

# Artistic integrity at the "big end of town"

## Up for Grabs by David Williamson

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*Up for Grabs* is a new satire by veteran Australian playwright David Williamson. Having completed its season at the Sydney Opera House the production will now be performed at Parramatta, Wollongong, Canberra, Melbourne and Newcastle during the next months.

The story deals with the efforts of Simone (Helen Dallimore), a young fledgling art dealer, to sell a painting by Australian artist Brett Whitely for a record \$2 million and thereby establish herself at the "big end of town". This ambition turns to desperation when she signs a contract guaranteeing this price, putting both her own and her partner Gerry's (Simon Burke) assets on the line.

Simone, who has a small list of clients with the sort of money needed for this kind of transaction, sets up an unofficial auction to push up the price. Her prospective buyers include Dawn Grey (Tina Bursill), a corporate art buyer still frustrated that she did not have what it takes to be a great artist; Kel (Felix Williamson) and Mindy (Kirstie Hutton), a young dotcom couple with more money than sense; and Manny (Garry McDonald) and Felicity (Angela Punch-McGregor), a wealthy but unhappy couple looking for a suitable trophy.

The game of playing each against all becomes increasingly sticky for the inexperienced Simone, who ends up compromising herself sexually on more than one occasion. "You are a hooker aren't you? You're trying to sell me something for more than it's worth and you'll do anything to get your price," says Manny. Starting out with pretensions as an art dealer of integrity, Simone abandons herself to the whims of her clients, hoping that this will clinch the deal.

However, when the moment calls for a modicum of honesty, Simone decides to warn the naïve Mindy, who has genuinely fallen in love with the art dealer, that the Whitely is grossly over-priced. Simone advises her not to put in a bid. Unfortunately for Simone, Manny has decided to pull out of the bidding, leaving her dangling dangerously close to bankruptcy.

In the end, and not without some more hiccups, Simone gets her price from the corporate art buyer, Dawn Grey, who is happy to see her clients pay \$2 million as a kind of vengeful act against the corporate world. While Simone doesn't lose a cent, she doesn't make anything either. She tells the audience, however, that the lessons learnt are priceless and economic success is guaranteed because the sale will bring other paintings and clients her way. She has made it to the "big end of town".

The background to Williamson's play lies in the booming international art market over the last two decades. In Australia in 1990, total art sales at auction were less than \$17 million, by 1995 this had grown to \$27 million. Four years later, turnover was close to \$70 million and last year art auctioneers in Australia sold paintings, prints and drawings worth more than \$90 million. According to investment

analysts, art has been the fourth best-performing asset in Australia during the past decade, with paintings and other art purchased as part of a general investment portfolio that includes shares and property. This has pushed contemporary Australian art prices to new highs with Brett Whitely's *The Jacaranda Tree* fetching \$1.9 million in 1999.

Williamson is not the first dramatist to note this phenomenon. In fact, there have been a number of plays written internationally about the subject over the last few years. For example, Yasmina Reza's *Art* about three male friends who quarrel after one of them purchases an all-white painting; Mac Wellman's *Jennie Richee* about American artist Henry Darger, whose recently discovered watercolours now sell for up to \$100,000 each; Charles Mee's, *Bobrauschenbergamerica*, a fantasia inspired by the artist Robert Rauschenberg; and Jon Raitz's *Ten Unknowns*, about a world-weary painter who catches the eye of a greedy art dealer in the early 1990s.

Apart from wealthy dealers, many are uncomfortable with the prices fetched by some works of art and wonder whether the creative intent and integrity of an artist is compromised by the intense financial speculation. I expected *Up for Grabs* to provide a serious and witty probing of these issues. Unfortunately Williamson's play was embarrassingly clichéd and provided no insights into the complexities of the art market boom and its impact on art and social life.

Certainly one could cite problems with the direction by Gale Edwards. Helen Dallimore, as Simone the art dealer, was impossibly light and breezy throughout the entire production with no recognisable change of mood, even when she was in the most difficult of situations. Gary McDonald as Manny the businessman with a homosexual hang-up was played for all the cheap laughs it could get, which only served to weaken the dramatic tension that did exist between him and his boozy, socialite wife. And the dotcom couple were silly to the point of being grotesque. Tina Bursill as Dawn Grey the corporate buyer was the most believable character.

The essential problem, though, was not the performances but the script, which was unsatisfying on every level—emotionally, dramatically and intellectually. Williamson's characters failed to touch, move or convey anything of significance.

Simone's decision to tell Mindy to withdraw from the sale was unbelievable. Prior to this Simone was prepared to do anything, including have sex, to sell the painting. Williamson provides no clues as to the origins of her new found integrity, which does not emerge from anything natural to Simone's character or the predicament she found herself in, but seems to be imposed from above, in accordance with the author's own prejudices.

Williamson is concerned with what he terms "the culture of greed" dominating society, but in *Up for Grabs* he attempts to put a liberal

gloss on the situation. Simone's change of heart, he tries to convince us, shows that the individual can rise above the excesses and pressures of the market. He highlighted the point in a recent interview.

