Australian play from the 1930s strikes a contemporary chord

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The recent Sydney Theatre Company production of *Morning Sacrifice* by Dymphna Cusack was a fervent and unsparing exposé of a hidebound education authority in Australia in the 1930s. In the course of the play, three teachers who attempt to defend a student caught kissing her partner at a school dance are more or less destroyed. Directed by Jennifer Flowers at the Wharf Theatre, the production captured the intense psychological drama and spirit of the original work and struck a chord with those aware of the difficulties facing contemporary teachers.

Cusack (1902-1981) wrote *Morning Sacrifice* after her own victimisation in the late 1930s by the New South Wales Department of Education. In her teaching career, from 1925 to 1944, Cusack faced a system that had hardly changed since the turn of the century. Most female students left school to begin work or undertake home duties as soon as they turned 14. State secondary schools like Easthaven Girls High, the setting for *Morning Sacrifice*, catered for the education of a minority aspiring to the professions and adopted the strictly enforced moral code of private church schools. (In the play's opening scene and as the final curtain falls, student voices are heard off stage singing the hymn Morning Sacrifice, which had been adopted as the school song.)

Education officials could remove students, or teachers, for the slightest moral infraction and school life was taken up with Latin drills, rote learning and cramming for a series of external tests. Cusack condemned this system and summed up her 20-year teaching career as a terrible waste. Much of the play's material was drawn from Cusack's school experiences.

The play opens on Monday, August 20, 1938, three days before the end of term. Pressure is mounting in the Easthaven Girls High School staffroom as exam marking deadlines loom and the school inspectors arrive, to the surprise and dismay of all except Easthaven's deputy head, Miss Portia Kingsbury. The central focus of the play is an increasingly bitter struggle between the teachers over the fate of Mary Grey (who never makes an appearance), a senior student at the school accused of immoral behaviour.

The details of Grey's "moral lapse" are not revealed until halfway through Act Two when an outspoken teacher, Gwen Carwithen, punctures the tense atmosphere that Kingsbury is deliberately creating, by saying what the girl actually did. Kingsbury, who is magnifying the affair for her own ends, wants to shore up her authority over Easthaven's seven teachers and Woods, the school's titular head. Grey has already been publicly stripped of her prefect's badge at a school assembly the previous Friday. She now faces expulsion, a punishment that will end her hopes of winning a bursary (a scholarship), her only means of attending university to study medicine, and dash her chances of any sort of career.

A split between the teachers emerges and it becomes clear that the issue is not just Mary Grey, and her future, but whether the school authorities will tolerate any attempt to change the rigid atmosphere or the old teaching methods at the Easthaven Girls. Three teachers, Carwithen, Macneil and Sole, are, to a greater or lesser degree, critical of the established order and speak out in defence of Grey. Hammond, Pearl and Bates line up behind Kingsbury, who has already cowed Woods into submission. It therefore comes down to Easthaven's youngest staff member to break the deadlock. This is University Medal winner, Sheila Ray, a young teacher described by Woods as "our torchbearer," who obviously symbolises the future's best hope. But when Ray decides to defend Grey, Kingsbury's full wrath descends on her head.

By Thursday, the last day of term and the play's end, Grey has been given a reprieve. While she can stay on at the school to finish her final year, this official pardon has come at a terrible cost. Kingsbury has put so much psychological pressure on Ray for daring to defend the student that the young teacher has committed suicide, throwing herself under a bus. Carwithen is about to be fired and Woods, who cannot take the stress any more, suddenly decides to retire.

Cusack was one of a group of Australian women writers radicalised by the economic and political upheavals of the 1920s and 1930s. A liberal-humanist, she gravitated towards the Communist Party of Australia and remained a fellow traveller for the rest of her life, visiting the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe during the 1950s.

Regarded as controversial in her lifetime, her novels and plays are not outstanding works, limited by rather crude, mechanical plots and underdeveloped characterisations. Her first play, inspired by her transfer in 1928 to Broken Hill, a

remote mining town, dealt with a miners' strike. Her most popular work, *Come in Spinner*, co-written with fellow Australian author Florence James in 1945-46, was concerned with the lives of women left at home during the World War II.

