

An imaginative and courageous political exposure

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Two Brothers, written by Hannie Rayson, directed by Simon Phillips and designed by Stephen Curtis

Two Brothers by Australian playwright Hannie Rayson and currently being staged in Melbourne by the Melbourne Theatre Company, is a naturalistic drama in which a terrible human tragedy—the drowning deaths of hundreds of refugees—tears apart a family that has previously been able to accommodate its political and emotional differences. The family in question is not seeking asylum. Rather, it is a prominent Australian family, the Benedicts, one of whom is Canberra’s minister for homeland security.

Rayson’s play was inspired in part by the ongoing controversy and cover-up of the tragic drowning of 353 refugees when a refugee boat, the SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle Number X), sank in October 19, 2001. The play constitutes part of the growing political opposition by Australian writers, actors and filmmakers to Canberra’s mandatory detention and demonisation of asylum seekers.

In September 2001, award-winning actors Alice Garner and Kate Atkinson established “Actors for Refugees”. With support from artists from major Australian theatre companies and television productions, the group has staged school and community performances dramatising some of the experiences of refugees seeking asylum in Australia. In 2002, four writers compiled *Kan Yama Kan*, an outline of refugee experiences performed by asylum seekers themselves. The production’s premiere season in Melbourne sold out before it officially opened.

A year later Tom Zubrycki examined the fortunes of a group of Afghan refugees in rural Australia in his film *Molly & Mobarak* and ABC television produced the two-part drama *Marking Time*. Written by playwright and satirist John Doyle, *Marking Time* explores the relationship between a young Australian student in a rural town and an Afghan refugee girl. And in 2004, husband and wife filmmakers Clara Law and Eddie Fong made *Letters to Ali*, a feature-length documentary challenging the government’s illegal detention of an Afghan child.

The significance of *Two Brothers*, however, is that it is the first to venture beyond simply “putting a human face on asylum seekers” and to attempt to address the issue in terms of the policies and the parties responsible.

Rayson, a leading figure in Australian dramatic arts, has written a number of intimate, intelligent and often witty family dramas over the past 15 years. These grapple, variously, with Australians’ sense of cultural isolation (*Hotel Sorrento* [1990]); the impact of “free market” policies on tertiary education (*Life After George* [2000]); and the economic dislocation and growing political confusion in rural Australia (*Inheritance* [2002]). A number of her plays have been performed in Germany, France, Canada, Japan, Slovenia, New Zealand and Britain.

While her work explores a range of social and political issues, Rayson, like a growing number of local artists, is deeply angered about the SIEV X tragedy and Canberra’s brutal treatment of asylum seekers and has resolved to use her creative talent to provoke political discussion about

them.

As she explained to the *Age* newspaper on April 19: “Why 353 people drowned when the boat went down in a heavily watched area of ocean is not at all transparent. The dimensions of this tragedy—and the unnerving sense that we are not being told the whole truth—is compounded by our cruel treatment of asylum seekers, by the inhumanity of the ‘Pacific Solution’ and by mandatory detention.

“To me there aren’t too many shades of grey in these events. The suffering that we are inflicting on these people is wrong. And that cruelty needs to be named.... We are living in times when debate is not encouraged. ... [and] in this climate, what is called for is bold provocation. Now is not the time for timidity in our drama.

“... And yes, I do hope that [*Two Brothers*] energises the audience to ask questions about the real world. Three-and-a-half years after Tampa, 54 people are still incarcerated on Nauru. The misery and human damage our policies have inflicted on some people will never be undone. The future must be different. My play is a vision of what that future may be like if people of goodwill—whatever their politics—do not win the day.”

Rayson’s play is by no means perfect, but her sincere, intelligent and courageous exploration of these issues has produced a work of genuine artistic merit. Together with director Simon Phillips, she has created an intrinsically theatrical piece where, particularly in the first act, short scenes, well-observed dialogue, and an interweaving structure engage the audience in the characters’ political and personal dilemmas and the inhumanity of their treatment.

Two Brothers opens with the murder of an Iraqi asylum seeker—Hazem Al Ayad (Rodney Afif)—with the first act carefully drawing out the incidents that have led to the crime.

The Benedict brothers and their partners are introduced to the audience with a series of short monologues. Each character stands at the front of the stage addressing imaginary meetings. For James “Eggs” Benedict (Garry McDonald), the minister for home security, it’s the exclusive Melbourne Club, whose members are some of the wealthiest and most powerful individuals in the country.

Tom Benedict (Nicholas Eadie) is a community rights lawyer and delegate to the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) conference. His audience is the ALP’s Coburg branch, a working class suburb in Melbourne with a large immigrant population.

