

***Kerry Walker, Patrick White and the Faces of Australian Modernism***

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The paper brings together two of Bruce Bennett's enduring interests: Australian modernist drama, and the life and work of Patrick White

**Abstract**

This essay considers the work of Australian actor Kerry Walker (b. 1948) in the years 1977-1989. It focuses on Walker's acting style in the roles she played in a variety of works by Patrick White, her approach to acting and her enduring friendship with White. It seeks to document the specific qualities Walker brought to her performances in White's plays and to explain her distinctive understanding of White's drama.

Kerry Walker has been described as a 'theatre animal with a seemingly effortless knack of drawing the audience's gaze to her' (2009). Yet when she graduated from NIDA in 1974 she was told she would not succeed as an actor because of her looks. It is almost impossible to imagine this comment from the distance of 2012, especially given the transformations she produces as an actor within one role, as well as the range of roles she has essayed over her long career. In spite of the discouraging comment about her looks upon finishing her studies, Walker has had an extraordinary career and is one of the most interesting actors to have contributed to Australian theatre, film and television over the last forty years. Walker has worked in regional theatre in New South Wales and in South Australia as well as on mainstages in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. Her dark hair, dark heavy-lidded eyes, pale skin and restrained intensity mark her unique physical presence. In fact she capitalised on her exceptional facial flexibility and her own writing talent in her one-woman play *Knuckledusters: The Jewels of Edith Sitwell* in 1989 when she portrayed the modernist poet and critic.

It is significant that Walker was identified by playwright, Nick Enright in 1994 as 'an actor's actor', someone whose work is never motivated by the desire to please, and who always has a strong sense of what her role is (Barrowclough 1994, 36). Enright is regarded as an actor's playwright and so his comments are significant. At the same time Walker is regarded as a maverick actor 'with a very good line to people on the edge' (Barrowclough 1994, 36). Enright also observed that Walker's most successful roles were when she played 'marginal people'. Geoffrey Milne refers to her (among others) as versatile and eccentric (Milne 2008, 54). Perhaps her 'eccentric' qualities are critical to her capacity to play roles in which comedy and satire blend with more esoteric

spiritual quests. One of the key features of Walker's early career, 1974-1989, is her versatility and intelligence in so many varied roles: Mother Courage in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1982), Feste in *Twelfth Night* (1984) Alice Dalton in *Bliss* (1984) and Mrs Lusty in *The Ham Funeral* (1989). As a young actor she did not shy away from older roles: Mother Courage in 1978 and 1982, the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* (1978), Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (1980) and Ivy Vokes in *Signal Driver* (1982). Walker has not resisted difficult parts: Irene Harding in John Romeril's *The Floating World* (1976) and Mog Figg in *Netherwood* (1983).

Walker's name is inscribed in Australian theatre history because of her achievements in creating new roles in the film adaptation of Patrick White's story *The Night the Prowler* (1978) and White's stage plays *Signal Driver* (1982), *Netherwood* (1983) and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987). In spite of this association with White and her many other achievements however, little is known about Walker's life or her attitude to her profession.

Walker's view of the actor's job is unequivocal. She believes the actor is 'an instrument for serving the text' and that the actor is his or her own 'laboratory' (Barrowclough 1994, 36). Walker says that after the death of a friend in the early 1990's she found herself crying, screaming and banging her head on the bed. She caught herself amidst her grief and thought about how 'extreme grief' causes extreme behaviour. Yet she wondered whether she would be brave enough 'on stage to go that far' (Barrowclough 1994, 36). Walker learned from her own experience of profound grief and observed her own behaviour, and that is critical for an actor. But Walker is clear that an actor must 'never sit in judgement on a character' because that is for the audience, whereas the actor needs to understand the reasons for their character's behaviour and 'forget moral judgement' (Barrowclough 1994, 36).