Cusack was involved in a range of reformist and anti-fascist causes in the 1930s and in 1939 drew the direct ire of the state education minister when she denounced him in front of a group of unemployed workers for attempting to abolish free milk to schoolchildren. That same year she won a ground-breaking workers' compensation case against the NSW education department over lost salary due to illness.

Later, on Christmas Eve, the department struck back. Despite top credentials testifying to her teaching ability, Cusack was notified by telegram of her transfer to rural Bathurst, where she was made supernumerary, given no examination responsibilities, told to fill in for other teachers when they were ill and make the morning tea. Miles Franklin, a well-known Australian writer and Cusack's friend, advised her to turn the tables on the department and the play, *Morning Sacrifice,* was the result.

The problems one usually encounters in Cusack's work have been largely avoided in *Morning Sacrifice*. The play's characters, with perhaps the exception of the rather facile Carwithen, are well crafted and authentic. Hammond and Pearl are not merely departmental stooges but dedicated teachers with much of their lives revolving around their students. Even the fawning and subservient Bates is partially redeemed when she hints that World War I tragically ended her only romantic relationship.

Other aspects ring true as well. Cusack shows how moral issues were used to split and divide teachers attempting to fight worsening working conditions when, during the 1930s depression, teachers' salaries were cut and reduced education spending resulted in classes of up to 60 students. One particularly divisive measure was legislation enacted in 1932 under which women whose husbands already had work were dismissed from their jobs. In the play, the 29-year-old Carwithen cannot afford to marry her fiancée because she will lose her job. She is eventually sacked after one of her secret assignations with him is discovered.

In particular, Portia Kingsbury, powerfully performed in the current production by Sandy Gore, is a figure of some complexity. Easthaven's velvet-tongued deputy-head is daunting, combining authority and presence with considerable personal attraction. She is sufficiently brutal to drive Ray to suicide. In Kingsbury, Cusack has created a character with the capacity to draw out teachers' best qualities and yet confine them within an iron fist. She destroys Ray, convincing her that she is a failure. Kingsbury tells Ray that she has not improved Mary Grey's life, but ruined it. In the play's most highly-charged scene, Kingsbury informs Ray that her progressive ideas, which the vice-principal claims are a product of the "deplorable laxity among today's so-called intellectuals," have corrupted Grey and led to her "lapse".

The play's conclusion imparts a sense of waste and frustration. Ray kills herself, her death only strengthening Kingsbury's hand. Woods, not knowing what has happened between the deputy-head and Ray, and feeling she has failed the young teacher, announces she will immediately leave the school, her place to be taken by her "dear colleague, Miss Kingsbury". Carwithen, Kingsbury's most outspoken critic, faces dismissal: Bates has reported that she was seen camping—alone with her fiancée. With everything in place for an even more oppressive regime, Woods' last decision as school head is to allow Grey to remain at the school until the year's end, under strict supervision.

Morning Sacrifice was written in 1942, winning the West Australian Drama Festival prize in the same year. More than 40 years elapsed before it was given its first professional performance at the Stables Theatre in Sydney. While press reviews of the current production have praised the cast they have also claimed that the work is dated. The *Sydney Morning Herald* referred to it as "a well-intentioned play" but "no longer a potent theatrical experience" while the *Sun-Herald* described it as "a quaint period production".

These rather patronising comments ignore the fact that the issues raised in the play—the pressures exerted on teachers to conform to hidebound school authorities and destructive education methods—still apply. Rather than *Morning Sacrifice* being "dated", the play resonates because it accurately captures the hothouse psychological atmosphere in schools. In fact, as any teacher will testify, these pressures have increased drastically over the last two decades as government and education authorities have systematically cut public education budgets, closed schools and victimised teachers attempting to defend jobs and conditions. Anyone in the audience who has had anything to do with public education in the recent period will immediately recognise the methods used to set teachers against each other.

Morning Sacrifice deserves the widest audience because 60 years after it was first written the play makes audiences more conscious of these pressures on public school teachers and the issues at stake. While the Wharf Theatre's production has ended, the play will be performed again at the Glen St Theatre in Belrose, Sydney, from October 3 to October 20.