

Sydney Theatre Company and AUDI present



The Season at Sarsaparilla
by Patrick White

Directed by Benedict Andrews

Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Jeffrey Dawson

Acknowledgements

Sydney Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teacher's Notes: Jo Peoples, Performing Arts Collection, South Australia

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Cast And Production Team

Sydney Theatre Company and Audi presents

The Season at Sarsaparilla

By Patrick White

Girlie Pogson	Peter Carroll
Clive Pogson	John Gaden
Judy Pogson	Hayley McElhinney
Joyleen (Pippy)	Amber McMahon
Ernie Boyle	Brandon Burke
Nola Boyle	Pamela Rabe
Harry Knott	Martin Blum
Mavis Knott	Emily Dawe
Roy Child	Eden Falk
Rowley Masson (Digger)	Colin Moody
Julia Sheen	Helen Thompson
Ron Suddards	Dan Spielman
Mr Erbage	Alan John
Deidree	Alan John
Two Ambulance Men	John Gaden & Colin Moody

Production Team

Director	Benedict Andrews
Set Designer	Robert Cousins
Costume Designer	Alice Babidge
Lighting Designer	Nick Schlieper
Composer	Alan John

This production opened 2 March 2007 at the Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House. There will be one interval.

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 original **productions** and **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 hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au

See also *Who's Who of Australian Writers*, Thorpe publishers in association with the National Centre for Australian Studies, ACT 1995

The Writer – Patrick White

The following articles on White are from the program for this STC production, edited by Laura Scrivano..

Patrick White Reappraised

DAVID MALOUF

Last year some of Australia's leading publishers and agents received a chapter of a novel in progress from a new and as yet unpublished writer, Wraith Picket. Some of them simply rejected the manuscript with the usual apologies. Others recognised a certain flair for language but found it confused, overwritten and in need of the sort of editing that no publisher these days could afford. The writer was less disappointed than he might otherwise have been because he was already, as his name might have suggested, in the grave. Wraith Picket was in fact an anagrammatic Patrick White, born in 1912 and awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1973; the "unpublishable" manuscript was chapter three of his novel *The Eye of the Storm*...

Literary hoaxes are a national sport in Australia, intended, decade after decade, to prove that the gatekeepers of our culture are con-artists, because culture is itself a con, and their claims to expertise an imposition on the innocence of ordinary Australians. In this case the non-reading general public, who had always felt intimidated by White, and all those readers who are wary of anything "heavy", were relieved at last to be off the hook. The old boy really was unreadable, and now, it seemed, unpublishable as well...

Like most writers, even the greatest, White, in the 15 years since his death, has fallen into neglect. My guess is that, like most younger Australians, the "professional" readers of Picket's manuscript, though they would certainly have heard of White, had never in fact read him. And those who had? Perhaps they thought Picket was just another Patrick White imitator who was doing it badly (he sometimes did it badly himself), or their response had less to do with literary taste than with the state of current publishing, a hard-headed recognition that, however talented he might be, Wraith Picket would not "sell".

For the first decade after his return to Australia from Europe in 1948, White lived in almost total anonymity in the semi-rural suburb of Castle Hill. He bred prize-winning schnauzers, helped his partner, Manoly Lascaris, to work a 2 1/2-hectare farm, and waited; then, between 1952 and 1957, he produced two masterpieces, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*.

When White and Lascaris settled at Castle Hill, he had already published three novels, the last of them his first clear masterpiece, *The Aunt's Story* (1948); and he was, in his own mind, returning to the New South Wales of his childhood, as he had re-imagined it in the opening section of that book. Thirty years later, at the birthplace of Henry Lawson, another Australian writer and reluctant returnee, he explained, "Henry, like many others, found he couldn't escape. He was driven back, I suspect, as I was by glimmers of remembered landscape, by scents and sounds from hot days, to childhood, the source of creation, when perception is at its sharpest". For White, that remembered landscape was pastoral, but

in no way idyllic (for two years in his late youth he had worked as a jackaroo on family properties); its social world simpler, closer to beginnings, than the over-refined and divided Europe of the 1930s, which he had watched slide towards the barbarous destruction of Barcelona in 1938, to be followed by London, Hamburg, Dresden, and the organised murder of the Nazi concentration camps.

It is important, given his later savage disillusionment, to recognise the extent to which, in 1948, after the deprivations and ruins of Europe, Australia presented itself to White, as it did to so many displaced Europeans, as a world untouched, even primitively “innocent”, a source of recovery and fresh beginnings; in his case, of the sort of recovered experience that might go into the novels he meant to write. To Ben Heusch, his New York publisher and his mentor in those early years, he had written: “Rediscovering my home country was an interesting experience and full of nostalgia. I have been impressed by a great many things. The people are beginning to develop, and take an interest in books, in paintings, and music, to an extent that surprises me, knowing them 14 years ago. One gets the impression that a great deal is about to happen.” It’s the last phrase that matters.

He was soon brought down to earth. *The Aunt’s Story* established him as a major figure in New York, but what mattered to Australians was London, and London was lukewarm. In Australia itself, the book was barely noticed. Deeply wounded, White abandoned fiction, devoted himself to gruelling farm work, fell into depression, put aside the new book he had been working on, *A Life Sentence on Earth*, and wrote nothing more for the next three years. When he took up the book again, *A Life Sentence* had become *The Tree of Man* (1955), but the belief that life is itself punitive, a slow working, through suffering and acceptance, towards a kind of redemption, remained, and he extended the idea when he saw his own punishment as (a reference to Australia’s penal beginnings) a sentence to life in Australia. Meanwhile, to his cousin Peggy Garland he wrote: “When we came to live here I felt life was, on the surface, so dreary, ugly, monotonous, there must be a poetry hidden in it to give it purpose, so I set out to discover that secret core”; and in his essay *The Prodigal Son* in 1958: “I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people (Stan Parker in *The Tree of Man*), and incidentally, my own life since my return”. *The Tree of Man* is in every detail grounded in a local and experiential Australia, both the landscape, its colours, moods, smells, and the minutiae of social life in and around Castle Hill (or Durilga, as he calls it here, later Sarsaparilla). But the drama, as again in *Voss*, is an elemental one, and, though it takes place in small souls, is of epic dimensions: the conflict between Man and the Land, Man and Nature, Man and himself, Man and God.

The Tree of Man and *Voss* confirmed White’s status overseas as a major voice. At home, the books were savagely attacked. For the Australian literary establishment, White was an interloper who had taken on the “matter of Australia”, but wasn’t really an “Australian” writer at all.

White’s earliest American admirer, James Stern, in a letter of 1964, detects a degree of anger in *Riders in the Chariot*, the book that followed *Voss*. A move towards the grotesque that he finds disappointing after the grandeur of the earlier books; an early appearance, too, of the heavily judgemental. White defended himself:

“Unfortunately we live in black times, with less and less that may be called good. I must reflect the blackness of those times. I tried to write a book about saints, but saints are few and far between. If I were a

saint myself I could project my saintliness, perhaps, endlessly in what I write. But I am a sensual and irritable human being. Certainly the longer I live the less I see I like in human beings of whom I am one.”