Elizabeth Schafer observes that the work of directors, performers and designers has a great deal to contribute to the understanding of Patrick White's plays (2011). Schafer does not focus on actors in her analysis of Armfield's productions of *The Ham Funeral*, *A Cheery Soul* and *Night on Bald Mountain*, but does acknowledge that all practitioners preparing for a production know a text intimately and that they must 'examine it, and then own it, inhabit it, and embody it, more fully than even the most scrupulous of scholarly readers or editors' (Schafer 2011, 1). Schafer quotes the English actor Simon Russell Beale who stated that in acting 'every part is an exercise in three-dimensional literary criticism' (Bedell 2003). Beale's idea is not at odds with Kerry Walker's view of the actor 'serving the text', given that the text must be interpreted by both the director and the actor in order to be served. Beale's understanding of the role of the actor is critical and goes a long way to identifying the significance of the actor in 'playmaking'. The actor is as important, if not more important than the director in 'serving' the text. Yet scholars and theatre critics continue to focus on the director's vision, rarely noticing the way in which an actor offers literary criticism.

Walker's style of acting is restrained and pared back and with this she has a talent for the highly comic. Enright though of it as a withholding quality in her acting. On and off the stage she is often described as 'enigmatic' 'private', 'secretive', even 'inscrutable'. Walker's manner is serious and quiet and she is known for her dry wit and devilish sense of humour. Like many other actors, she has gone to great lengths to protect her privacy, dislikes interviews, and is retiring by nature.

Walker's reticence, savage sense of humour, reserved personality and propensity for harsh self-criticism may have contributed to her understanding of Patrick White, with whom she enjoyed a close friendship over thirteen years, after she played the lead role in White's film adaptation of his story *The Night the Prowler* (1978), directed by Jim Sharman. Her understanding of White's personality as a friend may also have given her some insight into what Elizabeth Schafer identifies as the 'theatricality' of White's plays (2011, 2). White's attraction to Walker as an actor may have been partly to do with her pliable face, her ability to convey a range of emotions facially. In his fiction and in his stage directions White gives attention to faces. One reviewer of the Sydney Theatre Company production of *The Ham Funeral* in 1989 noted this point and referred to Walker's facial versatility (Carmody 1989). There are numerous instances in which White focuses on faces. For example in *Riders in the Chariot* White wrote of '... Miss Hare, whose eyes were always probing ... (White 1961, 12), and in *The Tree of Man* of Stan: 'Already, as a boy, his face had been a convinced face. Some said stony. If he was not exactly closed, certainly he opened with difficulty' (White 1956, 29). In *A Cheery Soul* there are frequent stage directions for facial expressions: 'frowning', 'squinting', 'staring'.

Walker and White spoke almost every day on the phone, wrote letters and cards to one another and saw one another every week except when Walker was working away from Sydney. White was extremely fond of Walker whom he called affectionately 'Kerro' and their correspondence reveals his high regard for her and his delight in her sense of humour. One post card he wrote to her shows a black and white photograph of the head and shoulders of a dancer in Berlin taken in 1929. White wrote 'Saw you staring out of the post card rack'. He frequently sent her cards of film stars with pithy comments on them: Buddy Holly, Judy Garland and one of Mae West smiling seductively and wearing a massive broad-brimmed hat with huge feathers shooting up from it. White wrote on this card: 'If I ever get into drag it will be in this hat.' (12 April 1982; Walker Papers). Of all the actors White 'took' up, Walker remained close to him until the end of his life, did not fall out or disappoint him as others did, and seemed to give him great pleasure as a friend and as a performer.

White wrote several parts for Walker, including the Female Being or Second Being in *Signal Driver*, Mog Figg in *Netherwood* and Elizabeth in *Shepherd on the Rocks*. Walker and White first met after Jim Sharman cast her for the role of the strange and frumpy Felicity Bannister in *The Night the Prowler*. Sharman had suggested that White adapt the short story for film. It was the first time White had written a screenplay. Sharman found it difficult to cast the role. He said that he required 'an actress who could dominate the screen for two hours ... and switch from a repressed, stay-at-home daughter to a wildcat, roaming the streets and scaling walls – all with a minimum of dialogue' (Sykes 1977). Walker auditioned for roles in White's *A Cheery Soul* and Louis Nowra's *Visions*, two plays Sharman was casting for productions at the Old Tote. On the basis of her auditions Sharman invited Walker to do a screen test for the role of Felicity Bannister and quickly observed her ability to meet the demands of the part. Sharman showed White the screen tests of various actresses without mentioning his own preference and White was unequivocal in his choice: Kerry Walker. (Sykes 1977).

