women in the play, their lives and their journeys, prompt some very interesting questions as to how much Australia has changed since *Don’s Party* first hit the stage in the early 1970s. *Don’s Party* was first performed in the round at the Pram Factory, a small theatre that was dedicated to presenting new Australian works. In the seventies Williamson and his contemporaries were the emerging voices of a blossoming uniquely Australian theatre scene. Since then *Don’s Party* has followed a unique trajectory moving into our national theatre consciousness and is now considered a classic of Australian Theatre.

‘It struck a chord with its audience right from the start’, comments Peter. With his own particular production of *Don’s Party* Peter hopes the audience will be reminded of a particular time in Australian playwriting and how good it was. For an older audience it is a play about their generation and a time they lived through. For younger audiences, it may be the first time they have seen *Don’s Party* on stage and it is a play about their parents, or grandparents.

Asked if he thinks we will be seeing *Don’s Party* on our stages in another thirty years, he replies without hesitation – ‘Absolutely! Even as it becomes more of a period piece, it doesn’t become less interesting because the issues are still relevant. It’s just got good jokes and it’s a good night in the theatre and it’s as funny as hell’.



Design

Jacinta Stapleton in *Don's Party*.
Photographer: Jeff Busby

Reference: Martin Ball, review of the MTC/STC production in *The Age*, Monday, 13 January 2007

“Dale Ferguson’s set opens up Don and Kath’s home so we see all the rooms at once, except the bedrooms. There are posters of Gough Whitlam and extraordinary detailing such as leaves on the corrugated fibreglass roof above the patio. It’s a spacious and uncluttered set.” It incorporates orange vinyl, formica topped, mock-wood grained textures of the late 1960s.”

Ref: Bryce Hallett’s review of the MTC/STC production in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, 18 September 2007

“Dale Ferguson’s strikingly colourful set lays open the interiors of Don’s house while drawing the eye to a vacant suburbia on the edges. The design helps solve the need for swift transitions between scenes.”

Ref: Jo Litson’s review of this production in *The Sun Herald*, Sunday, 19 September 2007

“Thirty six years on, *Don’s Party* feels like a period piece from a bygone Australia. Dale Ferguson’s set and costumes whisk you straight back to the late 1960s. It’s a terrific design, full of delightful little touches, from the Gough Whitlam poster to Mack’s long socks.”

See also the definitive text on stage design in this country, Kristen Anderson and Imogen Ross' *Performance Design in Australia*, Craftsman House Sydney 2001 which includes references to Dale Ferguson. This invaluable reference also includes an extensive bibliography on set and costume design.

p.220: THE DRAMA THEATRE AT THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

"The Drama Theatre is essentially an end-stage configuration with a single audience seating block at a right angle to the stage on a stepped, tiered, medium-raked incline, with the audience point of view looking down at and into the stage space. The low auditorium ceiling emphasises the narrow vertical height of the stage opening into the stage space. The rectangular stage space at the end of the auditorium is framed by building limits of the auditorium with adjustable sides to the proscenium opening. Most audience members receive a similar stage picture.

The designs which deal with the low, narrow opening are the most effective. The space tends to re-scale or subdue the human figure. Designs can counter this by clever use of scale and proportion. Vertical placement of the dramatic space is most difficult. Audience perception of the performance varies little except for the front three rows, where eye line is at stage-floor height."

Acting (a Williamson role)

An election is a moral horror, as bad as a battle except for the blood; a mud bath for every soul concerned in it.

George Bernard Shaw

'[Williamson's] plays demand energy and bold straightforward clarity in performance. They are dramatically sharp and acutely observant – rarely do characters say anything that isn't central to the conflict being explored within the scene or in the play. I can hear my acting teacher at drama school, Jennifer Hagan, bellowing as we struggled to imbue our Shakespeare scene-work with psychological subtext: "Cut it out! The characters are not hiding anything from the audience. Reveal! Don't conceal!" I feel this instruction applies in varying degrees to Williamson's satires and dramas. They're full of characters champing at the bit to have their say and are constructed in such a way that the central conflicts are articulated very clearly. He creates a highly charged world in which antagonists, with whom we readily identify, meet head on: a fiery, familial dysfunction pits father against daughter, husband against wife; or it'll be mate against mate; table-thumping lefties against corporate high flyers; academics against students; managers against sportsmen, eastern suburbanites against 'Westies'; idealists against cynics. The plays are full of these robust gladiatorial clashes.

