



Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

Ray Lawler (1950's)

Perhaps like many of us, you last studied the play 'Summer of the seventeenth doll' (or now known more fondly as 'The Doll') when you were at school. If so, you may be thinking that you know the play well and wish you did not have to do it all over again in this unit. But I urge you to rethink and to reassess your view of the play - to approach it with open and new eyes, to enter into the spirit of journeying through the play willing to explore its dramaturgical dimensions with a different perspective than when you were at school. If on the other hand, the play is entirely new to you than I believe you will undoubtedly enjoy reading and working with the play - I still believe (after many years of teaching this play) that it is a wonderful and unique piece of quintessential Australian theatre history. I would like you to consider the play from a number of different angles:

- the play as a piece of Australian playwriting
- the play as a mirror of an emerging new 50's Australian society
- the play as a mirror of the Australian character and ideals - a sociological exploration if you like
- a challenge to the legend of the bush, the old order where the Australian male truly was considered a legendary masculine figure
- the concept of aging and the reassessment of dreams

Exploring the play using the former areas as guides is helpful in deciphering some of the more contentious issues and debates surrounding the play over the years. I have provided you with two readings (Cousins 1987 and Ferrari 1999) which provide some insight into the diverse perspectives of the play both as a piece of theatre and as a cultural and sociological discourse. But for now we will look at the play from a variety of angles, an invitation for you to think deeply about the work and form some opinions of your own.

I would like to begin with a quote from Peter Holloway (1981) who describes the 'Doll' in the following terms:

"Summer of the seventeenth doll" is concerned with what should be a wildly exciting annual reunion bubbling with happiness which instead falls flat and proves to be the last of seventeen such occasions. Thus, appropriately, it begins in a mood of gaiety and joyful anticipation but ends in disillusion and bitterness. (p.204)

This sense of an endpoint is an important one for considering the doll as a mirror of a changing society and a signal of movement from one way of life to another. It is to this point we will return soon but first, let us consider the play as a piece of theatre.

The play as theatre

The play written in 1955, provided a significant spotlight for Australian theatre in international terms. For the first time, an Australian play drew serious attention from overseas observers and critics as an important piece of theatre writing. The play has been described by some as a well-written, superbly constructed piece of work. Its use of realistic props, stage business, its fine balance of text and sub-text, its grasp of rhythms of the spoken Australian language and its use of space and lighting was superior to that of earlier plays.

Holloway (1981) describes the play as a combination of melodrama and humour - significant elements of the dominant earlier style of playwriting. Indeed, there is an interesting mixture of joviality and lightheartedness contrasted against heightened tragic emotion - in particular the closing scene is a powerful example of melodrama where Olive refusing the marriage proposal from Roo drags herself out of the room. Roo, devastated by the end of a dream, numbly sits with his face in his hands, a beaten and dispirited figure.

But it was this juxtaposition of the melodramatic and naturalistic which has posed problems for other critics (see readings provided) who felt the exploration of the 'myth' of the outback stereotypical man set against the naturalistic suburban scene brought with it a myriad of contextual and stylistic difficulties.

Despite the overtones of melodrama, Lawler's play was still heralded as one of the first naturalistic Australian plays offering its audiences rich local idiom and culture in a recognisable and popular setting. It was enthusiastically described by one critic as, 'the first play about Melbourne that Melbourne has seen.' (in Carroll 1985) (For further analysis on this subject, refer to the provided readings)

The play as a mirror for an emerging society/a challenge to the old order through the development of characterisation

Lawler's play did not simply reflect the masculinist images so popular in Australian cultural history since colonisation but rather intrinsically reassessed the contextual framework in which these images were grounded. The play's narrative provided a closer look at what happens when the 'outback' hero, the seemingly stoic and physically strong male protagonist, begins to age, to show signs of fragility and vulnerability in a time of change and uncertainty. What then happens to the dream? Fitzgerald (1979) describes it thus:

(the doll) was itself the agent and myth; and after analyses like Russell Ward's "The Australian legend," the stereotype of the outback hero and the rites he evolved to cope with a hostile environment, could not easily be assented to as representative of a present Australian reality. (in Cousins 1987, p.3, Copy provided from Internet)

Lawler's play provided what Carroll (1985) refers to as a more 'critical attitude' of the old Australian order. To give you some historical background (albeit briefly), in the 1950's Australia was faced with a post-war situation where the country realised it could no longer look to Britain as its major ally for defense and support.