The role of Felicity Bannister was complex, largely physical, and Kerry Walker was only three years out from her final year at NIDA. Like so many of White's stage plays, *The Night the Prowler* is a tragi-comedy, and is overlaid with expressionist elements,

grotesque images, satirical comment and epic themes. Walker mastered the surly and spoiled adolescent, transforming into a sinister and violent leather-clad prowler herself, before discovering a dying tramp in a derelict house. Felicity's encounter with the naked putrefying man allows her to break through to a new realisation of her true self and a liberating understanding of life. The combination of satire with existential and spiritual questing posed a challenge that seemed to suit Walker as an actor, and prepared her for other roles in White's plays. Jim Sharman explains that 'a very Australian understanding of tragi-comedy' was the element that connected White's writing to his realisation of it on stage and screen (2008, 268). Walker too seems to have a connection to that understanding of tragi-comedy, and an unusual capacity to embody it in character.

### **Lighthouse**

In 1982 Walker signed a two-year contract with the State Theatre Company of South Australia, joining an ensemble of actors under a new name: Lighthouse, The artistic director was Jim Sharman, with Louis Nowra as associate director and dramatist in residence. Sharman appointed Neil Armfield as a guest director; he also approached his chosen actors to join the company and envisaged it as working from a German model rather than those found in the West End or on Broadway (Sharman 2008, 318). Lighthouse presented fourteen new productions over a two-year period under Sharman's artistic direction, including two new plays by Patrick White.

Geoffrey Milne has shown how Lighthouse achieved a highly successful ensemble theatre company and suggested that it 'seeded' various partnerships that came together in later years (Milne 2008, 42-3). Katherine Brisbane and Philip Parsons were invited to the productions, as Milne reports, in the interests of promoting the work of the company nationally. In 1982 Brisbane wrote about the rise in actors' theatre, quoting Sharman:

We have gone through a period of having a director's theatre, a writer's theatre ... Now I think we are in a transition period and the actor is very important ... I think I can say that the most striking aspect of Lighthouse is the actors. They have a strongly individual approach. (Brisbane 1982).

Walker and another of the ensemble members of Lighthouse, Russell Kiefel, had studied at NIDA together. The other actors were: Robyn Bourne, Peter Cummins, Robert Grubb, Melissa Jaffer, Alan John, Gillian Jones, Melita Jurisic, Stuart McCreery, Robert Menzies, Jackie Phillips, Geoffrey Rush and John Wood. Geoffrey Milne spent a year with Lighthouse as a writer and researcher for Magpie and recalls that the strength of the company was both in the powerful work they created but more importantly in the responsibility the actors took for the whole company, from decision making to entertaining at first night parties. Sharman's success therefore was not only in presenting innovative theatre but in developing an enterprise in which the actors were central (Milne 2008, 53). In spite of Sharman's achievements and hopes, and the magnificent work of his ensemble during the Lighthouse years, it would appear that an actors' theatre is still not evident in Australia and that a director's theatre is very much in the ascendant.

The Lighthouse season in 1982 opened with White's *Signal Driver*, a play for just four actors; the first full ensemble production, staged later that year was *A Midsummer*

*Night's Dream* in which Walker played one of the mechanicals Tom Snout and also one of the fairies, Moth, with Sharman's 'electric actors' Geoffrey Rush and Gillian Jones appearing as the 'boss fairies Oberon and Titania' (Sharman 2008, 316).

### ***Signal Driver***

The first Lighthouse production was Patrick White's three-act play *Signal Driver* which had its premiere on 5 March 1982 at the Playhouse, Adelaide. Sharman had requested that White write the play for the 1982 Adelaide Festival of which he was artistic director. According to Walker one of the interesting aspects of working on a play written by Patrick White was that the scripts were ready to be performed and did not require changes or cuts to scenes. White worked hard to make the scripts as ready as they could be for the actors and had already done some rewriting of Act One of *Signal Driver* (Marr 1991, 609). Also White was involved in rehearsals for the plays. (Walker 2001, 8). Previous directors of White's plays had not allowed him such access (Marr 1991, 609).

