Insights into the faded hopes of the 60s generation

Life After George, Sydney Theatre Company, Wharf 1 Theatre—through December 9

Kaye Tucker
24 October 2000

Australian playwright Hannie Rayson's *Life After George*, which premiered at the Melbourne Theatre Company in January this year and is now being performed in Sydney, is an absorbing investigation into the life of Peter George, a recently deceased university professor. The gregarious professor, a defender of academic excellence and liberal humanism, had been under siege from the commercially oriented university administration. Rayson's play is a witty and insightful comment the general loss of hope amongst a section of the intellectual milieu.

The play begins with a memorial from Alan Duffy, a friend and colleague of Peter George, who has just died in a plane crash. Duffy remarks that with George's passing he has lost a friend, and a man of great ideas, and offers his condolences to the women in George's life: his first two wives, Beatrix and Lindsay, and the very young Poppy Santini, his current wife.

George's wives encapsulate the different stages and concerns in his life over the previous 30 years. The play flashes back to his first marriage and early political influences. Beatrix, now in her 60s, is an artist. She and George first met in Newcastle, England. She came from a privileged background, he from a working class family. They married and went to study in Paris during the 1960s where George was deeply affected by, and became involved in, the May-June 1968 general strike of French workers and students.

The general strike convulsed French society, brought the De Gaulle regime to the point of collapse, and opened the way for an offensive by the international working class over the next seven years. The French Communist Party broke up the nation-wide action after the government promised education reform and workers were awarded a one-third increase in the minimum wage.

The strike, according to Beatrix, was a defining moment for George, “an actor rather than a spectator in the events.” While Beatrix is cynical about this revolutionary uprising, declaring that “nobody would have known what to do if they had taken power,” for George the experience is cathartic. Through his involvement in the French uprising he develops the ability to think critically and rebelliously. He is able to imagine a better future for mankind and this optimism stays with him for the rest of his life.

In the early 1970s, in the aftermath of this extraordinary movement, George is offered, and accepts, an academic post in the Humanities Department at Melbourne University in Australia. The couple has two children but George becomes involved with Lindsay, a student and radical feminist attending the university. When Beatrix leaves George, taking their two children, he marries Lindsay.

Lindsay and George have a very liberal marriage, both enjoying extramarital affairs. Lindsay, however, becomes more and more a part of the university establishment, and less and less of a radical, and by the time of George's death, she has become the university's academic director. She and George are constantly arguing over university policy—in particular privatisation of academic studies and other measures opening up the institution to market forces.

Rayson's play explores the impact of profit-driven education policies, which marginalise humanities subjects and other less utilitarian sciences and stifle intellectual development on campus. History is a “non-performing sector,” according to Lindsay, who refers to students as clients. In one scene George confronts her over another

administrative decision to cut the Arts Faculty, declaring that all she is concerned with is climbing up the corporate ladder.

Poppy, George's last wife, edits a postmodernist Internet magazine. “She's a new kind of girl,” says George. “She embodies the times. Every age produces them.” For Poppy, who has no understanding of history, George is a powerful intellectual catalyst and she sees in him something lacking in her own generation—the ability to imagine a better future. She is devastated by George's death, and even more so when she learns that a woman's body is found at the site of the plane crash where George was killed. This throws Poppy into a crisis. Was George being unfaithful to her?

Then there is Ana, George's daughter to his first wife, Beatrix. She is angry with both her parents, but particularly George, because she feels that she has spent her whole life seeking, but failing, to win his attention.

Life After George is complex in both the political and personal arenas. The Sydney Theatre Company adaptation, directed by Marion Potts, is simple and direct with uncomplicated staging and minimal props—a large university lecture bench with a blackboard, piano and a few chairs. Much of the success of this performance of the play is due to the considerable acting skills of the cast.

Geoff Morrell convincingly captures the spirit of Peter George, the liberal professor fighting to preserve academic excellence on campus under difficult odds, while becoming infatuated with a student his daughter's age. Melissa Jaffer, as Beatrix, portrays a woman more interested in her own comfort and with no interest in changing the world.

Robin Nevin as Lindsay, a seemingly hardened radical-feminist who has become a conduit for the forces of reaction on the university campus, develops some of the more tragic and complex aspects of her character's life. Nadine Garner as Poppy, a young girl with no sense of the past, and Sasha Horler as Ana, who has no sense of a future, are excellent.

The real strength of *Life After George*, however, lies in Rayson's potent script and her extraordinary ability to interweave discussions about political and philosophical issues from the past 30 years into a sensitive story about contemporary life. Rayson's characters, which could have so easily descended into preaching stereotypes, are rich, complex and engaging.

“I'm interested in how the radical baby boomers have defected to the other side. They make a whole series of compromises all the way along to privilege, work and career,” Rayson told Melbourne's *Age* newspaper in January this year.

Rayson, whose other plays include *Room to Move*, *Falling from Grace* and *Hotel Sorrento*, which was made into a feature film in 1995, appears to be looking for answers in some of the key political experiences of the post-war period—in this case the French general strike. While the play does not examine this event in any real depth, the impact that its betrayal had on contemporary intellectual and artistic life has an ever-present, almost subterranean, presence in the play.

The most encouraging and healthy aspect about *Life After George* lies in the fact that Rayson is attempting to examine why the hopes and dreams of young people in the late 60s and early 70s were transformed into what she refers to as “the emptiness of the modern soul”. The price is being paid by the Anas of this world who, in the play, seems to be lost in endless self-scrutiny, unable to be kind or respond to the suffering of others. Remarkably, Rayson approaches these issues without descending into hopelessness and pessimism. In fact, the play is consistently optimistic.

Rayson has commented that George's refusal to renounce his principles, despite the difficult intellectual atmosphere he found himself in, was a key component of the play: “I guess my central question is: What has happened to idealism and issues of principle?... George has a commitment to idealism that I want to see carried on into the next generation. If we are creating a culture where it's impossible for people like that to survive then we are an impoverished culture.”

One hopes that Rayson continues to explore these issues.