"The play," Williamson said, "is meant as a parable for our economic rationalist times... If the message pumping out there is that you're a fool if you behave ethically, then it's going to shift society's moral centre of gravity. In *Up for Grabs* I'm trying to say that no matter how great the shift, glimmers of decency are possible. Human beings still feel the pain of others. We are social creatures and all the economic rationalism in the world won't entirely beat that."

But this naive liberalism blocks an objective investigation of the commodification of the arts and its impact on those involved. After all, in the cutthroat world of art deals survival or success for individuals like Simone is measured in dollars and cents, not how good they are to their clients. Williamson shows us something of the conniving, opportunism and dishonesty that goes into making a million dollar art sale but stops short, unprepared to admit that many individuals are hopelessly corrupted. Instead of a damning critique he offers redemption through the invocation of a moral imperative.

Unlike some of his more recent plays, *Up for Grabs*, has been fairly well received by Australian critics. When Williamson's *The Great Man* opened last year, a play exposing the rightward shift in the ALP and the grasping layers inhabiting the upper echelons of the organisation, he was denounced for cynically capitalising on public distrust of politicians. No such outcry has greeted *Up for Grabs*. For many of Williamson's more conservative critics the play is a welcome relief from previous more biting works.

Born in Melbourne in 1942, Williamson studied mechanical engineering and psychology and lectured at Melbourne's Swinburne Technical College before becoming a full-time playwright in 1970. His first commercial success was *The Removalists* in 1972 for which he was the co-winner of the British theatre's George Devine Award. The play, a savage satire about police brutality against the working class, is regarded as a landmark in Australian literature.

Williamson's next play, *Don's Party* (1973) takes place at an election night party with the Australian Labor Party tipped to defeat the ruling conservative Liberal-Country Party Coalition which has held office for two decades. Comedy turns to anger and demoralisation when it becomes clear that the conservatives will hang on to government. The play's characters are new professionals—teachers, psychologists and other layers educated during the period of postwar economic boom. They had money, status and liberal political ideas, and a vulgarity to match their sense of self-importance.

During the last three decades Williamson has established himself as Australia's premiere playwright, writing over 20 plays. These included: *The Department* (1974) which criticises the trivia of academic politics; *The Club* (1977), which studies the conflicts in a football club as market forces replace old loyalties; *Travelling North* (1979), considered to be one of his finest plays, explores the difficulties of an elderly couple; *Sons of Cain* (1985) is about investigative journalism and political corruption; *Emerald City* (1987) where a screenwriter teeters between the demands of national integrity and international aggrandisement; and *Dead White Males* (1995) where Williamson evokes Shakespeare against identity and gender based politics. More recent plays by Williamson include *Corporate Vibes*, *Face to Face* and *The Great Man*.

Looking back on this body of work, Williamson has attempted to examine the social and political issues of the day from a critical and

humane standpoint. His protests against the establishment and acute social observations gave his early plays an edge and a popular appeal. He was angry and committed to revealing some home truths about social life in Australia. His skills as a writer of sharp and witty dialogue meant that his work captured something of the mood of discontent within the country during the 1970s and early 80s.

Williamson, however, now seems to be distancing himself from the oppositional character of past work. In a recent interview he declared that *The Removalists* and *Don's Party* were "misperceived" as "more strident calls for social justice than in fact they were". These works, he now says, were "bleak plays that explored the dark-side of human nature."

This reappraisal expresses both the limitations in Williamson's outlook and the changes in the political landscape since he first began writing. He belonged to a generation radicalised by the struggles against the Vietnam War and was one of a layer of intellectuals, writers and artists who were critical of the status quo and believed in the need for social change. In his at times sharp critiques, Williamson took aim at the excesses and hypocrisy of the upper social strata but never really explored the underlying causes nor challenged the fundamental premises of capitalist society.

The last two decades, however, have seen a marked social regression. The majority of people have experienced falling incomes and living standards while a relatively narrow layer of the upper classes have enriched themselves at the expense of others. In Australia, it was the Labor Party—the party of social reform—which in the 1980s and early 1990s carried out the dictates of the market and presided over the growing gulf between rich and poor.

There have been no lack of subjects for penetrating social satire and commentary but the very issues raised point to disturbing questions about the character of society itself. Rather than rise to the challenge, the trend in intellectual circles has been to adapt to the prevailing rightward shift that has seen the repudiation of all the old nostrums of social reform. One cannot help but feel that Williamson's recoil from the description of his early works as "calls for social justice" is bound up with this atmosphere.

It appears that Williamson remains critical of and even disturbed at the signs of the hypocrisy, careerism, shallowness and greed that he sees around him. But, as is revealed in this latest play, without a more probing questioning of society and social relations, he is reduced to taking cheap shots at relatively easy and familiar targets. Instead of insightful social criticism, the audience is served up with the rather complacent message that, no matter what the situation, "glimmers of decency are possible" and things will work out in the end.



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