Eggs’ wife, Fiona (Diane Craig) addresses the private girls’ school which so adequately prepared her for her future as a “dippy South Yarra blonde” and the wife of a leading conservative politician. Tom’s wife, Ange Sidoropoulos (Laura Lattuada) teaches at a state high school where she is congratulating the ethnically diverse range of students in her class on their scholastic achievements.

Hints of the coming crisis emerge as the families enjoy a Christmas Day gathering at the brothers’ jointly owned luxury beach house. As small talk proceeds, Eggs receives an urgent official phone call and then another from his son, Lachlan, a Gunnery Officer in the Royal Australian Navy

(RAN).

Over the next weeks, Tom and Ange learn about the tragic Christmas day sinking of a refugee boat—known as the Kelepasan—and Tom becomes both friend and lawyer to the sole survivor, Hazem Al Ayad, who has lost his wife and children in the disaster. Al Ayad's account of the drowning death of his wife and children, obviously drawn from the testimony of some of the SIEV X survivors, is powerful and deeply distressing.

Important political issues emerge as Rayson draws out the relationship between the phone calls, the refugee boat disaster, Eggs' bid for prime ministership, and Canberra's refugee policies. Moreover, she skilfully interweaves these issues into an exposition of the troubled relationship between the two brothers and a layered exploration of the sources of their differences.

By the end of Act I, everyone knows that Lachlan's ship was in a position to rescue the refugees but was prevented from doing so by directives from Eggs.

The second act deals with the political repercussions of this decision and the unbridgeable differences between the two brothers and their wives, as Eggs moves forward with ruthless determination to become prime minister.

The play concludes with Eggs delivering a victory speech in which border protection, the so-called "war on terror", free market rhetoric and various strands of right-wing nationalist populism are interwoven.

Various local theatre critics and political commentators for the Murdoch press and the *Age* newspaper have denounced *Two Brothers* as "left-wing propaganda", "caricature", and accused Rayson of slandering the government and the Australian navy. (See "Media witch-hunts new Australian play and Hannie Rayson, its author")

These attacks have nothing to do with the artistic quality of *Two Brothers* but are crude, politically-motivated attempts to intimidate Rayson and any other artist who dares to use their skills to educate, provoke discussion and ultimately develop resistance to the government's refugee policies.

Owen Richardson, an arts writer for the *Age*, for example, accused Rayson of portraying Eggs as a "moustache-twirling Dickensian stereotype". This is nonsense.

Two Brothers is not exaggerated or distorted but a genuine and, at times, chilling examination of the callous political psychology of those responsible for Canberra's asylum seeker policies. In fact, Eggs Benedict and his personal secretary, Jaime Savage (Caroline Brazier), are accurately rendered fictional microcosms of the sort of individuals capable of pursuing these policies.

The response of Prime Minister Howard and then Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock (now attorney-general) to news of the SIEV X tragedy in 2001 was as bone chilling as any aspect of Eggs Benedict's behaviour.

Ruddock told the media that the disaster "may have an upside ... In the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it," while Howard cynically obfuscated, falsely claiming that Australian personnel had no knowledge of the vessel's existence.

Leading members of the so-called opposition—the Australian Labor Party, Greens and Democrats—did not challenge these claims at the time. This was despite the fact that Operation Relex, the military operation initiated by the Howard government to prevent refugee boats landing in Australia, had precise intelligence of SIEV X's location and its overcrowded and unseaworthy state.

Rayson, moreover, is acutely aware that any serious artist, no matter how "worthy" the issues they decide to explore, has the responsibility to candidly tell their story in a dramatically valid way. Part of her research for *Two Brothers* involved lengthy interviews with members of the Melbourne Club. This provided her with valuable background which is clearly apparent in much of the play's dialogue.

Far from overplaying the cold-blooded disdain with which the 353

victims on the SIEV X have been treated by the whole spectrum of official politics, Rayson and the actors capture it very well.

Eggs and his secretary Jaime Savage are typical of those who calmly incarcerate hundreds of refugees in outback or offshore detention centres while at the same time justifying the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq with a tissue of lies. Brazier, in particular, evinces the cold, professional, almost casual brutality that necessarily prevails when governments make regular decisions that destroy lives and livelihoods.

McDonald's performance is a tour de force, effortlessly recreating Eggs' sinister charm and switching between the politician's unvarnished malice and his affable public face. When Eggs says, "They ask me how people like me sleep at night. We sleep very well," one is reminded of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. It's not difficult to imagine Eggs or Savage repeating Richard's terrifying comment: "Why, I can smile. And murder while I smile."

Two Brothers also demonstrates a perceptive understanding that Eggs, Savage and their ilk are acutely conscious of the real nature of their policies and spend much of their time desperately working to cover-up or "spin" their actions. Rayson's dramatisation of this process is artful and compelling.