More than once I have heard directors refer to the performance style required for a Williamson play as non-naturalistic. Director Gale Edwards suggested that *Soulmates* was reminiscent in style of the Restoration comedies of the late-seventeenth century and demanded more of a presentational approach in performance. Similarly, Wayne Harrison extended the techniques he and Dr Phillip Parsons explored in their Elizabethan Experiment series to the production of *Dead White Males* in 1995, in which I appeared. We performed on a simple raked, presentational stage with very little in the way of sets and props and played directly to the audience from the front of the stage. I remember Wayne's coaching in the big rehearsal room at the Wharf Theatre: "Trust the text. Cut out all the little 'ums' and 'ahs' and say what has been written. Be bold, face the front and speak clearly.' It was a daring scheme but it worked. The show was a monumental hit.

Williamson is renowned for his unerring ability to hold the mirror up to society. He researches his subjects in painstaking detail and, as the actor John Howard – no stranger to the Williamson oeuvre – pointed out to me, invariably the emotional line through a scene is uncannily accurate, counter pointed by what the characters do or say. But at the same time, it's as if a character's ego-driven obsessions have retarded their sense of self-awareness. Williamson is constantly setting emotional traps to shake them out of their complacency. They keep having emotional doors slammed in their face.

While the dialogue is often a more direct, condensed and rhythmic variation on how Australians really speak, we are able, in his heightened verbal jousting matches, to recognise parts of ourselves and our obsessions in the behaviour of the protagonists. Williamson provides a dense kernel and it is the actor's task to nourish it, to find a clear identification with their character in order to present a fully-fleshed portrayal the audience can easily recognise and with which they might even identify. It is essential to trust the dialogue is implicitly interesting and concentrate on making the character's emotional journey through the play passionate and truthful.

Another characteristic of Williamson's storytelling is the directness with which he attacks the drama. He wastes little time when expressing his characters' feelings or thoughts, instead preferring to cut energetically and confidently to the chase. The

conflict is immediate and you are rarely afforded the luxury of working your way into a scene. Such rigorous storytelling requires a great deal of preparation on the part of the performer. The actor must be ready to seize the linguistic bull by the horns and spring into action or the scene will be over before they've had a shot at the target. It can be exhausting work but the challenge can produce bountiful rewards. As in any well-constructed play, if you're committed to the emotional truth of the scene, and dancing in step with your cast-mates, there's every chance you'll find yourself in powerful contact with the audience. And what a feeling that is!

Glenn Hazeldine, who plays Simon in this production, excerpted from 'Devouring Williamson: An Actor Ruminates' in Williamson: A Celebration

Plot Synopsis

To familiarise yourself with the story, read through the play synopsis below. Write down your initial response to the story, which you can reflect back on, after you have seen the play.

It's election night 1969.

Don's been handing out how-to-vote cards – the Libs have gotta go. Don and Kath are having a few friends over to celebrate, or commiserate. Either way they'll drink. Too bloody right they will.

Politics is quickly dispensed with as the booze and the lechery kick into gear; the women provoke or stay silent as Don and his mates argue, flirt, drink, flirt some more, drink some more, brawl, get caught on the job – and it's only then that it starts to go horribly wrong.

Since the 1970s men have started eating quiche, been Mr Moms, secretly enjoyed metrosexuality, started marrying each other and suffered an apparent crisis of masculinity; while women have burnt their bras, smashed the glass ceiling, gone corporate and post-feminist, lifted, tucked and botoxed, rejected glamour, re-embraced glamour, and sexed in the city, so is anyone still keen on the more primitive arts of getting drunk and flirting?

