

“You can speak your truth more easily in the theatre”

An interview with Australian playwright Hannie Rayson

Richard Phillips
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Australian playwright Hannie Rayson recently spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about Two Brothers, her latest play, which premiered in Melbourne last May and is currently playing at the Sydney Opera House until July 2.

Two Brothers was partly inspired by the Howard government’s brutal treatment of asylum seekers and the ongoing cover-up of the SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle Number X) tragedy in which a refugee boat travelling between Indonesia and Australia sank on October 19, 2001, drowning 353 men, women and children. The play provoked a series of angry political denunciations from the corporate media during its Melbourne season.

A prolific writer, Rayson is best known to local audiences for Hotel Sorrento (1990), which deals with cultural isolation in Australia, and Life After George (2000), which explores the impact of “free market” policies on tertiary education and the rightward shift by sections of academia.

Richard Phillips: Why did you decide to explore this issue?

Hannie Rayson: I was driven by a sense of moral outrage and frustration over the SIEV X cover-up and the government’s treatment of asylum seekers. Like many others, I knew that the SIEV X issue really smelt. I’d read all the Senate papers on the issue but no amount of scouring revealed what really happened. In fact, whole sections of these papers are blacked out.

On another level *Two Brothers* was about trying to make some sense about left and right in Australian politics, whether these terms are applicable anymore, and whether we are confronted with the death of small-l liberalism. These were some of the grand plans or

issues that I started out with but which were obviously narrowed down in the process of writing.

RP: The response to *Two Brothers* by the Melbourne press, particularly the *Age* newspaper, certainly revealed the collapse of small-l liberalism. Did you anticipate this?

HR: No, I didn’t expect this reaction at all. I think they were very literal in their approach to the play but I’m not clear what inspired this kind of anger.

What really got to me though was the *Age* editorial, which implied that the play was doing some kind of damage to the “cause”. But what “cause” were they talking about: the “cause” of keeping silent about the SIEV X, or the “cause” of doing nothing against the outrageous treatment of asylum seekers and refugees?

I’ve also been struck over the past few weeks with comments that my play is brave. But all I’m doing is what any decent playwright, artist or social commentator is obliged to do—to speak out on the most essential questions and hold up the government of the day to some scrutiny. This is what I’ve traditionally done in all my work. The fact that people consider it brave to raise these questions indicates that what was once considered orthodoxy is now in the minority.

RP: Why do you think this has occurred?

HR: It seems to me that the economic rationalists have been very clever in infiltrating and undermining the traditional places where small-l liberalism once prevailed. Of course I’m only referring to Australia here but if you take places like the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], the universities and the media, there has been a marked change. It’s very hard for people in these areas now to express political dissent against the government. They’re under

tremendous pressure at the moment.

You can also see this in the government's attack on student unionism, which is going to change the face of the universities. The clubs and activities and other services for students—legal, housing, welfare—will all go down the chute if the government gets away with this.

The government claims this is an important issue but there's no groundswell of support for its proposals. Students are not rising up and saying that we want user-pays, we don't want to pay the amenity fees, etc... It seems to be a purely ideological and divisional issue for the government and they are getting away with this because not enough people are speaking out.

RP: We described the media response to *Two Brothers* as a political witch-hunt. What do you think the reaction says about freedom of expression in Australia?

HR: It's a worrying trend, and particularly the government moves to try and silence critical voices in the ABC and other places.

But overall I'm heartened by the discussion that the play has provoked. I'd rather the debate be out there, robust and rigorous, instead of something insidious going on in the background. Obviously if you stick your neck out and provoke discussion then you have to expect a reaction, and one that is not necessarily polite or even acknowledges that you might have scored one or two good points. In other words, it's a question of being able to stand the heat in the kitchen.

RP: What about the role of the Labor Party in all this. Labor's role is not made clear in *Two Brothers*.

HR: That's true and what you said about the Labor Party in your review was right on the money. Of course the ALP is present in all these events. They're certainly part of the problem and I don't have any illusions that a vote for them would change anything.

RP: Who are your main literary or artistic influences, past and present?

HR: I'm a big fan of Arthur Miller and David Hare and, of course, Chekhov, Shakespeare and the other greats. But I guess my main influences are Australian. I'm indebted to David Williamson, who put the Australian voice on stage, and Helen Garner. As an English literature student at university it didn't occur to me that profound experiences could be Australian experiences. Nothing in my education disavowed me of that until I was exposed to Williamson, Garner and

others like Jack Hibberd and John Romeril.

RP: You once commented that theatre was potentially the most subversive of all the art forms but unless it addressed the public agenda, it would die. You called for a "content-led recovery". Could you elaborate on this?

HR: Theatre provides a certain freedom because the space between the writer and the audience is much more direct and immediate and not mediated through the countless number of other people involved in television and film production.

In other words, you can speak your truth more easily in the theatre, and I think we are beginning to see some signs of this already. I'm amazed at the range of topics that contemporary playwrights are dealing with—stories about the political landscape—and its encouraging that a lot of writers are not navel gazing.

I heard a reading the other night of Gillian Slovo's play *Guantánamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom*, which is based on the testimonies of people held in Guantánamo Bay and performed by Iraqis and Iranians. Slovo and someone from Amnesty International spoke after the performance. It was one of those really profound theatrical experiences, very powerful and on the edge. Unfortunately it was to a relatively small audience.

One of the great things about the media controversy with *Two Brothers* was that it pushed the debate into the broad mainstream and of that I'm really proud. Of course, how this translates into action is not clear. But I hope that it encourages more and more people to make a stand on these and other important issues.



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