Walker found Neil Armfield's 'rigorous, academic approach' to directing, to be a highly effective one for her as an actor. She appreciated the time spent on a first reading followed by discussion, then a line by line reading followed by lengthy discussion of the play by the whole cast. By the end of the first week of rehearsals the actors would then read the play together again, sometimes in a 'moved reading' but not always. For her this careful process led to a sense amongst the cast of 'collective understanding and ownership' of the work which provides a 'strong foundation for the rehearsal period' (Walker 2001, 9).

During the first week of rehearsals for the premiere production of *Signal Driver* White stayed with Walker in Adelaide and attended rehearsals daily. He did not say much during the discussions because in Walker's view he did not like 'having to explain the work' and preferred the actors to discover it for themselves. Walker recalls that he 'listened intently to the discussion' and 'enjoyed these days immensely' because he 'valued the company of actors and relished their humour' (Walker 2001, 8). He had spent hours with Armfield before rehearsals reading him the play aloud and showing him the bus stop he and his partner, Manoly Lascaris, frequented for their regular trips to Taylor Square. The bus stop was also the place Patrick would escape to after arguments with Manoly. White cried all the way through the rehearsals of Act 3, and told his friend, the writer Elizabeth Harrower, that 'it tears me to bits, so much of our life in it' (28 February 1982; Marr 1994, 554).

White had always enjoyed theatre and the company of actors. He kept dozens of old theatre programs and notes about actors and plays covering many countries and many years (Marr 2008, 8). His friend from his London days, the actor Ronald Waters, believed that White wanted to write 'one great play' more than all the novels (Marr 1991, 385). Yet initially writing was something he felt that he settled for because he could not do what he would have liked to do and that was to act. He recognised that he did not have the confidence to pursue acting and described his situation in *Flaws in the Glass*:

Lacking flamboyance, cursed with reserve, I chose fiction, or more likely it was chosen for me, as the means of introducing to a disbelieving audience the cast of contradictory characters of which I am composed (White 1981, 19-20).

According to Walker the play had its origins in New York in 1940. White's friend Peggy Stewart, who was an actress but retired by then, would often quarrel with her husband and pack up her suitcase and leave him. He would chase her and find her at Grand Central Station and then 'coax her home again' (Walker 2001, 1).

One of White's specific loves was music hall and vaudeville. Walker speculates that White's experience of revue early on in his career had given him 'a distaste for naturalism in the theatre' (Walker 2001, 7). He wrote the part of the female Being, a kind of supernatural, music hall chorus figure for Kerry Walker, and told Gus Worby in an interview for *Theatre Australia* before the play premiered that he found it easy to write for her because he knew her well and knew her voice well (Worby 1982, 15).

White returned to Sydney after the first week of rehearsals but kept in touch with Walker and Armfield by telephone before coming back to Adelaide for the production week of rehearsals. Walker recalls that White was pleased with what he saw in that week. However there was one element that he did not like. At the end of the play the Aurora Australis becomes visible. To create the effect of the dazzling southern lights a massive painted silk cloth floated out from the back of the stage covering the audience and the stage, as Walker suggests, to provide a symbol of the joining of 'characters, actors and audience'. For White and indeed for Armfield and possibly for Walker too, it was perhaps 'too literal an interpretation' and the decision was made to dispense with the silk cloth and create the effect of Aurora in lighting (Walker 2001, 10; Armfield 1983, ix). In retrospect it may have been a case of White over-stepping his role because the description of the massive silk cloth enfolding the audience and the players, sounds innovative and spectacular.

In 1985 Walker appeared in another production of *Signal Driver* at the newly established Belvoir Street Theatre in Surry Hills, Sydney. It was the inaugural production of the infant Company B and was directed once more by Neil Armfield, his third production of the play. Although White had written the part of the Female Being or Second Being for Walker, both Armfield and White wanted her to play the part of Ivy Vokes. John Gaden played Theo, pleasing White very much because he had long admired Gaden as an actor. A black and white photograph by Regis Lansac of Walker as Ivy and Gaden as Theo in middle age, their arms linked, facing straight out to the auditorium, reveals Ivy looking strong, solemn and proprietorial in a silk taffeta full-skirted 1950's dress with gloves and pearls.

