
Two Australian plays won the 1955 Playwrights’ Advisory Board Competition: Summer of the Seventeenth Doll and The Torrents. Ray Lawler’s The Doll had tremendously successful productions in Australia and London. It is still regarded as one of the most significant Australian plays, and has been credited with instigating a renaissance in Australian drama. The other prize-winning play never entered the canon of national Australian drama and, for some time, its dramatist was all but forgotten. Michelle Arrow notes, ‘as far as Australian theatre mythology is concerned … Oriel Gray doesn’t exist’ (11). As its title suggests, Arrow’s book, Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last, seeks to rectify this oversight. Indeed, Arrow promises ‘to reveal a more complete picture of Australian theatre and drama writing by looking at some of Australia’s women playwrights’ (38), specifically those who wrote for television, stage and radio between 1928 and 1968.

Arrow’s book is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship that addresses insufficiently documented and remembered aspects of Australian drama history. The book offers many fascinating details about a range of Australian women dramatists. It does not only focus on the more famous individuals, such as Betty Roland, Ruth Park and Mona Brand, but also provides information about the lesser-known personalities. The book even refers to writers, like Joan Gibson, who seems to have had just one play produced. Arrow is careful not to generalise about the dramatists and compares the different reasons for their attraction to playwriting, the ways in which they conceptualised their task (leisure or career), their socio-economic circumstances and education.

Arrow comprehensively researched these women and their work, gleaning information from a wide range of sources. Unfortunately, some of the women’s scripts, such as Kay Keavney’s many radio serials, are not extant. Arrow therefore drew on other documents such as the dramatists’ personal letters, newspaper articles about them and critics’ reviews of their plays. Lively quotes from Arrow’s own interviews with a few of the dramatists are the highlights of the book. The most unusual sources that Arrow turned to were ASIO files. The government was suspicious of some of the dramatists, especially those who wrote for New Theatre and who were committed to communism or socialism. Another interesting lead was passport applications, which revealed how the women chose to define their professions.

Upstaged seeks to place the women’s experiences within the broader context of the progress of Australian drama. This is a worthwhile endeavour, but its execution is problematic at times. The book intersperses information about the women’s lives, the content of significant plays and productions, and critics’ responses to this work.
within discussions of the development of Australian television, radio and theatre. The unfortunate costs of this approach are that the women’s stories are sometimes swamped by details of government funding, theatre companies and playwriting competitions, and that facts about the individual dramatists are often repeated to remind a reader distracted by the other minutiae.

Arrow chose to present her work in this way because she wanted to reverse a trend in other histories of Australian drama that omit women dramatists. Yet Arrow’s explanation of her opposition to those histories is unhelpful. Arrow claims that theatre historians mostly focus on Louis Esson and the Pioneer Players, The Doll, and the New Wave of the late 1960s because they tell a ‘nationalist story of Australian theatre’ (12-13). She dismisses the inquiry into nationalist Australian drama altogether simply for the reason that historians pursuing that question have not referred to the work of female playwrights. Her argument would have been much stronger if instead she had showed how women’s plays also contributed to the development of a national Australian theatre dealing with nationalist issues.

Arrow also inaccurately states that this ‘nationalist story of Australian theatre’ ignores ‘a theatrical tradition highly critical of Australian social and political life’ (13). In fact, women playwrights were not alone in producing drama that was critical of Australian society, the histories that Arrow castigates document such plays, and that drama was deemed to be nationalist. The prime examples of this drama are the plays of the male New Wave dramatists that, as Arrow observes, are frequently discussed.

Despite these problems, Upstaged is an interesting, valuable and original account of Australian women dramatists and the roles that they played in developing Australian stage, television and radio drama.

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How did Enlightenment thought of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries play itself out in colonial Australia? John Gascoigne’s The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia explores this intriguing theme.

Such a focus on Australia’s early colonies, at times tenuous edges of empire, in terms of Empire’s developing powerhouse, the Enlightenment and its ideas of progress, is rare. However, for some time now historians in Britain’s former colonies have been doing this, leading to reassessment of empire on the ground to reveal its operation in the colonies. Unlike David Armatige’s recently published The Ideological Origins of the British Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which while thoroughgoing does not test imperial ideology by analysing