Should we be worried about how little has really changed since 1969?

Vulgar. Uproarious. Exhilarating. Tragic. Here are Australia's men and women held up to scrutiny as they try and make sense of their lives, their crumbling marriages and their flagging youthful zest.

Don's Party is one of Williamson's earliest works, written in 1971, even before *The Removalists*.

Political Context

Ref: Martin Ball, review of the MTC/STC production in *The Age*, Monday, 13 January 2007

"The action takes place on election night 1969, when after a long period of conservative government (John Gorton was the Liberal Prime Minister at that time), Labor voters sensed a mood of change, before inevitably falling foul of DLP preferences. There are clear parallels for our times - especially the unexpected success of the Green Party in recent elections – yet *Don's Party* is ultimately not about party politics. Rather, it explores the domestic politics of marriage and the petty compensations people create for their failures. This production keeps the focus on the human comedy. Tempting as it may have been, there is no attempt to introduce contemporary political references."

Character Summaries

A Melbourne critic has said that “Williamson makes the most of his unattractive characters, and this production doesn’t try to defend them.” Simon says “they’re very extroverted types,” to which Evan replies, “I think they’re a bunch of shits.”

Don Henderson – laconic host, a teacher and failed writer - like all the characters in the play, except Susan, Don is in his mid-thirties – owner of the home which is the setting for the party in the Melbourne suburb of Lower Plenty on the 25th October, 1969 – election night, “Try and act like a host tonight, will you?” Changes from casual clothing into “a dinner suit, complete with dress shirt and black tie. He still wears brown casual shoes.” Seems disengaged with everything and everyone around him.

Kath Henderson – frustrated, frazzled and oppressed wife of Don; slightly neurotic, depressive (she’s on anti-depressants). Eloquently harried, distributing bowls of Twisties and platters of pineapple and red pickled onion appetisers before the guests arrive. Has a monologue in the finale of the play.

Simon Bascombe – “immaculately dressed.... he has a cultivated confidence and bonhomie that covers a certain unease. This becomes more evident as the play progresses. He is, “Married to Jody, An industrial accountant”. They are the most removed characters from the rest of the guests – the only Liberal voters in attendance. Stitched up conservative. Simon and Jody are Kath’s friends.

Jody Bascombe – “attractive and socially confident. She has a conservative upper middle-class background which sometimes emerges as a trace of arrogance. She is very fashionably dressed.” She feels overdressed. She has two children Sophie and Dalton. She is, “Gradually drawn into conversation with the three males in the kitchen.” Says she “associates Labor with coarse men in overalls.” An upwardly mobile Liberal; outspoken; discovers a new way of looking at her relationship with Simon by the end of the play.

Mal – Don’s best mate; “tall, good looking, urbane and is dressed casually but thoughtfully.” A management consultant,” yet his wife Jenny tells Kath he’s “a professional bullshit artist.” A political know-all.

Jenny – “attractive but has a biting quality of resentment about her, which often underlies her dialogue.” Tells Cooley she doesn’t “make a habit of speaking to incorrigible lechers” at parties. As one Melbourne critic put it ‘Sits in a corner creating a black hole of hate and depression’. Actor Alison Whyte says of Jenny: “She’s a deeply unhappy person, embittered at what life has dished out to her – which is great fun to play”. She spends most of Act One recovering from “a headache,” only chipping in when appropriate. Her true feelings are revealed in Act Two. She is brittle and intense, bitterly frustrated, lonely and unhappy; social climber.

Mack – “a dishevelled little man carrying a large poster and numerous bottles.” He has recently separated from his wife Ruth. He is a design engineer. He has sensitive and larrikin sides to his character. Mal, Jody and Mack embody the political context of the play.

Evan – “well groomed and subdued, almost brooding.” He is the dentist husband of Kerry, he is humourless, straight and wooden.

Kerry – Evan’s free-thinking artist partner, who is “very attractive and has a touch of affectation in her voice. She tends to overreact emotionally with “a touch of hysteria.”

An artist who has had many major exhibitions. Oozes elegance and style. On a higher plane than the other party guests.