To Heusch he wrote at much the same time: “It is really a hateful country and I think if I were 15 years younger I would go away and stay away for good. As it is I hope to take root in this new house, which will be closer to the source of something I want to write.”

The “book of saints” was *Riders in the Chariot*. The new house overlooked Centennial Park. Of the four saints of *Riders*, Ruth Godbold and Mary Hare are among White’s most fully imagined and deeply felt creations. Of the others, Mordecai Himmelfarb now seems worked up, though the Auschwitz scenes and the Lady from Czernowitz retain their power, and Alf Dubbo, “the blackfellow, or half-caste” painter, is at this point embarrassing. Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack, vaudeville figures whose gentility would do credit to Edna Everage, Sarsaparilla’s defenders of Home and Hoover, for whom all is sanctified by cake - surely two of the great comic monsters of modern fiction - provide a chorus for the progress of the Jew, Himmelfarb, towards a mock crucifixion in Harry Rosetree’s Brighta Bicycle Lamps factory at Barranugli. History in Australia repeats itself as larrikin horseplay, but is no less brutal because Himmelfarb’s persecutor - “Blue” of the splendid torso and toothless head, that Antinous of the suburbs - lacks a designer uniform, and no searchlights turn the sky overhead to a cathedral. The effect is of a Sarsaparilla Bosch.

The year 1964 marked a watershed in White’s life and work. His mother’s death at the end of 1963 had made him more than “better off” financially and had removed one of his deepest emotional ties and nervous irritations. He could now deal with her in a book. Heusch, the publisher for whom he had written five novels in the previous 25 years, died in August 1964, and, as David Marr suggests, “a formal grandeur that now faded from White’s writing had reflected Heusch himself”. In October, he and Manoly moved to Martin Road. In the weeks before, White burned all his papers, including the manuscripts and drafts of the early novels. Two weeks later he finished the first draft of the last of the Sarsaparilla books, *The Solid Mandala*.

The old Australia he had been drawn back to, and so powerfully recreated, was passing. Australia, like other places in the swinging ‘60s, was on the move: sexual liberation of all kinds; protests, demonstrations; a mineral boom that saw enormous fortunes made, and development projects initiated that would tear the heart out of the older cities. Values that had grown up as a response to hardship and poverty - a hardbitten stoicism and self-reliance (relieved at times by humour), a hanging-together that could also, as White knew, show its darker side in a clannish suspicion of whatever was “different” - had given way to crass materialism, a new openness to experience but also to unrestrained egotism and greed.

One reaction to this was the plays and novels White wrote in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. As he put it in his Nobel prize essay in explaining the move to Martin Road: “I had... the conscious wish to extend my range by writing about more sophisticated Australians, as I have done in *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm*.” What he means is big-city people like the society ladies who make their first appearance in the Mrs Godbold section of *Riders*; the painters, actors and lawyers who crowd the pages of these novels, replacing the “ordinary people” of the Sarsaparilla period, who, small as they may be, are touched with a kind of nobility. *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm* are overwrought, excessive, unlikeable books, full of larger-than-life (theatrical) characters and grotesques, lurid

situations, and an oddly old-fashioned view of the artist as sacred monster; a march of folly in which the traditional decencies have given way to rank opportunism and cannibalistic greed.

A second reaction, which in some ways grew out of White's move towards the theatre and itself had its theatrical side, was his involvement in the protest movement, beginning in December 1969 with his signing of a Petition of Defiance against the National Service Act - a brave gesture this, that might have led to imprisonment. Reluctantly at first, he became a regular protest marcher and speaker: against the Vietnam War, uranium mining, an Olympic Sports Centre at Moore Park, a monorail; for the Whitlam government after the 1975 dismissal (White voted Labor for the first time in 1972); for peace, Aborigines, the republic. A grim, Boris Karloff-like presence with a tremulous upper-class accent (he was a nervous speaker), a dilly-bag for his eye-drops, and a woollen beanie, he became a familiar figure on public platforms.

Meanwhile the plays and film scripts kept coming - *Big Toys* and *The Night the Prowler* (1976), *Netherwood* and *Signal Driver* (1983), *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1986). *A Fringe of Leaves*, suggested by a series of paintings by Nolan, begun in 1961 and abandoned, was finished in 1975; in 1979, in a splendid return to form, came the finest of White's later novels, *The Twyborn Affair*, its first section one of the most moving things he ever wrote and the one place, after the early masterpieces, where he really did "extend his range" - his emotional range. A memoir, *Flaws in the Glass*, appeared in 1981; finally, *Memoirs of Many in One*, a last work in which everything that was serious in the early books suffered a final daring transformation to burlesque: not least of all the author, that impossible person Patrick White. The papers newly displayed by the National Library in Canberra record this period well: drafts of the terrible letters in which old friends were finally dismissed, drafts of plays and filmscripts, of *Flaws in the Glass*, the unfinished *The Binoculars* and *Helen Nell* and *Dolly Formosa* and *the Happy Few*, and *Many in One*; recipes; 10 notebooks (1930-1970) in which we read the opening sentences, hastily set down and corrected, of most of the novels: glimpses of the writer's own first glimpse of a new fictional world, the visionary insight and chemical change in him that was a new book. Most moving of all, to anyone who was close to him, under what the Library calls "Realia": a beanie, a beret, a pair of spectacles.

Realia. I can hear the hoot he would have given, then the long-drawn-out diphthongs of his mock Australian accent, ree-ah-leeah, at the translation of these ordinary objects of his poor existence into the realm of the iconic, the extraordinary - the glasses he needed for his milky marble old eyes, the beret, the woollen beanie Manoly knitted - exhibited not as objects but (as in "Australiana") as the left-over oddities of a lost and now mythological continent. He would have been amused by that.

THIS ARTICLE IS AN EDITED AND SHORTENED VERSION OF THE ARTICLE WHICH FIRST APPEARED IN *The Times Literary Supplement*. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF *The Times Literary Supplement* AND DAVID MALOUF.

To Change Love Into The Currency Of Words

BENEDICT ANDREWS, DIRECTOR

All Patrick White's plays were experiments. They allowed him to try on disguises and test voices. He could be clown and satyr, mystic and poet. He could slow time and speed it. He could unpeel people, show their vegetable and animal selves, make their well-worn masks crack.

Australian theatre has never had better stage directions. White's are funny, concrete, mysterious. They teem with a novelist's eye for detail, but essentially, they are bodily. You feel him trying a character on for size, getting into dress ups. You sense tremors along invisible strings as if a child were playing with puppets. His characters jerk, tremble, choke, are punctured. One is described as having "grown rather soggy." Another wonderful instruction reads, "they cling to each other in the shadow of the fence, kissing freely, in joyful relief." Others clutch, vibrate, sweat at every pore, sleepwalk, and explode with joy.

In *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, from such minutiae, White constructed a theatrical treatment of overlapping lives. In the brick boxes of expanding early 60's Sydney suburbia, he confronted The Great Australian Emptiness. His response was a savage attack on Australian ways of life. His suburbia is a nightmare. A conservative, monocultural hell of stultification and judgement. Peering into the homes which underpinned the doctrine of the Menzies' government, he saw cultural disease and spiritual sickness.