According to Walker the intimate space at the Belvoir Street theatre was perfect for *Signal Driver* and much more appropriate than the Playhouse in Adelaide where the play premiered. The stage at Belvoir was kept bare with only 'a long bench, a wind machine, a barrel full of pebbles and a sheet of metal – devices operated in full view of the audience by the Beings to create various effects. Even the proscenium arch of the shelter had become redundant in such an intimate space' (Walker 2001, 12). It would seem that the stage setting was explicitly referencing Beckett.

White's health was poor during the rehearsal period and so he attended sporadically, and according to Walker, still found it difficult to sit through Act 3 without experiencing 'distress' (Walker 2001, 12). On opening night White sent Kerry flowers and a note with the words: 'Kerry - Age beautifully – Love Patrick' (Walker Papers). Walker's ability to play the role of Ivy and her transformations over a fifty-year period was remarkable. She recalls that the opening night applause were 'rapturous' and that White appeared on stage at the curtain call, standing in his beret and scarf beside John Gaden 'who was still dressed as old Theo, with a beret and scarf'. The image of the frail White standing next to Gaden is etched in Walker's memory. Their resemblance was 'striking' (Walker 2001, 12). White was delighted with the production but in the days that followed he was appalled with the critical response to the play itself. Harry Kippax praised Walker and Gaden for their 'sensitive explorations of character' but declared that '[T]he play is slight.' (Kippax 1985, 10) In a luke-warm review in the *Daily Mirror* Frank Gauntlett wrote that one moment at the end of the play stayed with him: 'the chorus of two dragging open the back wall of the Belvoir Street Theatre and dancing into the grotty night of Clisdell Street, Surry Hills .... a wonderful and strangely shocking exit for two irksome characters' (1985).

Walker describes the writing in *Signal Driver* as 'fugue-like' and that having played both female roles she discovered a 'wholeness' and 'completeness' in the play (Walker 2001, 13). In her view any production of the play should recognise the nuclear threat that hangs over the action and that the bus shelter is a symbol of a 'place to hide' as well as a little theatre where Ivy and Theo 'act out their lives' (Walker 2001, 5). The play offers a grim analysis of marriage and of materialism in Australia and White called it in his sub-title 'A Morality Play for the Times'. In this work White laments what he saw as 'the decay of Australian society as reflected in two characters' (Worby 1982, 13). The relationship between the married couple Ivy and Theo is at the centre of the play, portraying three distinct phases of their lives from their early married days right through to their old age. The characters never manage to escape one another, in spite of attempts to do so at the tram/bus stop. In addition to the symbolism offered by the bus stop as a place of refuge and escape, another key symbol of the play is the kitchen table that Theo made himself. Walker sees it as a representation of 'honest, domestic truth versus the vanity and barbarism' of the nuclear threat that haunts the play (Walker 2001, 6). Theo is a cabinet-maker and at the end when he and Ivy are old it is still there, scarred, just like the two characters. In 1983 Neil Armfield described the play in relation to this symbol, calling the work 'strong, solid and simple' just like the table (Armfield 1983, vii).

### ***Netherwood***

In 1983 Walker created the role of a retarded young woman called Mog Figg in White's next play, also commissioned from White, and produced by Lighthouse under the direction of Jim Sharman. The play is set in an old house somewhere outside Sydney in the Moss Vale area, where a couple look after some mentally ill people. White was horrified at the new government policy of releasing mentally ill people into the community to fend for themselves. Moggy Figg is a 25-year old child murderer and a 'wise fool' character (Milne 2008, 52). It was another challenging role and demonstrated Walker's fearlessness at 35, and her ability to play characters from all classes of society. White wrote the play especially for the Lighthouse ensemble of actors. Geoffrey Rush played Dr Eberhard, a psychiatrist. The play explored one of

White's life-long interests: the masculine qualities of women and the feminine qualities of men. Walker talked at the time about the rendering in the play of 'the fear of these qualities in ourselves' (O'Brien 1984, 8).

