

Alan Seymour (1927–2015)—a critical voice against Australian militarism

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The renowned Russian playwright, Anton Chekov, once said that the task of the artist is “not to solve the problem but rather to state the problem correctly.” It is with this in mind that we note the death in March of Australian dramatist, producer and script editor Alan Seymour, at the age of 87, best known for his 1958 play *The One Day of the Year*.

Written when Seymour was 31, *The One Day of the Year* is one of the few plays that challenges the myths surrounding Anzac Day, the annual Australian holiday commemorating the British-led 1915 invasion of Gallipoli in Turkey during World War I.

The nine-month campaign—the first major battle in WWI involving Australian and New Zealand—was a disaster, with more than 100,000 Turkish and Allied troops killed, including approximately 8,000 Australians. The Australian political establishment—then and now—insisted that the “bleeding” of its soldiers represented the “birth of the nation” and concocted various myths about the troops’ so-called special qualities. Such claims were promoted in order to cover up the reality of the Gallipoli conflict and the real nature of the imperialist bloodbath.

In line with Chekhov’s advice, Seymour’s play does not attempt to “solve the problem” of Anzac Day but rather explores the impact of the Australian memorial day and associated nationalist glorification of war on one particular family.

Alan Seymour was born into a working-class family in Fremantle, Western Australia on 6 June 1927, the youngest of six children. His mother Louise, a Cockney from east London who loved to sing and dance, was 45 years old when he was born. His father Herbert, a merchant seaman, was 63.

Seymour parents died when he was just nine-years-old—his father was killed in a wharf accident and his mother passed away a few months later from a blood clot. The young boy was raised by his oldest sister, May, and her husband Alfred Cruthers, generally considered as the model for the father figure in *The One Day of the Year*.

Seymour left school aged 15 and eventually found work at a Perth radio station. In 1945, he moved to Sydney and

worked for radio 2UE as a copywriter for a brief period before returning to Perth and working as a freelance writer for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC—now the Australian Broadcasting Corporation). From 1953–57 he was theatrical director of the Sydney Opera Group. In 1957, he first achieved recognition as a playwright for *Swamp Creatures*. Set in a Gothic mansion, the play concerns two sisters, one of whom experiments in the creation of monster insects. The insects were an allegory for the atom bomb.

The One Day of the Year is set in a small working-class home in Sydney’s inner-western suburbs. Alf Cook, a former World War II veteran, is frustrated with his job as a department store lift operator. “You dunno what it’s like shut up in that thing. It’s like a bloody cage, being polite to every no-hoper, every day all day.... I’m as good a man as them. Who says I’m not?” he complains.

Much to the ire of Dot, his wife, Alf and his mate Wacka Dawson, a Gallipoli veteran and friend of his father, who was killed during the Turkish invasion, are drinking and reminiscing about the war and looking forward to Anzac Day.

“I’m a bloody Australian mate, and it’s because I’m a bloody Australian that I’m getting on the grog. It’s Anzac Day this week, that’s my day, that’s the old digger’s day,” Alf tells his wife.

Alf’s son, Hughie is at university, the first to undertake tertiary studies in the family, and is disgusted with his father’s behaviour. Encouraged by his girlfriend, he plans to write an article for the university paper exposing Anzac Day and including photographs of seriously drunk soldiers. Alf eventually sees the article and is furious.

Father and son argue bitterly over the meaning of Anzac Day and the official claims about the Gallipoli campaign—subjects largely avoided in Australian drama at the time. These exchanges are powerful and highlight Seymour’s ear for dialogue and his ability to bring such contentious issues alive.

“All that old eyewash about national character is a thing of the past,” Hughie tells his father. “Australians are this,

Australians are that, Australians make the greatest soldiers, the best fighters, it's all rubbish.”

Gallipoli “was a waste. Certainly nothing to glorify,” he says at one point.

“... Every year you still march down that street with that stupid proud expression on your face, you glorify the bloody wastefulness of that day.”

Alf attempts to counter his son's arguments by declaring that the national holiday is all about looking after mates, in particular Wacka Dawson, who fought in the first and second world wars and was with Alf's father when he died at Gallipoli.

Wacka, however, admits that he was shocked with the official glorification of the Gallipoli veterans after the war. “We stayed there [Gallipoli] in the stinkin' heat with the stinkin' flies and the bully beef and the dysentery and sometimes the Turk trenches not ten yards away—we stayed there nine months ... When we went in there we was nobody. When we come out we was famous. Anzacs. Ballyhoo. Photos in the papers. Famous [but] not worth a crumpet.”

Towards the end of the play, Alf attempts to explain to his son the attraction of Anzac Day. “It's about boys I've known all me life, [who] went through the Depression with me, then the war. They're nothin' much either, but for one day they're something. Anzac Day. They make a fuss of you for once. The speeches and the march ... and you're all mates and everything seems all right.”

The conflict between Alf and his son was, in fact, indicative of shifting attitudes toward the Anzac commemorations in particular, and imperialist war in general, on the part of post-WWII youth. This shift coalesced during the 1960s around mass opposition to the US and Australian military intervention in Vietnam.

Hughie's anti-war sentiments anticipated the radicalisation of broad layers of youth around the world over the Vietnam War. In Australia, this was expressed in mass protests against compulsory military service for 20-year-old males.

In the late 1950s, the initial responses to Seymour's play were sharply polarised. Adelaide Festival's governors rejected it as too controversial, but when it was performed later that year by an amateur theatre group in Adelaide, it became a popular success.

Australia's political establishment, however, denounced the show. Seymour was labelled “a traitor and a communist” in parliament and the military veterans group, the Returned Services League, urged its members to boycott all future productions. There were death threats and, in April 1961, a bomb-scare during a dress rehearsal of the first professional season of the play at the Palace Theatre in Sydney.

After the ABC rejected a play it had commissioned Seymour to write— *Lean Liberty* —claiming that it made

“communism acceptable,” the playwright decided to move to Britain.

Seymour, who had no association with the Communist Party, lived in Britain and Turkey over the next three decades and was acclaimed for his television adaptations of L. P. Hartley's *Eustace and Hilda*, Antonia White's *Frost in May*, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and John Masefield's *The Box of Delights*, for which he received a BAFTA award. He returned to Australia in 1995 and continued writing until he began suffering from Alzheimer's disease about eight years ago.

While Seymour wrote scores of plays and several novels, his most significant and enduring work remains *The One Day of the Year*, which continues to be an important antidote to the glorification of militarism and war. The play is on the list of literature to be studied in schools as part of the national curriculum, is currently touring the east coast of Australia, and will be staged at the Finborough Theatre, Earls Court London, in May this year.

When Seymour first wrote the play, Anzac Day was in decline, with dwindling attendances at the annual marches and parades. But in the 1980s, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments initiated a protracted campaign to rehabilitate the national event, culminating in the World War I centenary commemorations and this year's 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli invasion.

The Abbott government has made available more than \$300 million for various memorial events—plays, symphonies, exhibitions, and countless other artistic happenings—all designed to lionise war, condition another young generation to sign up for new conflicts and drown out the anti-war sentiments of those like Hughie in *The One Day of the Year*. Alan Seymour would, no doubt, have been horrified by the current “celebrations” and of the entire government-corporate-sponsored WWI centenary juggernaut.

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