

Media witch-hunts Australian author Hannie Rayson and her new play

Richard Phillips
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Over the past fortnight the media in Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, has conducted a vicious campaign against *Two Brothers*, the latest play by Hannie Rayson, a prize-winning local author, playwright and film and television scriptwriter. Billed as a political thriller, Rayson's play explores some of the malevolent political psychology behind Canberra's repressive asylum seeker policies and the personal motives of some of those responsible for their implementation.

Two Brothers centres on the conflict between two siblings over government policy. James "Eggs" Benedict is homeland security minister in an Australian conservative government, and striving to become prime minister, while his brother Tom Benedict is a left-wing charity worker. (See "An imaginative and courageous political exposure") The play has been staged by the Melbourne Theatre Company, with a season commencing in Sydney on May 19, to be followed by a two-month New South Wales regional tour.

While parallels have been made with Peter Costello, prime ministerial aspirant and current Australian treasurer, and his brother Tim, Australian head of the charity World Vision, the "Eggs" Benedict character is an amalgam of leading figures in the current Liberal-National coalition government—Attorney-General and former Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock, Prime Minister John Howard and former Defence Minister Peter Reith.

Rayson also draws loosely from the SIEV X incident, the tragic drowning of 353 refugees, including 150 children, who died after the overcrowded fishing boat in which they were sailing to Australia broke up and sank in international waters between Australia and Indonesia on October 19, 2001.

The SIEV X deaths occurred in the midst of an unprecedented anti-refugee scare campaign, orchestrated by Howard to boost his chances of winning the 2001 federal election. Information about the catastrophe, the highest loss of life in Australian naval history, only began to be publicised during a Senate inquiry called to investigate official lies about another government-concocted "incident"—the so-called "children overboard" affair. Prime Minister Howard, ruling coalition senior ministers and the new "People Smuggling Taskforce" claimed that asylum seekers on a boat bound for Australia had thrown their children overboard in order to force navy ships patrolling the area to rescue them and take them into Australian territory.

Damning evidence not only exposed these allegations as lies but other details began to emerge from a range of sources, including former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin, which raised serious questions about what the government did or did not know about SIEV X.

Accusations were made that the Howard government was aware that the desperately overcrowded boat was about to leave Indonesia and could sink. While the Australian navy, air force and coast watch regularly patrolled the area where the vessel sank, the handful of refugees who survived the terrible ordeal were not rescued by Australian forces, but by an Indonesian fishing boat (See "The tragedy of SIEV X: Did the

Australian government deliberately allow 353 refugees to drown?").

Two Brothers makes no direct references to SIEV X—instead, a fictional incident is created—but it does give flesh and blood form to the criminal character of the Australian government and the consequences of its anti-refugee policies. Among other things, "Eggs" Benedict, who is prepared to do "whatever it takes" to become prime minister, is shown ordering the navy to ignore drowning asylum seekers from a fictional refugee boat. Moreover, the play contains numerous references to the so-called "war on terror", social inequality and other key political issues.

Notwithstanding some limitations, Rayson's play is an angry, provocative and, at times, powerful work that has reignited discussion on the extent of the Howard government's culpability in the drowning deaths of hundreds of innocent men, women and children.

With commendable courage and passion Rayson has provoked important debate on at least one of the many skeletons rattling in Canberra's cupboard. This has clearly scratched a raw nerve in government circles.

Despite the fact that some information about the SIEV X disaster began to circulate during the Senate inquiry, the Howard government, the Labor opposition, and the media all conspired to bury it as quickly as possible. So successful have they been that most people know little or nothing about it. Hannie Rayson's play, which has been mounted by one of the most popular and best known theatre companies in the country, is therefore serving to bring the issue to the surface, and the entire political establishment has become very nervous.

Not surprisingly, the first denunciations came from Andrew Bolt, the extreme-right editor of the *Herald-Sun*, Rupert Murdoch's Melbourne tabloid. Bolt, who specialises in character assassination and right-wing populist appeals to ignorance and social backwardness, attacked Rayson's play even before it had officially opened.