White flew to Adelaide for the opening night and was pleased with the play. Once more though, he was infuriated by the critical response: Harry Kippax damned the play and thought it 'did not work' but he praised Walker in her role as 'a waif, but aggressive, with a dead baby in her past' (Kippax 1983). Peter Ward's review in the *Australian* was not as vociferous: 'With these characters, White has created a world in which the notionally insane are finally seen to have the greater grasp of what is true in heart and mind. Pitted against them is a curious "reality"' (Ward 1983). Walker was philosophical and said that 'to present the fears and neuroses of a society, we're not always thanked' (O'Brien 1984, 8).

With a season of *Twelfth Night* behind her, in which she played the clown-fool Feste as an 'androgynous figure' (O'Brien 1984, 8) recalled by Geoffrey Milne as 'lugubrious' (2008, 52) the Lighthouse Company disbanded and Walker returned to Sydney in 1984. It had been an intense and productive two years for Walker, and the end of what is sometimes called the 'Lighthouse legend' (Sharman 2008, 319). Sharman's decision to leave came after the Board rejected his plan to stage seven new Australian plays for the 1984 season (Milne 2008, 52). In his own memoir Sharman recalls some of the pain of the period at Lighthouse where the reception to plays was 'often hostile'. He once daringly attempted to explain the philosophy of the company during a season launch, drawing on a Rolling Stones song: 'You can't always get what you want, but sometimes – you get what you need ...' (Sharman 2008, 319).

Walker seems not to have regretted the break-up of Lighthouse. She told a reporter at the time that the: 'worst thing for an actor is sinecure. You need constant change' (O'Brien 1984, 8). Amongst her possessions were 240 unread books, casualties of her extremely busy life in Adelaide where she spent all of her time in the theatre with other actors. Walker has always worked hard to maintain friendships with people outside the theatre, fearing that staleness, insularity and lack of understanding of life would stifle her work if she did not maintain strong connections beyond the world in which she works.

### ***Shepherd on the Rocks***

During the period of their friendship, between 1977 and 1990, when White died, Walker offered White creative ideas. During the Sydney season of *Signal Driver* at Belvoir in 1985, she read him out aloud an extract of a book by Alan Jenkins entitled *The Thirties* (1976), recounting the disgrace and defrocking of the vicar of Stiffkey in Norfolk, for his immoral relationships with prostitutes in London. After his fall Reverend Harold Davidson took a job performing with lions in a sideshow. He was eventually eaten by one. On hearing this part of the story, White declared 'Oh, I know all about that. I was at Cambridge with his son.' (Marr 1991, 626). According to David Marr, that very night Patrick White began writing a play based on the story of Davidson but set in Australia. He called the play 'The Budgiwank Experiment' but later changed it to *Shepherd on the Rocks* and presented the Reverend Davidson's story: a disgraced minister called Daniel Shepherd, living in a suburb of Sydney in a parish called Budgiwank, finishes his days in an act performed at the Jerusalem Easter Show.



Kerry Walker played a prostitute called Queenie and Neil Armfield directed the premiere production of the play. John Gaden created the lead male role of the minister. White had envisaged Gaden and Walker in the lead roles of Danny and his wife Elizabeth, but Walker recalls that Armfield had difficulties casting the role of Queenie and so she took it on because the role of Elizabeth was easier to cast. Wendy Harmer played Elizabeth in what Walker recalls in a file note was 'an unusual choice' (because Harmer had little stage acting experience) and that Patrick was delighted with her in the role (Walker Papers). Geoffrey Rush played Archbishop Wilfred Bigge and Henri Szeps played another bishop.

Walker looked into the etymology of the word 'queen' and noted down on her script copy its Dutch origins in 'kween' meaning a barren cow. She noted that it was a disparaging term for a 'bold or ill-behaved woman; a jade and a harlot, strumpet' (Walker Papers). The play has some 30 parts and 14 scenes and was not easy to stage. Patrick White had drawn his own set design but Brian Thomson's design bore no resemblance to the way in which White had imagined it. Thomson's design highlighted the circus elements of the play, something White found troubling (Marr 1991, 631). White told David Marr that he had found it necessary to 'remind them that the play was about the varieties of religious experience' (Marr 1991, 631).