There was a recognised need for the nation to increase its population (the populate or perish ideology) and to establish its own defense force and economic independence.

A new decade of defensive nationalism resulted in a 'xenophobic' nation (one fearful of foreigners and strangers) facing difficulty in coming to terms with the changing face of the Australian nation. A surge of immigration meant the old Australianist attitudes made way for new cultural and societal ideas and directions and so in turn, the old national identity - the Australian 'legend' ideal declined. Carroll (1985) extends on this point:

For Australia, the 1950's was essentially a decade of defensive nationalism in the face of new contact with outsiders..and a new intake of outsiders and a new intake of citizens which at first Australians did not really know how to assimilate in the best plays of the 1950's, the protagonists were often older individuals who have a deep commitment to the older Australianist images of identity and conduct.' (pg.105)

So then, how does the play 'The Doll' reflect such changes? Firstly, the dominant theme in the play is about change, the pathos of 'growing old'. It is set against a romanticised past exploring the love affairs of two cane cutters who come south to Melbourne for five months in the lay off season. It is here in suburban Carlton, that their women have waited for the past sixteen years. These two 'outback men,' Roo and Barney, epitomise freedom, mateship; toughened 'bushmen' who make their money labouring under the Australia sun. They represent a metaphor for the great Australian past, a country of freedom, of wide open spaces where 'men'

could roam at will whilst their women waited for them at home.

But this year, things have changed. Past experiences, those of the last sixteen years are immediately challenged with the opening of the play. Nancy, who has long been there with Olive waiting for Barney, has married a book clerk (a 'soft' city man) and Olive is left desperate to fill the void left by Nancy's departure. Another barmaid, a friend of Olives named Pearl, replaces her for this summer but it is immediately a relationship of tension. Pearl represents the 'new', a woman not easily swept away by the so called romance of the past which Olive has described so enthusiastically to her on the first night. Pearl is not taken in by what is on offer. She is not willing to accept what Barney has to offer her - unlike Nancy she perhaps sees Barney for what is really is, an aging larrakin who has difficulty settling down. She wants security (like the nation itself) and direction and rejects the old. In many ways Pearl is blamed for the failure of the seventeenth summer - if she had only been more yielding, everything would have been just like before! Pearl is the metaphor for the changing nation, the old to the new, the myth facing the reality.

In Olive, we see a woman desperately trying to hang on to the past, to stand still, to remain stagnant. Living in the myth of the past, she is like a small child who clings to her kewpie dolls for security and comfort. It is in Olive that we so poignantly witness the tragic consequences of inertia and denial. Act one unravels for us the intensity of this commitment to Roo and the past and the ultimate Australianist codes it stand for. In Act two, we see the importance of a man's commitment to his mates and to himself - Roo is portrayed as the physical 'king' of the northern cane fields whilst Barney is represented as the great lover. It is in the final scene that Lawler most powerfully deconstructs the Australian myth where Roo is left a broken man. There will be no more of what went before, the cane cutting is finished with Roo usurped by the stronger and younger Dowd. Olive, emotionally deficit, staggers away with Emma, her mother, demanding the men leave the house.

It is important here now to mention the characters of Bubba and Dowd for it is they who act as metaphors for the younger and changing Australia. Bubba who has always regarded Roo and Barney as icons of real men is attracted to Dowd because of the way he reminds her of her adopted 'uncles'. She declares to Roo and Barney that she will have what they had but it will be better, more 'real' as she puts it. (Carroll 1985) Certainly it is ironic that Dowd is the one to take Roo's place as 'cane cocky' but also as the new leading man in Bubba's life. Carroll (1985) describes Dowd in the following way:

Compared to his older role model (Roo), Dowd is more willing to reasonably compromise, more self aware, more willing to expose his vulnerability. He treads Bubba as an adult insisting on using her real name, Kathie, which contrasts with the way Roo has always involuntarily perpetuated Olive's childishness. (pg.112)

This discussion is not complete in itself. Rather it is meant as a springboard for your understanding of the play, to supplement the lecture and the provided readings and not to replace them. The readings you have been provided with will help you explore issues further with more depth and clarity. Undoubtedly 'The doll' will have some kind of effect on you. Hopefully you will see the play for the unique piece of Australian theatre that it is, appreciating the complexity of the piece in terms of sub-plots and sub-text and the unraveling of characters whose traits are familiar to us all. I would urge you to consider all these former points as you move through the play now with actor's eyes and strive to explore the metaphors which make the play so powerful and unforgettable.

References

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