On April 13, in an enraged comment entitled "Shameful saga of hate", he declared the play to be "a vomit of smug hate" and falsely claimed that it slandered Australian defence personnel as "murderers" for not rescuing the SIEV X refugees. Not satisfied with attacking Rayson, Bolt also fulminated against the Melbourne Theatre Company, which staged the play, and preview audiences for applauding what he claimed was a "cruel fantasy".

These comments, of course, had nothing to do with examining the artistic merit of the play. They were directed against Rayson because she had dared to expose the appalling human cost of Canberra's asylum seeker policies.

Bolt's line was repeated a few days later in the *Australian*, Murdoch's national daily. In a review entitled "Tumult in a sea of stereotypes", its theatre critic declared that *Two Brothers* was "heavy handed", "preached to the converted" and "pander[ed] to clichés about insular right-wing voters and decent, bleeding heart lefties".

Moreover, the "Eggs" Benedict character, the newspaper claimed, was "too heavily satirised, caricaturised and ultimately demonised". The clear

implication being that Rayson should have portrayed Benedict or others responsible for administering the government's policies as confused individuals, somehow unaware of the implications of their decisions.

After some initial hesitation, the *Age* newspaper, a Melbourne-based daily and former bastion of "small-l" liberalism, joined the fray.

The *Age*'s first response to *Two Brothers* was favourable, with one of its theatre critics Helen Thomson describing the play as a powerful and passionate work, and praising Rayson for "bringing Australia's treatment of asylum seekers into the mainstream of Australian drama".

The play, Thomson continued, delivered "blow after blow at cherished notions of Australia as an egalitarian land of the fair go. [Rayson's] targets are many, her aim is deadly and she leaves her audience at the end shaken, sickened even, at a national self portrait that is utterly shameful."

After the Murdoch press began its vilification campaign, the senior editorial staff of the *Age* apparently decided that they had to join it. Thomson's assessment could not, therefore, be allowed to stand. Taking their cue from Bolt, some of the newspaper's other journalists were quickly mobilised to attack the play.

On April 16, two days after Thomson's review, Tom Hyland, an *Age* political commentator with no expertise in drama, penned a major op-ed piece denouncing the play. *Two Brothers*, he declared, was "one-dimensional" and "propaganda" that ignored the truth and adopted the "comforting certainty of conspiracy".

"Instead of examining those complex moral issues [created by Australia's treatment of asylum seekers], he continued, Rayson had 'produced a piece of propaganda that deals in stereotypes, preaches to the converted and panders to prejudice. In the process, she does a disservice to the cause she seeks to espouse.'"

Like Bolt, Hyland falsely claimed that *Two Brothers* constituted an attack on the navy and its personnel. This meant, he said, that the entire play could be dismissed as "bleeding heart propaganda" which pandered to "leftist sentiment".

These allegations are entirely bogus. *Two Brothers* does not condemn the navy for failing to rescue the drowning refugees but highlights some of the genuine concerns that government directives caused amongst navy personnel. "Eggs" Benedict's son, for example, a naval officer on one of the ships directed to leave the area, is distraught over the drowning of hundreds of innocent men, women and children.

Hyland's comment was followed the next day by a special *Age* editorial devoted to vilifying *Two Brothers*, as well as another arts review. The review attacked the play describing it as childish, simplistic, "a shrill, wilful fantasy" and an "impossible burlesque of class tension".

The editorial claimed that refugee policy had previously been "apolitical" but the issue had now become "deeply polarised", and that the truth was "a victim second only to those people trapped in detention."

But instead of denouncing the Howard government, which has detained hundreds of defenceless men, women and children without charge in on and offshore detention centres, while at the same time circulating slanderous lies about them, the editorial directed its malice against Rayson. Her work, it declared, distorted, exaggerated, stereotyped the asylum seeker issue and would "only serve to further set back sensible debate".

The *Age* editorial did not elaborate on what it considered to be a "sensible debate". Last year's High Court ruling that the government could legally incarcerate asylum seekers in mainland and offshore detention centres indefinitely, was presumably a product of the sort of discussion the newspaper favours.