Cooley – Don’s lawyer friend; “very well dressed but has the air of a larrikin about him.” Tells Jenny he doesn’t “make a habit of speaking to hostile bitches” at parties. A ‘pants man.’ He is abrasively extrovert; rampant, larger-than-life larrikin. In a stage direction, Williamson mentions Cooley’s “consciously exaggerated male chauvinism.” In Act One, regarding organic relationships, Cooley teases sexy artist Kerry: “Organ first, relationship later.”

Susan – early twenties “warmly attractive and much younger than her date for the night, Cooley.” Open-minded; the other women warm to her. Says in Act One to Kath: “The average man under 35 gets a sexual thought every 5 minutes... The average woman gets one every 2 hours. I think I must be oversexed.”

Music

Soundtrack: Television electoral broadcast, Mr Wonderful by Mantovani – overlapping dialogue with election broadcast. Bad Moon Rising and other hits by 70s rockers Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Representations

Don's Party is a blatant expose of extra-marital affairs and sour suburban dreams.

To summarise, the main representations of *Don's Party* are:

- Sexual politics
- Party politics
- The middle class
- Failure
- Male egos.
- Evan says in Act One: "If Labor gets in we might get a slightly better health scheme, slightly better social services and that's about it." To which conservative Simon replies: "And you're never sure how they're going to pay for it."

Reference: Brian Moon, *Literary Terms A Practical Glossary*, Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA, 1992

p. 109: "Representations are textual constructions which refer to habitual ways of thinking about or acting in the world. Although they seem to refer to the "real world", they actually refer to the cultural world which members of a society inhabit....Representations cannot be judged on the basis of 'accuracy.' Instead, they must be evaluated in terms of their social effects." p.108. Hence Williamson is (re)presenting us with believable characters and their stories.

Representation includes character but is much broader and facilitates a commentary on mise-en-scene. It has been defined as "the act or an instance of representing or being represented. A thing especially a painting or image that represents another. A statement made by way of allegation or to convey an opinion.

A representation is a selectively constructed media depiction. It is necessarily built on 'shorthand' information and often, (but not always) includes generalisations and assumptions.

The word representation can be a loaded term. One meaning describes a media construction which has the potential to project a stereotypical stance by virtue of the fact that any media representation is constructed. Therefore representation can imply limitation, construction and thus be experienced as disempowering. A second meaning alludes to action, presence, making visible, giving voice, as in political or artistic representation. Applied in this context, the word "representation" holds connotations of empowerment.

To represent: to stand for or to correspond to. To act as an embodiment of or a symbol. To call up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination. To place a likeness of before the mind or senses. To serve or be meant as a likeness of.

Stereotyping: a routine or standard image of a person, event or object. It is often uninformed and works by categorising according to some (presumed) distinctive features, such as accent or mannerisms. Stereotypes are not always unfavourable.

Also see www.linknet.com.au/atol a brilliant site for notes on representation and other concepts of critical literacy.

Genre: Satire/Social Comedy

Definitions

Reference: M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1996

Although *Don's Party* may not be classified as a social satire outright, it definitely contains satirical elements. Abrams has defined Satire as "the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire "derides"; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a subject existing outside the work itself. That subject may be an individual (in personal satire) or a type of person, a class, an institution, a subculture like the football world in *The Club*, or even the whole human race as in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The distinction between the comic and the satiric is a sharp one only at its extremes. (Indeed eminent Theatre critic and academic John McCallum states in his "Williamson right on target" review of *Up for Grabs* in *The Australian*, (Monday, 5 March 2001) "David Williamson has always been too nice to be a grim satirist, and too savage to be a comfortable realist playwright.")

Satire has usually been justified by those who practise it as a corrective of vice and folly; Alexander Pope, the eighteenth century poet, remarked that "those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous." Its claim (not always borne out in practice) has been to ridicule the failing rather than the individual... Satire occurs as an incidental element in many works whose overall form is not satiric - in a certain character, or situation, or ironic commentary on some aspect of the human condition or contemporary society". (pp 153-154).