His slice of suburbia with its three kitchens and backyards prefigures Australian television's coming portrayal of suburban lives on *Number 96*, or the cul de sac of *Neighbours'* Ramsay Street. Unlike the soaps, White sees the tremendous fragility and nakedness of life. He stages a mythic presentation of ordinary life. With scathing contempt and deep compassion he brings us close to hidden lives of the onstage community. He achieves what his character Roy Child longs for, "to change love into the currency of words."

In reference to her translations of *Euripides*, American poet Anne Carson writes,

"...what is the question of desire? I don't know. Something about its presumption to exist in human form. Human forms are puny. Desire is vast, absolute and oddly general. A big liquid washing through the universe, filling puny vessels here and there as it were arbitrarily, however it lights on them, swamping some, splitting others, casually ruinous..."

In *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, this shape-shifting force takes the glandular form of a bitch on heat. Over three sweltering Sydney summer days, her cries, howls, and whimpers fill the air of Mildred Street and get under the skins of its inhabitants. The effect is feverish, disorientating, and possessive. Cyclic processes of contagion, breeding, gestation, birth, and degeneration operate on micro, molecular levels, as well as on a cosmic, mythic plane. Like humming motors, female cycles of menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause drive phases of fertility and infertility, creation and destruction. They charge White's symphonic study of suburbia with hungers and pulses and infectious dreams.

Rehearsing in Robert Cousins' revolving model suburban house, has allowed us to get close to Patrick White's theatricality of lives rubbing against one another. Without a set which adheres to a strict

representation of three separate houses, we produce the synchronicity of the overlapping lives, we generate notions of private and public, inside and outside, visible and invisible. The play's machinic construction becomes located in the monolith of the Dream Home and the backyard becomes an empty stage.

The suburban home, as in the paintings of Howard Arkley, is viewed as shelter, incubator, and cultural artefact. It is one molecular cell which shows the body of society. It contains the DNA of the McMansion belt, and, of the neo-conservatism of Australia under John Howard where the threat of a rising interest rate will win elections and continue to breed that Great Australian Emptiness.

Contemporary at its 1962 Adelaide premiere, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* is now a kind of ghost play, a theatrical séance. Like the "great trees which continue to spread, never quite exorcised" over the back fences of Sarsaparilla, so the ghosts of a disappearing era return to haunt the onstage house. White's theatre sings with accents and voices layered deep in our culture and city.

Given its concern with cyclic processes of decay and regeneration, this play also posits questions of generational change. Today, Mildred Street's youngest inhabitant, baby Kevon Knott would be 45 years old. What are his aspirations? What stories does he tell? Where is his Sarsaparilla? Who lives there? And Pippy, who survives her first season of dogs in *The Season at Sarsaparilla* is now in her late 50s. What culture does she dream of? What world might she belong to?

Patrick White's Sarsaparilla

DAVID MARR

Patrick White's Castle Hill has disappeared under the high tide of Sydney's prosperity. But when he was living at the bottom of Showground Road in the 1950s, this was a place of broken down farms and fibro houses where a businessman, a chap in men's wear and a dunny man might live side by side with their wives and children and dogs. Under the alias of a native weed on his farm, White celebrated this outpost of Sydney in two great novels and his finest play, *The Season at Sarsaparilla*.

"I think this is the best season for sarsaparilla we have ever had at Sarsaparilla," he wrote as the play was going into rehearsal. "It is trying to smother all the shrubs near enough to the street fences, and I am superstitious enough to dislike hindering it. The day I had the last conference on the play ... a dog was trying to rape a bitch outside the gate as I set out for Sydney. So all the right omens are there!"

The stage was White's first love. He had been hanging round theatres since he was a little boy. His redoubtable mother Ruth, a Sydney first night fixture in diamonds and white fox, paid for Paddy's little plays to be performed in Darlinghurst in the 1930s. She dreamt her boy would be the next John Galsworthy. Back in Australia after the War, White had other models in mind: Ibsen, Chekhov, Dürrenmatt, Ghelderode, Genet and Brecht.

For Adelaide - the first Australian city bitten by the summer festival bug - White dragged from his desk a play he'd written years before in London. But *The Ham Funeral* was rejected by the respectable city's burghers. For months, artists, writers, critics, commentators and cartoonists rallied to White's aid. Battered by the rejection but inspired by a stoush being reported around the world, he sat down to write *The Season at Sarsaparilla*.

It poured out of him. To the task he brought all his contempt for the coy pretences of respectable Australia. The pack of dogs that roam the streets of Sarsaparilla tell the truth for all those who can face it: that our lives are governed by desire. He warned his ally Geoffrey Dutton that this "charade of suburbia" was going to shock even more than the last play, "as this one is purely Australian, and at the same time has burst right out of the prescribed four walls of Australian social realism."

White worked at full throttle, wanting to "blow off a lot of what I have been feeling about Australia". But he was also driven by a writer's fascination with lives lived up and down his street. From Pimlico to Centennial Park, White invented continuous domestic dramas playing behind his neighbours' closed doors. For raw material he needed only a few glimpses, an overheard remark and some shreds of gossip. He was another Girlie Pogson: "She don't need to come in. She was born with imagination. And a thousand ears."

This was a time of triumphs for White. The year or so between the conception of Sarsaparilla and its first performance in Adelaide in September 1962 saw the publication of *Riders in the Chariot* to international applause and then the premiere of *The Ham Funeral* on which the attention of the literary world was focused. Dutton declared it "a triumph of the imagination over mediocrity" but White knew the one coming was "ten times better as theatre".

Even the governor of South Australia was there for *Sarsaparilla*'s premiere, but White refused to dig out the dinner jacket he had packed away at the outbreak of the War "which has probably turned to lace by now". He hung back in the shadows. The audience stood for God Save the Queen, but wafting over their heads as they settled down in their seats came the theme from Blue Hills. There was a roar of recognition. The night ended in ovations. The season sold out at once.

"Even more important than the first night," White wrote "was the second, when people actually paid to stand!" He revelled in the commercial success of the play in both Adelaide and Melbourne. But his hometown was not so pleased to see itself exposed on stage in such tawdry splendour. *Sarsaparilla* limped along in Sydney, praised by the critics but mercilessly attacked by young Rupert Murdoch's Daily Mirror under a front page banner headline: "A PLAY THAT STINKS."

White was a Nobel Laureate, the Opera House was in business and Castle Hill had disappeared under mansions and shopping malls, before Sydney finally woke up. Jim Sharman's 1976 production – with Robyn Nevin's monstrous Girlie Pogson – established the play as an Australian classic and gave Patrick White the Sydney theatrical success he had been craving all his life. "Well," he wrote, "*Sarsaparilla* has been accepted at last."

Sarsaparilla

To return to *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, that is kind of a charade of suburbia, the season being a bitch's heat and running parallel to that is the incident of a suburban nymphomaniac. It is a kind of folk piece with overtones, except that the Australians will probably miss the latter.

