

Academicising the Stage

David Williamson, Dead White Males, directed by Wayne Harrison and presented by the Sydney Theatre Company, 1995

Reviewed by Roger Sandall

There was a time when a theatre program gave you the cast of characters, mug shots and CVs of the leading players, and let you be. But not any more. After the usual BMW advertisement the hapless playgoer at *Dead White Males* is confronted with a ten-page background briefing in separate chapters — The Bard; a User's Guide to Post-Structuralism; Is The Shrew Sexist?; the Big Debate on Post-Structuralism versus Liberal Humanism; plus Virginia Woolf's conjectures about a hypothetical female Shakespeare — followed by the playwright's thanks to his wife, who 'was particularly encouraging and helpful, as were Don Anderson, Angela Browne, Brian Kiernan and Keith Windshuttle'.

All of which is ominous. After the politicisation of the academy, must we now endure the academicisation of the stage? Williamson's play is a vigorous attack on the schools of indictment now popular on the academic left, and since he wants to be taken seriously by university people an aggressive display of scholarship is excusable. But it looks to me as if the playwright has become the victim of too many sources, too many ideas, and too many personal influences. I'd be surprised to learn of any new play anywhere in the English-speaking world in which the author tries to get such a load of passionate notions off his chest — and so signally fails to make dramatic sense of them all.

First there's a defence of Shakespeare against the charge of being no more than a patriarchal ideologue. Shakespeare's art, Williamson affirms, does what all great critics have always said it did: it shows timeless features of human nature refracted through the glass of his own society and age. Next there's a portrait of the kind of modern academic who trades marks for sex, raves endlessly on about the evils of the 'dominant ideology', is neurotically fearful of biology and regards even the mention of human nature as a sin. Mixed in with this is a heavy anti-feminist argument satirising professionally ambitious wives, idle middle-class women devoted to 'artistic fulfilment', and their self-defeating fantasies about Sensitive, Caring, Compassionate New-Age Guys. Much of this seems over the top. Shakespeare himself wanders in and out of the action, not a little bemused and confused. Then there's the inter-generational incomprehension of young middle-class students, eager to condemn the lives of their parents and grandparents, without the faintest idea of what daily existence 40 years ago was like. In one of the play's stronger scenes a tradesman in his seventies talks bitterly to his granddaughter about the hardships of a lifetime laying roofing tiles. He's been accused of being too mean to educate his daughters properly, and his hot response, vividly depicting an Australian workman's life around the time of World War II, shows Williamson at his best. Character and

language, social portraiture done with biting humour, and the conflict between age and experience and an ignorant moralistic juvenility — it's all there.

But problems arise when we're invited to see this tough old tradesman as a kind of Carlton Lear. After all, he hasn't lost a daughter. He's just lost all patience. So when Williamson abruptly introduces a cameo from Shakespeare himself — Lear's heart-piercing wail at the death of Cordelia — one wonders what the ruckus is all about. The suggested parallels of domestic arrangement seem superficial. Lear provokes the destructive resentment of his daughters by recklessly demanding expressions of filial love. This forced sentiment reacts against him, leading to the logical sequence of actions that *precede* his death. In contrast, the resentment of Col Judd's children *follows* the death of their father, it does not precede it, so that the dramatic dynamic is reversed. Instead of a driving movement forward you get the passivity of retrospect. Williamson boldly introduces scenes from both *King Lear* and *As You Like It* into his own play, risking the chance that they upstage everything else, and that's what happens. But more skill and dramatic finesse — in the manner of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, perhaps — is needed to splice the materials together successfully.

As a sociological symptom of the sickness plaguing our universities, *Dead White Males* is important. An increasing number of articles in magazines and newspapers have been warning of the situation, and a Sydney Opera House production of Will Shakespeare vs the Monsters from the Ideological Bog measurably raises the stakes. Sadly, however, its political importance is much greater than its dramatic achievement. Attacking pedantry and pretension without boring the audience is difficult. But it can be done. More perhaps than Williamson and his academic friends give them credit for, ordinary citizens can tell nonsense when they hear it, and they need to hear it only once. The declamatory postmodern mumbo-jumbo pouring out of Grant Swain is in fact ten times as intolerable on the stage as it is on the written page. Drama it ain't. One is surprised that with all the literary expertise on his side — Don Anderson, Brian Kiernan, and so on — someone didn't tell the author. Didn't the director have anything to say? Too much time and space is given to Swain. Too little space, perhaps, is given to Shakespeare. Too little effort has been given to structural and thematic integration. Too many issues are raised, and too crudely; and because the author would basically like to be known as a Reasonably Sensitive New Age Guy himself (who wants to lose *all* the women's vote?). Williamson's handling of the patriarchy issue pulls ambivalently in two directions. Stoppard once said that if you feel really deeply about some wrong, and you passionately want to right it, then writing a play is just about the worst thing you can do. That goes too far. But *Dead White Males* shows how hard it is to keep the drama and the preaching in balance.

Roger Sandall retired in 1994 from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, where he had taught for 20 years.