The term 'humour' refers to what is purely comic: it evokes sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself. Humour is the harmless form of the comic... In satire we are made to laugh at a person not merely because he or she is ridiculous, but because he or she is being ridiculed - the laughter is derisive, with some element of contempt or malice, and serves as a weapon against its ridiculous subject.

Irony - In Greek comedy the character called the eiron was a 'dissembler', who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the alazon - the self-deceiving and stupid braggart. In most of the diverse critical uses of the term "irony" the difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case, or dissimulation, defines the ironic situation. (page 80)

Dramatic Irony involves a situation in a play in which the audience shares with the playwright knowledge of which a character is ignorant; The character acts in a way grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or expects the opposite of what fate holds in store, or says something that anticipates the actual outcome, but not at all in the way that he or she means it. (page 82)

Activities

Pre-performance

A) Look over some colloquial and other words from David Williamson's play and their meanings before you see *Don's Party*.

B) **Research** 1969 timeline.

C) Critic Nicholas Pickard has said about this STC/MTC production,
"Director Peter Evan's purist approach highlights parallels between then (1969) and now."

Compare and **contrast** the values and attitudes towards party and sexual politics between the composer's context then and your context as a responder to the play prior to a Federal election in 2007.

D) The following is the copy for the current radio advertisement for this production of *Don's Party*, said in an Australian larrikin voice:

"The liberals have been in power for bloody ages. We have followed the Yanks in this stupid war. Interest rates are going up. Petrol prices are a national disgrace. And don't get me started about the DLP!

I mean it's 1969, for God sake!

So it's time for all good men to come to the party – *Don's Party*. Where there will be grog, laughs, and incisive political discussion by some of Lower Plenty's finest intellectual talent. Oh and bring the wife – always a civilising influence."

(Coda: quickly)

"Spoken by Rhys Muldoon for David Williamson's *Don's Party*. At the Opera House now. Book at Ticketek."

What would you include in the programme for a play about an election night party to be held on the night of the forthcoming Federal election? Start by brainstorming similarities and differences in the contexts of 1969 and 2007. For example:

- Simon, a dentist states in 1969, "I pull in over twenty thousand dollars a year clear."
- Mal pokes fun at Jody: "Can't you get pregnant in a thirty-thousand-dollar house? Too cheap and nasty?"
- the conservative Liberal government had been in power for 19 years and society was on the cusp of change. "There was almost full employment yet there existed the winds of change in a surly electorate," according to Williamson. "There was a sense of passion and possibility then. With market-decided deregulation, there is more frantic materialism now..... Fear is the political device today."
- Political cartoonist Bruce Petty says that the media's coverage of economics is the main change between then and now – "it's the only factor shown to contribute to Human happiness today." Petty also believes our current leaders are "grey men," when compared to the more colourful leaders of the 60s/70s. A point of comparison for Petty is that "Australia distorts overseas fashions," even 38 years later.

- The ALP (Labor Party) seemed poised to win after years in opposition in 1969..... They lost, but eventually won in 1972 – a time when Gough Whitlam championed the arts!

E) A collage of actor Rhys Muldoon in role as Cooley and a Labor election leaflet, placed against a stained white shag carpet, features in the subscription brochure for the play. Clip the ad for *Don's Party* from the Amusement Section of *The Sydney Morning Herald* – which features actors Steve Le Marquand and Christopher Pitman in role as Don and Mal respectively, obviously intoxicated.

What can you tell about the publicity campaign for the play from these images of the play?

F) A Melbourne critic has said, “Thirty-five years on, this still-timely piece offers all-too-telling insights into the often amusing but dark aspects of middle-class life Down Under.” Do you agree or should *Don's Party* be regarded as merely museum theatre?

G) **Playbuild** around the themes of:

- Sexual politics
- Party politics
- Personal failure
- The middle class

H) Arts journalist Jo Litson said recently:

“The magnificent ocker vulgarity of Williamson’s dialogue was a breath of fresh air for 1970s audiences. These days, however, the flagrant sexism is hard to take.”