Patrick White to Ben Huesch, *Patrick White Letters*

When Xanadu had been shaved right down to a bald rudimentary hill, they began to erect the fibro homes. Two or three days, or so it seemed, and there were combs of home clinging to the bare earth. The rotary clothes lines had risen, together with the Iceland poppies, and after them the glads. The privies were never so private that it was not possible to listen to the drone of someone else's blowflies. The water-falls of the new homes would rub together at night, and sleepers might have been encouraged to enter one another's dreams, if these had not been so familiar.

Riders in the Chariot,

Patrick White

The brick homes were in possession all right. Deep purple, clinker blue, ox blood, and public lavatory. Here the rites of domesticity were practised, it had been forgotten why, but with passionate, regular orthodoxy, and once a sacrifice was offered up, by electrocution, by vacuum cleaner, on a hot morning, when lantana hedges were smelling of cat.

Tree of Man,

Patrick White

Under A Blazing Sky

Interview with director Benedict Andrews

By Laura Scrivano

On a gloomy afternoon in Berlin, director Benedict Andrews ponders the landscape of Australian suburbia conjured in Patrick White's *The Season at Sarsaparilla*. He spoke to *Currents* about his vision for this powerful, compelling and lively play.

"The blinds were half drawn. It was greenish in there. Some people are perfectly still when left alone. They close their eyelids. But this one would be taking on a fresh shape. And what would her shape finally be, if not a light and a tinkling?"

The Tree of Man, Patrick White

The Season at Sarsaparilla is an Australian classic but what attracted you to the play as a director?

In *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, Patrick White invented a unique stage - his slice of suburbia with its three kitchens and backyards. This stage prefigures Australian televisions' portrayal of suburban lives on Number 96, or in the cul de sac of Ramsay Street. Unlike the deadening action of these soaps, White's stage achieves a mythic presentation of ordinary life. Unlike the soaps, he shows the tremendous fragility and nakedness of life. In the hallowed suburbs of Menzies' Australia, he envisages a hell of boxed-in lives, and he regards these lives with utter contempt and great compassion. The collision of these two views produces a great vibration in the play. It blurs nightmare and carnival, inside and outside, dream and reality, farce and banality. The play is very funny, very earthy, and penetratingly observant. Theatrically, I am interested in the unique way it places a community onstage. Politically, I am interested in how it lays bare the horror of conservative, middle class Australia and the processes of manufacturing suburbia.

Answering these questions on a gloomy afternoon in Berlin where the sun has set at 4.30pm, I am also reminded how I love that the play takes place under a huge, blazing sky. A great understanding of nature as an overwhelming, cyclic force pervades White's work. In *Sarsaparilla*, the howling bitch on heat effects everyone's lives and "the great trees continue to spread, never quite exorcised." Everyone is caught up in time's work, subject to its laws of decay and regeneration.

This will be your first time working with the STC Actors Company, how do you think that will effect the process of rehearsals and production?

I look forward to working with this ensemble of fine actors. Given this will be their fourth consecutive production together, I expect them to be well tuned to one another, theatrically fit, and ready to take up the challenges of this great play. From my work with ensemble actors at Berlin's Schaubühne, I know the benefits that a group of actors gain by working together full time. A shared language is able to develop even across a range of differing directorial styles, and the invisible things that an audience senses - ease, trust, and complicity - are simply better. There's an ESP at work onstage amongst actors which makes the exchange between audience and stage richer. This confidence in a group of actors is extremely valuable.

Another pleasure in working with a given ensemble of actors is casting. Just as it is a thrill for an audience to watch the actors of an ensemble take on different roles, it is also fun to cast from within a finite pool. Without open choice, the matching of actor and role can more readily avoid the external and become playful. The audience are let into the game too. In Patrick White, character is something of a tension between mask and hidden self - that dreamed self, remembered self, other missing self. There's a tension between a puppet-like figure and poetic soul. Between role and actor. This is a quality of his theatre that casting can toy with. In this spirit, I especially look forward to Peter Carroll embodying the spruce figure of Girlie Pogson.

What is your relationship with Patrick White's writing? Have you directed any plays of his before? What has been your exposure to his work and how will this affect your work on the play?

As my graduation piece at Flinders Drama Centre, I directed Patrick White's 1983 play *Netherwood*. The following year, I worked as Neil Armfield's assistant director on his Company B/STCSA production of *Night on Bald Mountain*. These were formative experiences in my work as a director. The prospect of returning to Patrick White's work gives me great delight. He is my favourite Australian writer. A visionary. His plays are an extraordinary, experimental body of work in Australian theatrical literature. They are lively, earthy, robust, and full of his great imagination, wit, and compassion. Neil has described Patrick White's stage as being "a child's doll's house, lit by the spooky glow of the footlights in which the ritual of a morality play is acted out." It combines a Strindbergian savagery with dusty, vaudevillian routines, and a distinctly Australian idiom.

Like so many of the characters in Patrick White's novels and plays haunted by their reflections in the mirror, his theatre enters the gap between how things appear and the terrifying, forceful mysteries behind them. His characters are both marionette-like figures and complicated bundles of longing and language. They demand actors with huge souls to play them. Or perhaps onstage they enlarge the soul of the actor. Grotesque and wonderful. Like Robyn Nevin in Miss Docker's fat suit. Or Julie Forsyth as Alma Lusty. Or Carol Skinner as Miss Quodling. Or Dan Spielman as the Ham Funeral's young poet. Or Ralph Cotterill with his feather duster as fussy Mrs Sibley.

***The Season at Sarsaparilla* was written in 1961, what do you think its relevance is to audiences today?**

The play was written at the end of the Menzies' era and portrays a climate of stultification, conformity, and repression. It contains the DNA structure of right wing Australia under Howard, and it examines lives in the brick boxes which parented the McMansion sprawls of contemporary Sydney. The aspirations of post-war middle-class Australia were carefully cultivated by Menzies to transform citizens into private consumers. Domesticity and a retreat from public affairs became an expression of one's citizenship. A boxed in Cold War security. Although, we now live as citizens of a free-trade economy and globally mediated world, suburbia is still the heart of our culture and politics. It is a heartland worth viewing again through White's eyes. Out of all the *Sarsaparilla* plays and stories, in this play White concerns himself with the conservatism of Australian suburbia. He imagines it as a nightmare, but portrays its inhabitants with great humour and frailty. His box theatre breathes with the dreams and secret lives of its community. He shows how people survive and suffer in everyday circumstances. How they get on making and unmaking their lives.

The Season at Sarsaparilla was written 10 years before I was born and so, although it might remind me of meals in my Nana's kitchen, I don't really approach it with any kind of nostalgia for the period. I am interested, however, in how it captures a memory of language and thought and manners that belong to another time. One that has been mostly lost. Upon which our new identities have been built. I find it interesting to think of a kind of exorcism of this lost time. Without sentimentality, but via the great love and scathing wit that White brings to the stage.

The play blends realistic and non-realistic modes of representation - what challenges will this present in terms of the style of production?