"Rayson and other misguided refugee advocates," it concluded, "have become so shrill in their denunciation that many Australians, who have regarded the system of processing asylum seekers as unjust and shameful, must now wonder where the truth lies."

In other words, Rayson and other artists passionately opposed to the

government's ongoing attack on democratic rights are the source of the problem, because they are confusing the population and distorting the truth.

The newspaper's "concerns" about *Two Brothers*, of course, have nothing to do with setting the historical record straight or overcoming any alleged aesthetic weaknesses—the newspaper certainly does not want a hard-hitting documentary theatre or powerful drama about the SIEV X. Rather, its fulminations against Rayson's play constitute a new political attack on freedom of artistic expression, the purpose being to discourage or prevent the development of genuinely critical and subversive art and literature.

While ignorant hyperbole and political bullying is standard operating procedure for the Murdoch tabloids, the *Age* campaign against Rayson's play is unprecedented. During the late 1960s and early 70s the newspaper defended freedom of artistic expression and opposed the harsh censorship regime of the ruling Liberal-Country Party coalition government. The fact that it has now joined forces with one of the most notorious hacks from the Murdoch stable is yet another sign of the right-wing shift underway in the entire political establishment, including its so-called "liberal" wing.

Significantly the attack on Rayson follows last year's decision by the management of the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation to deny school education filmmaker Judy Rymer the use of ABC news footage on the grounds that it would be used for an "advocacy or cause". Like Rayson's play, Rymer's short documentary, *Punished not Protected*, examined the Howard government's refugee and asylum seeker policies.

In a follow-up comment to his review, Andrew Bolt demonstrated how the campaign against art works that challenge government policy will proceed. Entitled "Hannie's evil brew" and published in the *Herald-Sun* on April 15, Bolt aimed his rhetoric directly against Rayson, her historian husband Michael Cathcart and all other recipients of government arts grants.

Two Brothers, he declared, demonstrated how left-wing Australian writers and artists had become "hate filled barbarians" who had "resign[ed] from civilised society". This had occurred, he continued, because these "guzzling artists" were the recipients of a "flood of government gold" and not forced to "battle for the free market dollar". This "subsidised cultural elite" had been created, Bolt concluded, by "paving with taxpayers' gold their path to the asylum where everyone, dear, agrees it's the rest of the world that has gone mad."

The message is clear, Bolt wants state funding of the arts politically targeted or abolished altogether. Neither Rayson, nor theatre companies, filmmakers or anyone else receiving a government grant should be allowed to challenge, let alone explore, any aspect of government policy. If they don't toe the line they'll be cut out of arts funding.

And this political interference has already begun. The Film Finance Corporation, the federal government's film-funding body, has recently introduced an "evaluation system". The agency, which provides small amounts of money for local films that have already attracted financing from other sources, now demands direct creative control over any project it supports. Predictions are also being made that the forthcoming federal budget will see further cuts in arts funding.

Moreover, as Bolt knows full well, arts funding in Australia is already at crisis point, with major institutions—opera, drama, dance and other key areas—having been forced to close or drastically restructure and cut productions over the past nine years. The Sydney Theatre Company, for example, one of the country's major dramatic arts companies, now restricts itself to productions with no more than eight actors, in order to cut costs.

And rather than being swamped by a flood of "government gold" the overwhelming majority of professional writers, actors, musicians, dancers, choreographers and visual artists live in dire poverty—most of them

enduring long periods of unemployment or forced to work in other jobs in order to fund their artistic work.

While several letters, and a comment from Hannie Rayson, have been published in the *Age* defending *Two Brothers*, leading figures in the Australian drama and literary scene have been remarkably quiet. Whether this will change once the corporate media in Sydney lets its political attack dogs off the leash, is yet to be seen. The assault against Rayson's play, however, should ring alarm bells for all artists and working people.

When the capitalist press and the government take upon themselves the right to dictate what writers and artists can or cannot produce then all democratic rights are under threat. The witch-hunt against *Two Brothers* is another confirmation that the defence of freedom of speech and artistic expression is inseparably bound up with the need to develop an independent political movement of the working class as a whole, based on a socialist strategy, against the entire political set-up.



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