Do you agree or do you support actor Alison Whyte’s view that “We’re having a very different experience (today) where audiences completely back the women. The laughs still come thick and fast. There’s eye-rolling and cringing with it, but audiences have a really good time.” (*Sunday Telegraph* 16/9/07)

I) What expectations do you have for David Williamson’s play in production now you have read scenes from the play?

J) “Comedy is for those who think; tragedy for those who feel.”

Keep this in mind as you read the play, and then discuss this statement later when you have seen ***Don's Party***.

K) Outline in detail what you perceive the essential preparation for any of the actors in David Williamson’s ***Don's Party***.

Activities

Post-Performance

- A) Did you expect Williamson's play to focus so much on sexual politics? Melbourne critic Thuy On (*The Australian*, 13/1/07) has said:

"The caustic one-liners and bedroom antics make it pretty funny, even though in this enlightened post-feminist era, the sexist, boorish and randy behaviour of the males comes across as offensive. Despite falling into the category of fish wives or nymphettes, the women are marginally more sympathetic."

In Act Two, the female characters discuss children, boring marriages and unsatisfactory sex lives, while the males crack on to one another's partners as the booze flows.

- B) What expectations did you have before seeing this production? What changed for you after seeing it?

C) A Melbourne critic has said that "Williamson is famous for his one-liners but director Evans finds even more humour between the lines. There are some wonderful dynamics in group conversations and great expressiveness in the beats (changes of intention) where everyone is looking for somewhere to hide."

Do you agree with this appraisal?

D) **Direction** – What do you think was the vision of the director and his interpretation of the play. (The role of the director of a theatrical production not only includes finding the best actors for the play, creating truthful and believable performances, and building an effective ensemble, but also defining a particular vision for the text.)

E) **Design** - What mood does the set evoke from the out-set of the play? How does this alter at different times in the production? Do you agree with hostess Kath that "It's a bit **House-and-Gardenish**... The trouble with décor is that if your tastes change after you've done it then you're stuck with it."?

F) **Sketch** Dale Ferguson's set and list all the (minimal) props; e.g. chairs, tables, lamps, stereogram, television etc. Comment on the following criticism of the set from Martin Ball's review of the MTC/STC production in *The Age*, Monday, 13 January 2007: "It's a spacious and uncluttered set, though it makes the short first-act scene changes seem clunky, as groups are left twiddling their thumbs in semi-darkness on stage when the action moves from room to room. It's here that you see how easily the play translated to film, where simultaneity is easier to represent."

G) **Discuss** the impact the character changes had on the audience's experience of the play. Start with an examination of Mal, Jenny and Cooley.

H) How did the actors use the space to convey the shifts in character and narrative and time? For example in Act Two the guests are on the patio eating supper and the audience firstly focuses on Mack and Cooley.

I) How does lighting contribute to the mood of the scenes? What effect do these lighting states achieve? List some that were used.

J) How does music of 1969 and other music/ sound design contribute to the production?

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Don Henderson convinces his wife to have another party so that their friends can gather to watch the election, drink and carry on. Don's wife, Kath sees the party as just more work, while Don sees it as a chance to break his boring routine. The year is 1969 and some of Don's friends have jumped on the bandwagon of sexual freedom and experimentation. However, others at the party are more conservative about their politics and sex, and naturally, arguments break out over politics and fist fights erupt over the seduction of others' wives.

Bruce Beresford (dir.), *The Club*, Australia 1980 – Starring Jack Thompson, Graham Kennedy, Frank Wilson, John Howard and Harold Hopkins. Still one of Australia's best sports movies. Williamson himself adapted his play for the screen. Veteran football coach Laurie and his players discover that they are at the mercy of unscrupulous directors (Ted the businessman) running their club. Matt Buchanan said in *The Guide* in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday, April 14, 2003, "Many filmmakers sidestep sport, especially the different codes of football, because they face a crisis of depiction; mixing footage from real games with 'matches' featuring the actors just looks silly. The huge atmosphere of a televised match is farcically reduced as the director cuts to tight shots where the actors' ankles and 'oomphs' only highlight the apparent evaporation of tens of thousands of spectators.... As much as non-sports fans might protest this point, it is also near to impossible for even the most gifted film team to match the kind of drama that real matches produce every weekend.... *The Club* is "that rare sport film with sports culture and all its noisy rats-in-the-ranks power struggles as its subject. Even if the match scenes do look a bit silly, the whole film looks very much of its day and you still get the feeling that the dynamics in the sheds – not to say at the bar and in the boardroom, those places where players, fans and businessmen collide – haven't changed.