Chekhov said of his plays that "people sit down to their dinner, do nothing but eat their dinner and in the meantime their happiness may be being made or their lives destroyed." An interest in the rituals of ordinary life fills *The Season at Sarsaparilla*. White peers into the rooms and yards of three neighbouring houses on Mildred Street. He shows the inhabitants eating their egg breakfasts, reading their newspapers, staring from windows, washing up, watering the garden and so on. There's a special

love of the concrete and a respect for the silence of things, for the grace of ordinary life. And there is also the dream life of people and things which can lend the world a grotesque shadow or sudden poetry. As the doomed Julia Sheen observes, "Then, one morning you wake up. Dogs are barking. The sky is ablaze. People are asleep in other rooms. The furniture is so... wooden... It's suddenly terrifying." The challenge of course is to bring this alive with delicacy and vigor. To let different modes of playing bleed into one another. To rub the dreams of the characters against of the dreams of the audience.

The action is often detailed very clearly in the play - is this blueprint something you plan to follow?

The simultaneous presentation of the three backyards and kitchens envisaged in the stage directions generates a kind of machine for the play. This machine causes the lives lived in boxes to overlap, and it allows an overlapping of mundane routines and the dream-life of the play. Suburbia is built on a false assumption (a charade again) of privacy. The machine of the play evaporates this fallacy. All the little actions which White describes in such detail suggest a choreography of overlapping rituals. I plan to amplify this sense of simultaneous minutiae and to observe the consequences of the play's mechanics.

The subtitle of the play is "a charade of suburbia in two acts", Do you think this accurately reflects the play?

Patrick White also described the play as "a kind of folk piece with overtones." I like both descriptions very much. The concept of the charade is very useful. It suggests play acting, carnival and the rickety artifice of the puppet stage, but it also contains an idea of travesty. A concept which becomes interesting when applied to the brick boxes of suburbia and the quarter acre of the Australian dream. This dream becomes a nightmare. A tawdry show. A readily perceived pretense.

In *The Tree of Man*, Stan Parker's mother, an ancestor of all Sarsaparillians, "practiced neatness, as if she might tidy things up that way; only time and moths destroyed her efforts, and the souls of human beings which will burst out of any boxes they are put in." White's suburbia is a system of boxes which breed sameness and conservatism. His charade of suburbia shows another teeming world which threatens to spill from the characters' dreams, which looks back from their mirrors, and which whirls away in the razzle-dazzle of time. White's charade is part carnival, part nightmare. Its twin acts allow him to elaborate patterns of ritual and repetition, and to suggest a change of season, or subtle shift in cycle.

The Designer

ROBERT COUSINS

Patrick White envisaged a stage with three houses and backyards that would give audiences a sense of eavesdropping on their neighbours. However, Robert Cousins's set features a single house on a revolving stage, with some of the action taking place behind glass and on camera or picked up by microphones.

Cousins has designed the set to evoke a sense of the artificiality of suburban existence. It is a generic blond brick-veneer home. It has picture windows and some walls are glass. Large video screens project long shots and close-ups of action picked up by surveillance cameras inside the rooms. There are no yards, no fences and no clunky old Sunbeam Mixmasters. The actual spatial ownership of the kitchen in the set is unclear; the female characters prepare vegetables over the same sink!

The three households are not differentiated visually in Cousins' set. The focus is on how the families interlace in Andrews' production. The set, a generic Australian suburban house, emphasises the play as a portrait of claustrophobia and the nightmare of suburbia with its overlapping lives.

See the definitive text on stage design in this country, Kristen Anderson and Imogen Ross' ***Performance Design in Australia***, Craftsman House Sydney, 2001.

About the Play

A Charade of Suburbia in Two Acts

Setting: Mildred Street, Sarsaparilla, a fictitious outer suburb of Sydney, summer, 1961, three houses and three backyards, a pregnant wife, a nosey neighbour and a post office boy in love.

It's late 1960, it's summer and the 'lady dogs' – as Girlie Pogson so politely refers to them – in Mildred Street are on heat.

Three families – the Boyles, the Pogsons and the Knotts – eke out a normal existence in this newly-minted, dusty city fringe. But normalcy belies the secrets and lust, the beauty, hypocrisy, repression, malevolence and terrible innocence. And today the apparently mundane will become both hilarious and terrifying.

The Season at Sarsaparilla is a powerful, comical and prophetic play. Exposing with love and vitriol the obsessions of everyday Australians, it led the way, in style and substance, for Australian theatre for years to come.

Patrick White, our pre-eminent storyteller, often turned his keen eye on ordinary everyday Australia. *The Season At Sarsaparilla* depicts its astounding depth.

Reference: May-Brit Akerholt's analysis of *The Season at Sarsaparilla* in Philip Parsons (ed), *Companion to Theatre In Australia*, Currency Press Sydney 1995, p.519

"*The Season at Sarsaparilla* subtitled." *A Charade of Suburbia in Two Acts*" is generally regarded as Patrick White's most accessible play. A poetic satire, it examines, indicts and celebrates the cycle of birth, copulation and death, demonstrating in the families of a businessman, a salesman and a sanitary man how demands of the blood defeat the civilizing forces of art and education.

The satire explores society's automatic acceptance of conventions, embrace of mediocrity and celebration of conformity. The sixteen characters represent a cross-section of suburbia, with a poet, Roy Childs as chorus observing and taking part in the action – e.g. Roy points out in Act Two: "In Mildred Street there's practically no end to the variations on monotony. The Iceland poppies replace the glads, the dahlias take their turn with the chrysanthus. At weekends, Pogsons are painting their house a shade of French-grey they've seen on someone else's. Boyles are indulging in a daring splash of red. Nothing stands still. Not in the razzle-dazzle of time. People are splattered and splashed by it, of course. But for the most part, not very dangerously. So the men of Mildred Street continue on their way...out, in..., out....Supported by Hire Purchase, the splendid climate, and their Australian extrovert temperament, they are able to lead the Good Life. Some of them have even sent the population up."

Rapid shifts between realistic and stylized dialogue reveal the characters' inner longings and dreams (pp.136-140), and dramatise the monotony of their endless routines as their actions and impulses follow the round of the seasons. The characters' dilemma is reflected in the setting – three adjoining houses, near-identical suburban boxes that offer no escape." – heightened in this production through the use of 16 surveillance cameras. Beneath the suburban surface are layers of dangerous vitriol and deceptions.

Representations

Let us look at *The Season at Sarsaparilla* as a representational play, using Brian Moon's concept of representation.

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

"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 White is (re)presenting us with believable characters and their stories.

Representations: the Australian suburban dream, conformity, hypocrisy, deception, lust, repression, adolescence, birth, death, the 1960s, love, betrayal and malevolence.

Characters

N.B. *Italics indicate Patrick White's descriptions of each character from his stage directions.*

Each of the three families represented has different backgrounds and needs.