When Savage learns that Al Ayad may have seen the RAN vessel that abandoned the drowning asylum seekers, she immediately tries to smear him as an Al Qaeda supporter. Far from being a parody, this is an effective reminder that, for the last three and a half years, every attack on democratic rights has been justified on the basis of the "war on terror".

In an exchange between Savage and Al Ayad, Rayson reproduces the vicious and hypocritical logic employed by government ministers to poison public perception of asylum seekers.

Ayad points to the human cost of Canberra's abolition of family reunion rights. "You can't cut a man off from his family," he says. "He will go crazy."

Savage's response is icy and politically calculated. "Well, we certainly don't want crazy people coming here," she retorts, "especially from the Middle East."

The strongest scenes in Act II are the confrontations between Tom and Eggs. Whatever we have learned about their personality conflicts, sibling rivalry and political altercations in the first act, become unbridgeable differences as the truth of events begins to emerge. Likewise Fiona, Eggs' wife, and Lachlan, his son, react with disgust and outrage when they learn about the terrible human impact of "border protection" and "the war on terror".

When Eggs attempts to buy his brother Tom's silence with an international humanitarian post ("Do good on the world stage. Leave Australia to me"), Tom bluntly rejects it and decides to tell the media about the government's role in the refugee deaths. The journalists respond with characteristic disinterest.

The weak points of *Two Brothers* also become apparent in Act II, as Rayson, who perhaps has attempted to cover too much, strains to bring together all the political and emotional issues presented during the first half of the play. The playwright falls back on various local references and a few jokes, which grate, and are unlikely to translate to audiences outside the state of Victoria, let alone internationally.

In addition, Rayson's portrayal of Fiona Benedict does not jell.

Fiona is shocked by her husband's directives to the navy to not pick up the drowning refugees and at one point, after a discussion with Ange, Tom's wife, considers leaving Eggs. Notwithstanding Craig's admirable performance, this is less than convincing. Fiona's initial decision to marry an ambitious Liberal Party minister and the events that drive developments in the play cannot be the only heinous policies she's had to justify to herself.

Being the wife of an openly right-wing bourgeois politician is clearly a profession in itself and one that carries the promise of great rewards.

While not impossible, it is doubtful that someone in her position would jeopardise all that after having one heart-to-heart chat with someone she considers a social inferior and who also happens to be the wife of an outspoken political opponent.

Another more serious weakness is Rayson's omission of any real references to the bi-partisan role played by the ALP.

In her April 19 comment in the *Age*, Rayson attempted to rebut accusations that *Two Brothers* was "anti-Liberal Party propaganda" declaring: "The greatest political indictment in the play is surely directed against the Labor Party ... a play about one of the defining issues of our times and the Labor Party is not present. What does that say?"

But Tom Benedict appears to be a card-carrying member of the organisation, or at least attends its conferences.

While Rayson may have no political confusions about the ALP, her claim that it is "not present" in the "defining issues of our times" is not true and leaves the door open for those who maintain lingering conceptions that it represents some kind of opposition to the government or may sometime in the future.

Rather than the ALP being "absent", the party laid the legal foundations for the Howard government's policies. Mandatory detention of refugees was initiated by the Hawke-Keating government in 1991 and, when the High Court deemed it unconstitutional, rushed legislation through parliament to entrench it into law. Under Labor, the Port Hedland detention centre was constructed precisely because the remote location would prevent asylum seekers' access to lawyers and journalists.

During the 2001 elections Labor leader Kim Beazley attempted to present his party as tougher on "border protection" than Howard and in 2002, when it looked like the government's role in the SIEV X tragedy might be fully revealed, Labor voted to shut down the Senate inquiry into the issue.

Without excusing this omission, Rayson, however, is not alone. In fact, almost all the plays and documentaries produced about Australian refugee policies have been characterised by their failure to demonstrate, even in limited form, Labor's role in these events, reflecting unresolved illusions in the Labor Party. Future dramatisations and documentaries on this issue do need to address this vital question.

Notwithstanding this weakness *Two Brothers*, is a valuable and courageous contribution to a broader political discussion. One hopes that Rayson, who is a genuinely creative writer, will begin to examine some of the deeper international and historical driving forces behind the right-wing shift in the political and cultural climate to which she is responding and resisting.

Rayson has previously voiced her concerns about those who accommodate to this climate, and the responsibility of serious dramatists and writers.

As she explained to *Artbeat* in April 2001: "I think theatre is potentially the most subversive of all the art forms. I say 'potentially' because the theatre scene is full of earnest young men in black t-shirts who talk about being subversive, but what they mean is aesthetically subversive: 'subverting the form,' rather than politically subversive. They want to assault the senses rather than change the world. I have felt for a long time that, unless theatre addresses the public agenda, it will die. What we need is a content-led recovery."

This approach is entirely commendable and constitutes the essential strength of *Two Brothers*, a work that deserves the widest audience.



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