Both Patrick and Manoly flew to Adelaide for the opening night. The critical response was mixed. Ken Healey praised the 'boyishly enthusiastic' John Gaden for his 'brave and cleansing performance' as Danny Shepherd. He described the character of Queenie as a 'streetwalker who saw Shepherd as a stairway to paradise' and a 'genuinely touching' grotesque (Healey 1987). Barry Oakley's review was harsh: 'White gives us a pair of clergymen so cardboard even such talented actors as Geoffrey Rush and Henri Szeps can't fill them out' (Oakley 1987, 33). However Oakley referred to Walker's performance warmly. Peter Ward in a relatively sympathetic review, described Walker's Queenie as 'a classic bump-and-grind hooker, all glitzed over' but found the play 'not well made' (Ward 1987, 6).

Walker's role as Queenie marked the end of her creation of new roles in plays by Patrick White. He did begin writing an additional four pieces for her under the title 'Four Love Songs' but concerns about defamation of the politician-lovers in one of them entitled 'The Whore's Cat' prevented development of this piece. Another of the pieces featured a satire of the life of Mary McKillop, but this was never finished because White found himself more and more admiring of this saintly figure and unable to make her a satirical target (Marr 1991, 632).

### ***The Ham Funeral***

Walker appeared in new production of White's play *The Ham Funeral* in 1989. White had written the play in 1947 but it was not staged until 1961, by the Adelaide University Theatre Guild, in a production directed by John Tasker. White's friend Frederic Glover had encouraged him to 're-furbish' the play rather than consign it to the rubbish, and he took this advice and worked on it during a visit to Athens in 1958. The Royal Court in London considered the play, New Yorkers Zachary Scott and Ruth Ford took an option on it, and the Elizabethan Trust in Australia also expressed interest but nobody was game enough to stage it in this period. In fact the play was rejected by the Board of Governors of the Adelaide Festival of Arts for the festival program of 1962, on the

grounds that it was 'offensive'. The discovery of a dead human foetus in a garbage bin and the dance of copulation in the play may have been the cause. Understandably the decision was a blow to White and aroused considerable bitterness.

*The Ham Funeral* is a complex, radically modernist play, drawing on many theatrical traditions and styles, with few naturalistic elements and an inward looking main character. As Akerholt says it anticipates Beckett and Ionescu (Akerholt 1988, 9). *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in 1953, six years after White's play was written in 1953. Had White's play been performed closer to the date of its composition the history of modernist theatre might inscribe White rather than Ionescu and Beckett as its 'father figure.' As Barry Oakley stated the play 'was ahead of its time in Europe as well as in Australia. Its boldness lies in its attempt to project dramatically the deeper states of the psyche' (Oakley 1989). John McCallum states that White was 'the first successful modernist dramatist – in the special Australian sense of the word, meaning non-naturalistic' (McCallum 2010, 140). Walker herself notes the 'expressionistic, surrealist, poetic and vaudevillian' elements of the play (Walker 2001, 7). These elements are found in all of White's plays and create enormous challenges for actors, directors and audiences.

The action in the play is based on a story told to White by the painter William Dobell in 1946 in London, and informed by White's own experiences as a lodger in a house in Ebury Street London when he first lived in London in the 1930's and during the first months of the blitz. Dobell told White about the background to his painting 'The Dead Landlord'. Dobell lived in a house in which 'the landlord had died and his landlady had taken down her hair, announcing there would be a ham funeral, and that he must go and fetch the relatives' (White 1961, reproduced in the program for *The Ham Funeral*, 1989). From this anecdote White wrote his play, which was eventually set in the post-first world war period. White recalls agreeing to this suggested change by director, John Tasker, because he believed that 'it might increase the air of surrealism and timelessness which I had been aiming at' (White program). In the program notes for the premiere White talked of the 'courage' of the cast and the 'skill' of John Tasker who 'will have dissolved my stubborn groups of statuary into the fluid lines of workable theatre' (White 1961; 1989).