- Clive Pogson** a business executive, sells Holdens – the respectable family of the play. *Round fifty. A rather thick-set business bull – a minor one, but he will probably never know that.*
- Girlie Pogson** Clive's wife, the local busybody – *a small spruce woman in her forties. Not a hair out of place, and never will be. Everything must be nice, even if you pay the price. Mrs Pogson wears all the marks of anxiety and a respectable social level.* Girlie believes anyone who leads life differently from her is wrong. She always goes on about her past in Rosedale, which represents her lost paradise. She says "In Rosedale, when I was a girl, I'd lend a hand by second nature." Later she echoes this when she offers to help Mavis "Always oblige a neighbour if I can." In Act Two she again harps, "When we were girls at Rosedale, we were taught just how far a person may go, in conversation, or ...life. We were educated to look at things ethically." There is a sense that she has married down to Clive. Girlie tells her husband in Act Two, "Sometimes I think you've changed, Clive...that you don't care for me any more." To which he replies: "Your trouble, Girlie: you think a honeymoon can be made to last twenty years." She reminds Clive "we're the parents of two young and impressionable girls." Girlie tells Judy, her elder daughter, "I often wonder whether everyone is happy. Everybody ought to be. There's nothing to make them un-happy." Ern calls Girlie "that prissy old cow from next door," to which Nola adds, "She don't need to come in. She was born with imagination. And a thousand ears." She is one of the women trapped behind the glass of the windows of the houses; querulous, house-proud.
- Judy Pogson** The daughter of Clive and Girlie. She is studying the violin, has artistic notions about herself – *plays with a touch that is not exactly brilliant – yet studies at the Con – about 18. A tea-rose. Very pretty and sweet. Rather withdrawn and tentative.* She is Roy's girlfriend and then later Ron Suddard's. Judy tells Roy in Act Two: "We shall never see anything through each other's eyes." She big notes herself with Ron: "In the whole of Sarsparilla, nobody knows as much as us." Roy tells us in Act Two that Judy "seems to have struck it pretty good. Whether she's struck the best, only time, that lovely and distorting razzle-dazzle, will show....through the sunny Australian climate, and the rain of politicians' promises."
- Joyleen Pogson (Pippy)** –Clive and Girlie's inquisitive little girl, wise beyond her years; she is on the cusp of puberty and knowledge – *a forthright and astute small girl.* Her mother calls her a "bold little girl....you are the rudest little girl!" in Act One. Her neighbours, like Mavis, realise Pippy is growing up: "You're changing Pippy. Always running around the streets. A real little larrikin.....You're a big little girl." Joyleen tells Nola in Act Two about her parents: "I do what I want, you know. I only let them think I don't." In Act One she is fascinated by the local dogs on heat, but she loses interest in them in Act Two. Pippy learns about their significance from Nola. Pippy would be 55 if she was living today.

Deedree Ingpen

Slightly younger than her friend Pippy, more innocent, easily put upon; Deedree is the eternal stooge. Pippy tells her mother, "Deedree's backward. Deedree's stupid. I don't know why I put up with Deedree, except we've gone and got used to each other."

Ernie Boyle

A sanitary man – he is in his forties, but very active. An obviously good-natured, innocent and generous male, who respects and depends on 'the women folk..' He is happy to be free. Masson says of his old war mate Ernie: "I think I meant a lot to Ernie. We were in some pretty tough spots" in the war.... Ern feels more than 'e ever lets on." Ernie and Rowley represent the bonds of post-war friendship. The Boyles are the childless couple of the play. Ernie reels when he realises that Nola and Digger have been having an affair under his nose.

Nola Boyle

Ernie's his wife, an earthy sexpot; in her forties, she is often dressed in a chenille dressing-gown. Generous of figure. Tawny of head. A lioness. Stretching and yawning... sounds hoarse, but comforting. Nola says "a sanitary lady's life is not all roses." Pippy says "my mother can't stick Mrs Boyle. But Dad says she's generous." Nola tells Digger that she and Ern tried to have children "but they wasn't in our line." Tells Ern in Act Two, "The terrible thing about a conscience is it don't stay with you all the time. It walks out, and lets you down. When you're weak.... I'm weak. There are times when the flesh lies too easy on your bones. When even the air tickles your skin, in the places where it can get at you most."

Julia has flagged us with a question about Nola's sexuality previous to this when she asks Roy, "Who is the sanitary man's wife sleeping with this year? Or is it week?" Nola says somberly in Act Two, "Some bitches are lucky enough to escape. Some of the time. I mean, it's lucky for those street bitches. What'd they do with a lot of pups? Just roaming around. After they're turned out." Nola says to Ern in Act Two, "We know I'm about as barren as an old boot."

*After a deep and meaningful conversation with her husband in Act Two, White states the following stage direction: "She is taking the deep breaths of somebody returning to life." Roy tells us in Act Two that Nola, "the sanitary man's wife is sad. She's between her times. Something has ended, and nothing has begun." Nola represents the entrapped woman. As David Marr points out in *Patrick White – A Life*, "Girlie is initiating.... Pippy in the respectable lies that rule her existence. But the Pogson's efforts...are undone by Nola Boyle, motherly, candid and sexually charged. Pippy learns from this suburban nymphomaniac what the dogs are up to and watches, half-comprehending, Nola's adultery with Digger Masson."*

Harry Knott

In men's wear – a young man, probably younger than he looks, but responsibilities have been thrust upon him early. He is wearing his business pants, well-pressed, and beautifully laundered white shirt. Arm-bands. There is nothing distinctive about him. The Knotts are the least fraught of the three families.

Mavis Knott	Harry's very pregnant wife, <i>a bit miserable and fretful, though normally she would be a placid, acceptant young woman. Neither pretty nor plain. The average, decent suburban wife.</i> Her brother Ropy lives with them. She says "Used to think you (Harry, her husband was so awful as a boy... Such a streak! All those pimples.)" Nola thinks Mavis was "always a decent, dumb cow. One of the lucky ones. She'll settle down to it (motherhood) like shelling peas." She is full of joy and love.
Roy Child	Is Mavis' restless brother, a teacher, poet and discontented soul, acts as the Chorus in the play; he lives with the Knotts and is Judy Pogson's boyfriend for a time. White describes <i>in his early twenties. Very casually dressed. Very casual. In the course of the play his brashness should disclose a certain sensitivity underneath (a self-portrait of Patrick White?)</i> He feels the need to leave teaching to compose "the book I've got to write." He says to Judy in Act Two, "The trouble is: "when it comes to the point, you've got to help yourself." He is on holidays in the course of the play; sleeps during the day.
Rowley Masson (Digger)	A mate who fought with Ern in the Western Desert in WWII and now a truck driver. Ern tells his wife "I don't think Rowley ever sticks at anything for long." <i>A handsome man in his forties. A bit seedy, battered. Good features of the hatchet variety. The Digger type.</i> Ern tells Nola "Digger seems sort of mixed up." Tells Nola "My trouble is: I never had a woman I liked. But tried often enough." Nola and Digger have an adulterous affair under Ernie's nose.
Julia Sheen	Is a model, sleek – <i>she is glorious. Perfectly dressed. Perfectly slim. Long legs, neck. A pencil parasol. Any position she takes will be the artificial pose of the model. A slight coloratura parody vocally at first.</i> Roy thinks she's "all show. But what a show!" Actor Helen Thompson says her character Julia represents the outsider or the <i>other</i> in the play; Also the city. She has a dalliance with Roy, as well as a disastrous affair with Mr Erbage.
Mr Erbage	A corrupt alderman type who wants to be a councilor – <i>middle fifties. He is both self-conscious and self-satisfied.</i> Has a disastrous dalliance with Julia.
Ron Studdards	A post-office clerk – <i>a decent fellow. About 21. He is a mixture of the diffident and the determined.</i> Slowly but steadily pursues Judy for a relationship.
Two Ambulance Men	Take Mavis to hospital.