Ang Lee, *The Ice Storm* 1997 - In the weekend after Thanksgiving 1973, the Hood family is skidding out of control. Benjamin Hood reels from drink to drink, trying not to think about his trouble at the office. His wife, Elena, is reading self help books and losing patience with her husband's lies. Their son, Paul, home for the holidays, escapes to the city to pursue an alluring rich girl from his prep school. And young, budding nymphomaniac, Wendy Hood roams the neighborhood, innocently exploring liquor cabinets and lingerie drawers of her friends' parents, looking for something new. Then an ice storm hits, the worst in a century.

The climate is changing, politically and physically. As the Watergate scandal unfolds in the background, the inhabitants of New Canaan, Connecticut begin to slip into an existentialist void, wherein social taboos are shattered on whims and the line between adult authority and juvenile irresponsibility is practically nonexistent. Focusing on two families in particular, the Hoods and the Carvers, *The Ice Storm* chronicles a brief period of rapid moral deterioration, as the characters shatter their social "roles" in pursuit of meaning and satisfaction, within an environment turned inwards on itself. As the metaphorical device of an "ice storm" builds up around them, the actions of the characters - including adultery, sexual experimentation, drug use and petty crimes - become increasingly unpredictable and impulsive. Once the "storm" hits, though, reality sinks in, and the severity of their situation becomes all too apparent in its bitter, and resonating aftermath.

WEB SITES

www.sydneystheatre.com.au - Sydney Theatre Company

You can also send us your feedback on the productions you have seen, e-mail our archivist for specific information you may be searching for or check the date and time of a performance.

www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au - Here you'll find full information about subject syllabi and past examination papers.

hsc.csu.edu.au/english/courses - NSW HSC On-Line 3-Unit English Course - Tutorials, Exams, Resources

Currency Press - for references on Australian Drama

<http://www.currency.com.au> - particularly

<http://www.currency.com.au/club.html> - a site dedicated to a study guide by Peter Fitzpatrick of David Williamson's *The Club*

www.alm.aust.com/~kategren/index.html

This site was created by John Tranter for Australian Literary Management, Australia's premier literary agency.

<http://www.allreaders.com>

Helps you choose hundreds of plot, theme, character and setting options to what you're currently reading or researching.

<http://edsitement.neh.fed.us>

The EDSITEMent site includes online learning guides and a hotlist of links to top humanities sites

www.bham.wednet.edu/bio/biomaker.htm

These online lessons explain what a biography should be and walk writers through questioning, learning, synthesis, and story telling. The site includes embedded links to relevant Internet resources and tips for effective writing.

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/storyhandbook.htm>

This handbook for storytellers is filled with practical advice for story tellers on choosing, learning, and telling a story

Reviews

How we toe the party line

Sun Herald, Sunday, 23 September 2007

DON 'S PARTY Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House.

Until October 27.

Tickets \$65-\$73.

Bookings: 9250 7777.

Critic 's rating: 8/10

THE past 35 years have been kind to David Williamson 's biting domestic comedy Like a Parker Knoll sideboard or one of those coffinsized radiograms, *Don 's Party* comes up very nicely with a bit of spit and elbow grease.

Written in 1971, this satirical probe of Australian values centres on a toxic trio of middle-class blokes who gather in Don 's home in the Melbourne burbs for election night, 1969.

While partner Kath (Mandy McElhinney) grumpily distributes bowls of Twisties, laconic failed author Don Henderson (Steve LeMarquand) tunes the TV in to the tally room.