May Brit Akerholt served as dramaturg on the STC production and summed up the strangeness, excess and comic brilliance of the play in the program:

Who would have thought of putting together in the melting pot of a play an embryonic poet, his Anima or 'soul mate', a raucous and randy landlady, a silent, monumental landlord, two scavenging ladies of the dilapidated music-hall variety, and four mourning relatives ... as Mrs Googog puts it: 'It takes all kinds to make a tasty dust-bin.' (Akerholt 1989)

Kerry Walker played Mrs Alma Lusty. The play had not been staged in Sydney for some twenty-eight years and White named actors he thought suited the parts. Max Cullen played the landlord, Robyn Nevin and Maggie Kirkpatrick played the vaudevillian scavenger ladies, Mrs Googog and Mrs Fauburgus who the young man encounters on his way to fetch the rather grotesque relatives for the funeral. The young poet was played by Tyler Coppin and the girl by Pamela Rabe.

The play presents a young and at first rather withdrawn lodger, who wants to be a poet, and who discovers what it means to be part of the lives of other people and to engage with the messy, vulgar, fleshy experiences in the kitchen and basement of his landlord and landlady's house, and through the strange celebrations of a life after it has passed. Like Felicity Bannister he confronts the physical realities of the death of a man as he helps Alma move his body. In the course of the drama he faces the nourishing, earthy ribaldry, and vulnerability of the man's widow, bringing him to a new state of human understanding in the 'luminous night' (White 1967, 74).

White attended the rehearsals, which according to Walker, followed Armfield's meticulous approach that had worked so effectively for the Adelaide ensemble. Walker's script copy is covered in her pencilled notes, with detailed instructions to herself on how to deliver lines: 'recitative', 'heated', 'quicken pace', all her actions, gestures and movements including yawns, are recorded on it and Armfield's comments on her tone and delivery are also noted on the script. There is no indication from the script copy of any determination on accent but Walker's Australian accent was criticised by Bob Evans in an otherwise positive review of the production, who found it perplexing because 'her role seems so painstakingly [sic] written in a working-class English dialect'. Evans found Coppin's American accent equally puzzling. By contrast Ken Healey interpreted the diversity of accents as indicative of each character being 'rooted in a reality far more universal than any accent' (Healey 1989). He also criticised the way in which Walker's Mrs Lusty and Coppin's Young Man interacted, complaining that it lacked 'the visceral connection that can inspire the pathos White intended' (Evans 1989).

Most of the critics praised Walker's performance as Mrs Lusty and applauded many dimensions of the production, though some expressed reservations about the play itself, finding it static, limited and dramatically deficient, in spite of its exuberant theatricality (McGillick 1989; Oakley 1989; Neill 1989). Paul Le Petit found Walker's performance compelling, speaking of her 'magnetism' (1989). Another reviewer described her as 'one of our most creative actresses' (McGillick 1989). One critic noticed what I believe to be one of Walker's most significant qualities as an actor. John Carmody talked about 'the flexibility' of Walker's face as she played the landlady. He observed her in these terms: 'sensual and ribald, sensitive and uncouth, assured and vulnerable, vigorous and lethargic, poised and clumsy' (Carmody 1989). Barry Oakley noted that Walker first brought the character to 'realistic life' and then took her 'into the power of archetype .... Instinct insensate' (Oakley 1989). These comments reflect Walker's transformative power as an actor and her distinctive achievement in this modernist play.

Patrick White and Manoly Lascaris came to see the production on opening night. White told an ABC television journalist 'I can't hope for a better production than this. It is the great night of my life' (Marr 1991, 641). It was to be his last time at the theatre.

Kerry Walker, perhaps more than any other actor, has inhabited and embodied the difficult roles White created, with passion and understanding. Her friendship with White brought him great pleasure and inspired his writing. Like him she understood the arts as 'a concrete reflection of our lives' (Walker 1993). Walker's performances of Felicity Bannister, the Second Being, Ivy Vokes, Queenie, Mog and Mrs Lusty reveal her mastery of White's ideas about human behaviour and demonstrate her capacity for

experimentation. In these roles she offered 'three-dimensional literary criticism' and revealed the enigmatic faces of Australian modernism.

Kerry Walker's Papers are held in the State Library of NSW.

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