Before the Doll

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UPSTAGED: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN DRAMATISTS IN THE LIMELIGHT AT LAST
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T HIS BOOK AIMS to reinstate women at the forefront of Australian drama writing from the 1930s to the 1960s. The fact that there was a flourishing Australian drama scene during this period may come as a surprise to those who think that Australian theatre began with Louis Esson, experienced a long hiatus until Ray Lawler’s Summer of the Seventeenth Doll and reached full renaissance in the work of the APG in Melbourne and Nimrod in Sydney. As one of her subjects, Henrietta Drake Brockman, said to Michelle Arrow: ‘it’s all very well being a pioneer, but one gets a bit fed up at hearing the Doll spoken of as if it were Athena sprung adult from the head of Jove.’ Indeed, as Arrow points out, the Doll, a work that began its trajectory toward classic status by winning a playwriting competition in 1955, shared that prize with The Torrents, by Oriel Gray: a ‘gently feminist’ play, rarely produced and consigned to virtual oblivion.

Arrow considers how factors such as political activism and, later, World War II restrictions on imports created a favourable climate for women writers; and the cultural forces (not only, as one might expect, the then-prevailing attitudes to women) that led to the obliteration of her subjects from the history of drama in Australia. As she shows, these forces were still in play at the beginning of the so-called New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s: for example, the ‘total theatre’ style of performance pioneered by Sydney’s New Theatre, and exemplified by Mona Brand and Patrick Barnett’s On Stage Vietnam (1967), remains unacknowledged as the model for the more widely acclaimed The Legend of King O’Malley (1970).

The book’s title carefully describes its subjects as ‘upstaged’ rather than ‘forgotten’ or ‘ignored’. Some of the women — Ruth Park, Dymphna Cusack, Betty Roland, Gwen Meredith, Coral Lansbury, Katharine Susannah Prichard — have had significant recognition, though, as Arrow points out, not primarily as dramatists in the accepted sense. Arrow argues that such writers are mostly absent from histories of Australian theatre because they worked in less conventional forms, notably in the political or ‘oppositional’ theatre sustained by the New Theatre movement that sprang up in five states during the 1930s; and in radio, the main experience of any form of drama for Australians during the pre-television era.

The New Theatre movement provided almost the only outlet for women wishing to write for the stage. Most of the women were on the political left, some were active members of the Communist Party — at least until the Hitler–Stalin non-aggression pact of 1939. For women such as Gray, Brand and Catherine Duncan, their writing and their politics were largely inseparable. The fact that the mainstream press for many years refused to review the work of the New Theatres, and that it was widely dismissed as propaganda, undoubtedly contributed to its relative invisibility.

Writing for radio — one-off plays, features and serials — was ideal for women, most of whom had to combine their work with household and child-rearing duties; and unlike writing for the stage, it could provide a steady, if relatively meagre, source of income. Features from the radio magazines of the time depict these women either as glamorous ‘career girls’ or precursors of the ‘supermum’, dashing off five episodes of a weekly serial while cooking dinner and feeding the baby with their other hand. Arrow speculates that the appeal of radio drama over stage writing for women may also have been its greater sense of intimacy between listener and writer. The women who sustained themselves by radio writing tended to regard it as a lesser form of creative activity, a poor and ephemeral substitute for recognition as a writer of lasting talent, a ‘culturally transcendent being’ in Drusilla Modjeska’s phrase (somewhat overworked here by Arrow); though, as Arrow points out, a substantial number have since used memoirs, autobiographies and the compiling of personal archives ‘as a way of writing [themselves] into literary history’.

Upstaged reads at times like a series of individual essays rather than smoothly linked chapters. We are told several times that Gray wrote for the television series Bellbird and that Roland wrote The Touch of Silk. There are strange omissions: Miriam Hampson, for many years the mainstay of Sydney’s New Theatre, is mentioned in passing but not indexed; some works cited in footnotes are not listed in the bibliography. There are some sloppy errors: ‘Menzie’s’ and [Clifford]’ Odet’s’, ‘mitigated against’, ‘effect’ for ‘affect’; Charles Moses is wrongly described as the ABC’s ‘founding General Manager’.

Arrow is an historian, self-described as ‘someone who gets her kicks rummaging through archives’. This is not a book for anyone seeking insights into the dramatic impact of the women’s work; there is no passion for performance. Only once does Arrow mention attending a performance (The Torrents), and, curiously, although Dymphna Cusack’s powerful play Morning Sacrifice has been professionally produced in recent years in both Sydney and Melbourne, she mentions only reading it ‘with some friends at home’. Nevertheless, her research is thorough, ranging from ASIO files to extensive New Theatre archives, and she was able to interview a number of her (now elderly) subjects. She appends useful biographical notes on the twenty-one women who fitted her criteria for selection. She succeeds in demonstrating that there was a lively continuum of Australian drama writing in the twentieth century, and in according due recognition to the women who played a central, even dominant, role.