If there 's any justice in the world, Whitlam 's socialists will oust John Gorton's moribund Liberal/Country Party coalition.

And so say Don 's longtime cronies: Mack (Travis The sexual posturinc McMahon), newly split from his wife; times in which the p1 political know-all Mal (Christopher Pitman); and Cooley (Rhys Muldoon), a randy lawyer whose latest conquest, 19-year-old Susan (Jacinta Stapleton), is hot enough to cause a degree of discomfort in the old Fletcher Jones.

Other party guests include tight-lipped dentist Evan (Cohn Lane) and his free-thinking artist partner Kerry (Caroline Brazier), and Liberal voters Simon (Glenn Hazeldine) and Jody (Felicity Price). Sidelined by a migraine, Mal 's embittered wife Jenny (Alison Whyte) watches warily from a dark corner.

The election result? The Libs fall over the line thanks to DLP preferences. ... about human failings and sexual rather than party politics. Just as Don uses the occasion as an excuse for a piss-up, Williamson uses it to explore the depths of domestic angst.

The sexual posturing is very much a product of the times in which the play was written pure Alvin Purple to the 21st century eye but, as Williamson writes in the program notes, the play has "a lot of sadness at its core". It's there that the play 's enduring appeal lies.

Director Peter Evans balances earthy humour and underlying viciousness expertly and he takes pleasure in the rich comic potential of agonised pauses and silent putdowns. He's also highlighted some deft physical humour particularly with Hazeldine, who, as Simon, is always in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Dale Ferguson's open-plan set design is colourful, spot-on for period and full of interesting detail. The widescreen look does seem to highlight the necessity for actors to stand around rhubarbing while scenes are going on elsewhere but by using the full potential of the space and clever lighting (by Matt Scott), it 's not overly distracting.

Evans's cast, fresh from a lengthy Melbourne run, is secure and unerringly on-target.

LeMarquancFs laconic Don is more subtly drawn than his so-called mates but McMahon is endearingly oafish as Mack, and Muldoon relishes every moment from that famous (unprintable) first line on.

The women are equally strong with McElhinney eloquently harried as Kath and Whyte conjuring up a black cloud of grievance that powerfully affects the entire stage.

The production never quite transcends the limitations of the play and there is some slack in the second half but once you've dropped into the groove and to this production's credit, that 's almost immediate *Don 's Party* makes for a big, boozy, lusty night out. JASON BLAKE

Why there's still life in Don's party

Sunday Telegraph, Sunday, 23 September 2007

DON 'S PARTY Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House until Oct 27

AFTER years of entrenched conservative government, Labor has been doing well at the polls and could win. Sounds familiar? Actually it's the political backdrop to David Williamson's landmark 1971 play *Don's Party*, but the parallels with today didn't escape Sydney and Melbourne Theatre Companies who saw this as perfect timing for a revival.

It 's election night 1969 in middleclass suburban Melbourne. Don (Steve Le Marquand) has invited some mates to celebrate what he hopes will be a Labor victory, though it 's just an excuse for the men to get drunk, chat up each other 's partners and indulge in some back-slapping.

As the booze flows and the disappointing results roll in, things turn ugly.

Thirty-six years on, *Don's Party* feels like a period piece from a bygone Australia. Dale Ferguson 's set and costumes whisk you straight back to the late 1960s. It's a terrific design, full of delightful little touches, from the Gough Whitlam poster to Mack 's (Travis McMahon) long socks.

There are strong performances all round from a very good cast that includes Rhys Muldoon as the rampant, larger-than-life larrikin Cooley, Alison Whyte as the embittered, social-climbing Jenny, Glenn Hazeldine as the stitched-up conservative Simon, and Mandy McElhinney as Don's depressed wife, Kath.

The shock of recognition that greeted *Don's Party* in the 1970s has gone but there's still a lot of fun to be had in looking back at the way we were. The themes of middleclass pretension and disillusion are as relevant as ever.

It may be cringe-making at times, but it still has you roaring with laughter.