

Playwright of Many Parts

Nick Enright: An Actor's Playwright

Edited by Anne Pender and Susan Lever

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This twelfth volume in the Rodopi Australian Playwrights series is a welcome first collection of essays devoted to one of Australia's finest theatre practitioners. Nick Enright was recognised, before his death in 2003 at the age of fifty-two, as a gifted actor, teacher and director, and a prolific playwright unusually possessed of the capacity both to create runaway successes, and deeply to engage and explore the self as all great art should. Part one of this publication consists of eleven essays devoted to the key plays, as well as an examination of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Enright archive; part two includes memoirs from four of his friends and colleagues.

Anne Pender gives an informative overview of Enright's life and career. His fascination with the theatre began with an epiphany at the age of six, when John Bell, his neighbour in Maitland at the time, showed him a toy theatre with scenes from *Macbeth*. Sent to Riverview College for his secondary schooling with the intention that he eventually enter the family profession of the law, he starred there, performing, for example, the remarkable scholarly feat of comparing, in a final year exam, the Greek (Sophocles) and French (Anouilh) versions of *Antigone* in the original languages. Yet his traumatic experiences at Riverview, as a sensitive gay youth misplaced in the militaristic milieu of the Vietnam War years, would provide the material for his semi-autobiographical play *St. James Infirmary Blues* (1990). His twin virtues of scholarly wealth and an unusually highly developed spirituality undoubtedly contributed to the mesmeric and inspirational effect he had as teacher, as Karen Vickery, his former pupil at NIDA where he was Head of Acting from 1980 to 1984, fondly recounts. Enright's confession that 'working with actors' was his favourite aspect of working in the theatre recurs several times in the book, as does the *leitmotif* of his belief in it as a democratic activity (19).

St. James Infirmary Blues emerged from a transitional period in his writing career, when the largely presentational mode of the earlier period—including

On the Wallaby (1978), the phenomenally successful *The Venetian Twins* (1979), and the hardly less popular *Daylight Saving* (1988)—was giving way to drama of greater introspection and complexity. Sandy Gore gives a fine insider's account of the genesis of *Daylight Saving*, which gave Enright the encouragement to persevere with his playwriting, which he had largely abandoned during his time at NIDA, and which had stagnated in the four years since. He was emerging, in 1990, from six years of psychoanalysis, in which his family and his sexuality must surely have been central themes. Gore is perceptive in her assertion that 'Nick's plays were all about family, loss of family, looking for family, reuniting with family, coming home to the bosom of family and finding one's roots again' (200). Enright himself said that we are all 'prisoners ... creatures of our own preoccupations and obsessions', which for him were 'family and the fate of the young' (21). Enright explored his inner self in the character of Dominic Connolly, who in *St. James Infirmary Blues* is driven to assert his own anti-war sensibilities in the face of the entrenched militarist culture of his school; and in Vincent O'Hara in *Mongrels* (1991), whose articulacy and sensitivity counterpoints the brutishness and self-indulgence of Edmund Burke, who was based, famously, on the prisoner-turned-playwright Jim McNeil. The collection reprints Veronica Kelly's *Southerly* essay 'Enright's *Mongrels* as Intervention in the Canon of Contemporary Australian Drama'.

Enright's mature phase saw also, amongst much else, the Oscar-nominated screenplay of *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992); *A Property of the Clan*, his examination of the aftermath of the murder of the teenager Leigh Leigh in Newcastle; his co-adaptation with Justin Monjo of Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet*, which one critic hailed as 'one of the most successful productions in Australian theatre history'; and *The Boy from Oz*, based on the life and songs of Peter Allen. Susan Lever, in her extended account of *Lorenzo's Oil*, is surely correct in highlighting its theme of 'misplaced guilt for physical failing and the extreme actions which follow it' as 'Enright territory' (51). Both she and Gore describe Enright's dispiriting subsequent experience in Hollywood, which he decided to abandon rather than submit to its demands to sugar-coat the confronting aspects of his work.

Jack Teiwes' essay on *Cloudstreet* is one of the most interesting in the collection. Enright and Monjo collaborated with director Neil Armfield in an ambitious adaptation of Winton's sprawling novel. In the end it required 38 speaking parts in three acts, and ran over five hours. Teiwes does justice to its legendary opening night, when so much went against it—*inter alia* lack of adequate rehearsal, rain-corrupted acoustics, a poorly placed container ship which marred the visual finale on the harbour—only for it subsequently to be hailed as a resounding

success. Sell-out seasons in the capital cities followed, and three overseas tours. Teiwes says 'The play's phenomenal success stands as a testament not only to Nick Enright's talents as a playwright, but as an inspired collaborator' (75).

The most challenging essay in this symposium is undoubtedly Jane O'Sullivan's 'Mongrels and Young Curs: the Hounding of the Feminine in *St. James Infirmary*, *Good Works*, *Blackrock* and *Spurboard*.' Her theme is that the "erasure" of the feminine in these plays is regrettable and alarming, coming as it does from an artist so professedly an advocate for womanhood. This is a point worth making. Enright's female characters—for example Elaine in *Mongrels*, Jenny in *St James Infirmary*, and Rachel in *Property of the Clan* and its film adaptation *Blackrock*—tend to be two-dimensional, while the real depth of characterisation is given to the men. Anne Pender notes that 'Helen Garner expressed her dissatisfaction with the play and the film version of *Blackrock* for their failure to imagine the young female characters as individuals when the young males are given an attentiveness and an "angry pity"' (24). Yet O'Sullivan's censure begs several questions. Is it just to reprove a gay man for concentrating on the world of men? Might it not be that the feminine principle, as distinct from the literally feminine, can be powerfully present in male gay literature? Might an artist with profound misgivings about the grossly masculine world not do immense good by focusing his attention on that world? One suspects that Enright simply lacked the range adequately to convey the inner lives of women; and that, further, this limitation may have prevented his ascent to or beyond the plane occupied in Australian drama by David Williamson. Yet O'Sullivan is too severe in her censure, and Susan Lever's comment to the contrary is welcome: 'This focus [of *Blackrock*] is not so much a determined erasure of women, as the critics claim, that makes the film somehow complicit with misogyny, as a desire to teach young men the implications of their casual, matey mistreatment of women' (55).

Peter Fitzpatrick gives a fine treatment of *The Boy from Oz*, emphasising Enright's capacity to see beyond the popular Peter Allen of such catchy hits as 'I Go to Rio', to the damaged soul beneath, as evidenced especially by the song 'Tenterfield Saddler', the central event of which is the suicide of Allen's father. Again, this is family; and a family, moreover, from the perspective of a gay member of it. Other essays are dedicated to *The Venetian Twins*, *The Man with Five Children* and *Summer Rain*, while there are further memoirs from George Ogilvie, and Enright's collaborator on *The Venetian Twins*, Terence Clarke.

Nick Enright: an Actor's Playwright is the celebration of a life directed by love, enthusiasm and passionate commitment. The subject thoroughly deserved the book. These essays may indeed 'inspire theatre practitioners as well as scholars' and 'inform and enlighten students and teachers both at high school and university', as the blurb justifiably asserts.

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