Before Seeing The Production, Explore These Questions:

Questions For Students Who Haven't Read The Play

1. **Research** the 1960s in Australia. Prepare a timeline of significant events.
2. Read other Australian plays or screenplays either written or set in the 1960s. Can you see stylistic and thematic connections between these plays and *The Season at Sarsaparilla* ?
3. What would you include in the programme for a play about three families from different socioeconomic backgrounds in suburban Sydney in 1961?
4. A portrait of six characters from *The Season at Sarsaparilla* features in the publicity campaign for the play. Clip the ad for the production from the Amusement Section of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

What can you tell about the play from this STC marketing image of the play?

5. Read the following song lyrics by Malvina Reynolds:

LITTLE BOXES

1. Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky,
Little boxes, little boxes,
Little boxes, all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same.

2. And the people in the houses
All go to the university,
And they all get put in boxes,
Little boxes, all the same.
And there's doctors and there's lawyers
And business executives,
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same.
[these lyrics found on <http://www.completealbumlyrics.com>]

3. And they all play on the golf-course,
And drink their Martini dry,
And they all have pretty children,
And the children go to school.
And the children go to summer camp
And then to the university,
And they all get put in boxes
And they all come out the same.
4. And the boys go into business,
And marry, and raise a family,
And they all get put in boxes,
Little boxes, all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same.

What does this lyric tell you about life in the suburbs, including the sameness of its architecture?

Questions For Students Who Have Read The Play

1. **Playbuild** around the themes of:

- **disillusionment**
- **pretence**
- **the distance between the myth and reality of family life.**
- **betrayal**

2. What does the title tell you about the play? Collect as many quotes from the play as you can find about various characters' responses to the dogs and their season.

3. Australian artist Howard Arkley's paintings of 1960s suburban homes have greatly inspired Robert Cousin's set for this production. Surf the net or look in art books or magazines for examples of Arkley's works. What similarities can you see between them?

4. Outline in detail what you perceive the essential preparation for any of the actors in Benedict Andrew's production of *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, particularly acting on a stage with cameras and body microphones involved as well as a shared, generic, domestic set.

After Seeing The Production, Explore These Questions

Questions for students who hadn't read the play

1. Having seen *The Season at Sarsaparilla* can you now see how the marketing image relates to Benedict Andrew's production? Can you identify each of the six characters on the flyer?
 2. What expectations did you have before seeing this production? What changed for you after seeing it?
 3. Can you relate the representation of suburban life in Sydney in the 1960s in the play tour context today? Compare and contrast.
 4. *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, involving live video footage.)
 5. *Design* - What mood does the set evoke from the out-set of the play? How does this alter at different times in the production? (e.g. the representation of the *razzle dazzle* at various points in the play)
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Questions for students who had read the play

1. **Sketch** Robert Cousin's revolving set and list all the (minimal) props; e.g. chairs, kitchen table, Mixmaster etc.
2. **Discuss** the impact the character changes had on the audience's experience of the play.
3. How did the actors use the space to convey the shifts in character and narrative and time?
4. How does lighting contribute to the mood of the scenes? What effect do these lighting states achieve? List some that were used.
5. How does live Hammond organ music and other sound design (e.g. humanized dog barking) contribute to the production?

Bibliography

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Judith Gadaloff, *Australian Drama*, The Jacaranda Press, Queensland, 1991

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Filmography

John Duigan (director) *The Year My Voice Broke* Australia 1987 - affecting story of a teenage boy's friendship and infatuation with a troubled girl, set in a small rural town in Victoria in the early 1960's. Followed by a sequel, set in 2 neighbouring boarding schools, *Flirting*, which features the seemingly endless thrashing of Danny Embling by a sadistic Brother.

Fred Schepisi, *The Devil's Playground*, Australia 1976 - young boys reaching puberty while boarders in a Roman Catholic school; meanwhile their teachers, the Christian Brothers, have problems of their own. Starring Arthur Dignam, Nick Tate, Simon Burke, John Frawley.

Kate Woods (director) *Looking for Alibrandi*, Australia 2000 - rites of passage of Italian Australian teenager, Josephine Alibrandi.

Television

Neighbours
Home and Away

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Web Sites

<<www.sydneytheatre.com.au>>

<<www.theaustralian.com.au/schools>> This site lets you have your say in Forum, an online debate on educational matters.

<<www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>>

<<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>>>

<<<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

Critical Responses And Articles

Rosalie Higson, "The Way We Were," in *The Australian*, February 17, 2007

BLOND brick veneer. Cross-dressing. Surveillance cameras. A new production of The Season at Sarsaparilla promises to take Patrick White's play about Australian suburbia in the 1960s to a very different place.

Some things won't change -- the howling of dogs chasing a bitch on heat, for instance, that is the background to the action -- but director Benedict Andrews is not interested in museum theatre or in received notions about approaching a given writer.

The Season at Sarsaparilla opens on March 2 at the Sydney Opera House, performed by the Sydney Theatre Company's Actors Company. It is 30 years since the play was performed in White's home town.

Early morning, harbourside, Andrews sips a heart-starting coffee before beginning another long day in the rehearsal rooms at the Wharf Theatre. He has been back in Australia only a few weeks and looks weary. On January 5 he was in Berlin, where he directed the premiere of a new play by Marius von Mayenburg, with whom he frequently collaborates, at the Schaubuhne am Lehninger Platz. Andrews directed von Mayenburg's play *Eldorado* in Melbourne last year, then went straight to Berlin for rehearsals with the German actors.

"To return to such an Australian tongue and to such a Sydney play, I thought there might not have been enough time to get into that world," Andrews says. Then he came back to a sweltering, sticky summer and one morning rode his bike through the suburbs to swim at Clovelly beach: "Just like Roy does in the play, where he comes back smelling of salt and sun. And I thought, 'I get it'."

Andrews was keen on reviving *Sarsaparilla* because many of his formative theatrical experiences were with White's work, which introduced him to Australian modernism after a diet of Beckett, Genet and the left-wing Royal Court mob during his Flinders University days in the early '90s. His graduation play -- and first piece of Australian theatre -- was White's *Netherwood*, which led him to all of White's books for the first time. "I began to fall in love with his work. I felt like I was discovering a new language, which was completely familiar but somehow very, very strange. I learned a lot of words -- I was an Adelaide boy -- sassafras and things like that. There was this vernacular in his writing, but then this clown and a satirist. Very familiar and at the same time mythic."

In 1996, Andrews assisted on Neil Armfield's production of White's *Night on Bald Mountain*: "I started to see this notion of the Patrick White stage as an enchanted doll's house, with the actors being marionettes, not superficially in that they act like puppets, but a metaphysical and theatrical notion. Through White, Armfield opened up an Australian idiom on the stage."

He also wanted to work with the STC Actors Company. "It was a pretty exciting proposition. I think it's great for this ensemble to work in an Australian vernacular and the kind of song that's in Patrick White's language. Also, it's a wonderful piece for an ensemble: it's about putting a community on stage but the technical demands of the piece mean you need great actors to carry the roles. All of the roles, no matter how big, need big souls to fill them."

The Season at Sarsaparilla is set in a fictional Australian suburb and peers through the windows into the lives of three families, the Boyles, the Pogsons and the Knotts, in their neighbouring boxy homes. It is the height of summer and in the background is the sound of the dogs.

In Andrews's production Pamela Rabe plays earthy sexpot Nola Boyle, with Brandon Burke as her husband Ernie, the nightsoil man. The respectable Pogson family has John Gaden as father Clive, Amber McMahon as the inquisitive little girl Pippy and Hayley McElhinney as her older sister Judy. Their

querulous, houseproud mother Girlie will be played by Peter Carroll. The Knotts are Emily Russell and Martin Blum, with Eden Falk as the restless brother Roy. Other roles are taken by Alan John, Colin Moody, Emily Russell, Dan Spielman and Helen Thomson.

White is present in all his creations, Andrews says. "In the best of his plays he puts himself into drag and dress-up so you get the writer splintered through all of the characters. There are wonderful Australian writers for the stage but I can't think of anyone who has such a distinctive voice.

"Sometimes that voice is as a mimic, and there's a mixture of absolutely scathing contempt and deep compassion."

White remains a divisive literary figure. Australia's only Nobel laureate for literature, he has passionate supporters as well as those who dismiss him as yesterday's man. During his lifetime, although he was acclaimed overseas, it was only grudgingly that the Australian public began to buy his books. Today his wordy, meandering, poetical style, which mixes earthy humour with notions of the sublime, is out of favour with readers.

It was this newspaper that sent publishers a chapter of his book, *The Eye of the Storm*, under a different name: it was unanimously rejected and none of the publishers recognised his prose.

But White hated the "dun-coloured realism" of most Australian fiction and in his eight plays he wanted make an Australian theatre where the actors did not have to shout to make their intentions known to the audience.

"He is not a textbook dramatist, which I really like, particularly with the first couple of plays, which have the sense of being experiments about them, whether that's the histrionic, expressionist puppet show of *The Ham Funeral* or the experiment of putting a community on stage as in *Sarsaparilla*," Andrews says.

Sarsaparilla was written in the early '60s and premiered in Adelaide in 1962. At the time the writer lived at the then semi-rural Castle Hill outside Sydney and used the neighbourhood as a template for his observations about Australia, the country he both loved and hated, and Australians, about whom he also felt rather ambivalent. White turned Parramatta into Barren Ugly and Castle Hill into Sarsaparilla: His novel *Riders in the Chariot* was also set in Sarsaparilla and he published several books, plays and short stories depicting the town. Barry Humphries says that life in Australia worked on White "like a kind of irritant which produced those works of art".

Sarsaparilla is a comment on the conservative Menzies era, on the creeping encroachment of suburbia, the corruption of government, the destruction of the bush and what White called the great Australian emptiness. By turns lacerating and compassionate, White has his characters weave a sort of modernist dance between three families and their suburban houses and back yards.

"I love the fact that it is slightly dated," Andrews says. "I've never done a period piece. I've done plays that are meant to be set in the past but they haven't been period pieces." At the time the piece was written, the US and Australia had post-war capitalism and conservative governments in common.

The advent of television was creating a new type of consumer, and a new home in the suburbs was what everyone wanted. White called them boxes; so did Californian songwriter Malvina Reynolds in her '60s hit *Little Boxes*: "They're all made out of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same." she wrote.

"I look at this as a kind of DNA of the new Australia and the terrible nightmarish conservatism of Australia under (John) Howard, and the complicity of Australians in their own ... let's say emptiness again: conservatism, stupefaction. To look at the play as the DNA of this is fascinating," Andrews says.

Andrews was born in 1972, 10 years after the play was written, and doesn't share an earlier generation's nostalgia for the period's lino floors and Mixmasters, with dutiful wives cleaning the house and cooking endless dinners. "The women in the '50s were often imprisoned within these houses," he says. The play reminds him of images from the American painter Edward Hopper or the repeated scene in the films of Douglas Sirk, where a woman stands at a glass window, looking out.

So it was easy to move away from the conventional staging of *Sarsaparilla*. "White's directions to mime: I think that can be a bit of a crusted convention," Andrews says, rising to imitate an actor opening and closing an imaginary, creaking garden gate. "On the other hand it's part of the theatrical language that you want to reinvent."

For the Actors Company, designer Robert Cousins has built a generic blond brick-veneer home on a revolving stage.

It has picture windows and some walls are of glass. Large video screens project long shots and close-ups of action picked up by surveillance cameras inside the rooms. There are no yards, no fences and no clunky old Mixmasters.

"Part of my notion of theatre is that it's not a museum, you have to find your own way into it," Andrews says. "Whether approaching a text that is 2000 years old or two days old, as director I strive to discover the text for the first time, to X-ray its insides and release its mysteries and demons. I try to explore ideas about what it feels like to be alive, to ask questions about power, sexuality, death, love and other wonders. I search for very personal connections between myself and the work. Otherwise it is a dead thing."

Now read some of the publicity articles and reviews of Benedict Andrew's production of ***The Season at Sarsaparilla*** and jot down in 2 columns points you agree/ disagree with. Give reasons for your choices.

Look at these and other reviews and articles of this production.

How do each of the writers respond to the play and this particular production?

Do the writers say anything about the STC's intentions in producing *The Season at Sarsaparilla*?

Writing a review: Read some of the reviews from the Sydney revival season of *The Season at Sarsaparilla*: note how the reviewer describes the elements of the production and analyses the connections between these elements. Try to be as objective as possible.

Include: Directorial decisions

Acting techniques used by the actors

Design choices

Overall strengths and weaknesses of the production.

Reviewing

A guideline for reviewing productions, possibly for a log book in Drama or as a journal entry in English.

If you attend a play, film, concert, opera, musical, school production, etc. - write about it critically.

1. Did you enjoy it? Why?
2. What was good or effective? What was bad or didn't communicate with you?
3. How is a good production, and this one in particular, achieved?
4. Did the rest of the audience enjoy it?
5. Was the plot communicated clearly?
6. Was the acting good? (What is good acting?)
7. Set and costumes: Credible? Bad or good? Too much or too little? If the set and costumes play too much of a part in the drama, this is considered an imposing or negative thing.
8. Was the play convincing, dull, funny, hilarious, dark, mediocre? Why? Why not?
9. Was the script/play credible?