In the following essay, the authors survey Australian realist drama of the 1950s and 1960s. They consider the theater of this period to be an experiment in grafting emotion onto the stock symbol of the national character, the strapping Australian male—a challenging task for dramatists, given the stereotype’s inarticulacy and propensity for violence.

In his lectures on The Making of the Australian Theatre, the inaugural director of the AETT, Hugh Hunt, lapsed uncharacteristically into the local vernacular in declaring his frustration with the state of Australian playwriting:

Conflict and emotions are at the heart of all drama, but conflict can only be expressed by articulate people. When realism descends to the inhabitants of the backyard, conflict has to be couched in monosyllables and emotions have to take the form of physical violence. It is difficult to think of any Australian play which does not end up with a ‘blue.’ Passionate expression almost inevitably takes the form of fists and boots in a drama which cannot make full use of language. (Hunt 1960: 17)

Hunt shared with Australian dramatists of the 1950s a conviction that emotional conflict was the key to effective drama, but he expected that conflict to be articulated in eloquent language. A failure to express emotion through language may also be regarded as a masculine character trait, in which the force of emotion is channelled instead into acts of physical violence. Ray Lawler’s Summer of the Seventeenth Doll (1957) epitomises Hunt’s observation that physical violence substituted for eloquent expression in Australian theatre. Yet, in looking closely at stage directions in the play script and actual footage from productions, we can see how such acts as the “blue” between Roo and Barney or Roo’s smashing of the doll were occasions that were not simply where language gave way to inarticulate violence, but where male performers also engaged new techniques of realist acting for expressing emotion.

Our focus in this chapter shifts from musical theatre to realist plays. We begin by considering an articulation of masculinity and nationality through the concept of the stereotype which informed the production and reception of Australian theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. We then analyse some scenes of violent action scripted for male actors in the realist plays first staged at this time, including Richard Beynon’s The Shifting Heart (1958), John Hepworth’s The Beast in View (1961) and Ru Pullan’s Bird with a Medal (1961). Our analyses reveal how theatre came to be used in Australia as a kind of laboratory for experiments in performing the masculinity of the national character. These were dramaturgical experiments in which playwrights varied the mix of actions and words in attempts at scripting characterisations resonant with national preconceptions about Australian men. The chapter may be read as a case study in a broader field of research on acting, emotion and gender (Tait 2002), although our approach to articulating the emotional aspect of theatrical sources—play scripts, prompt copies, production photographs,
film footage and so on—derives its understanding of emotion from firsthand respondents such as Hunt, who found the theatrical expression of emotion a particular problem in productions of Australian plays. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Debra Oswald’s *Gary’s House* (1996), a more recent play which critically re-dramatises the emotional inarticulacy of an Australian man.

**The Australian Character as Masculine Stereotype**

The life and character of the nation were topics of lively discussion in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s. A raft of publications contributed to these discussions, including A. A. Phillips’ *The Australian Tradition* (1958), Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), J. D. Pringle’s *Australian Accent* (1958), Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* (1964), and Peter Coleman’s anthology *Australian Civilization: A Symposium* (1962). A notable feature of these books is their rehearsal of the character traits of the typical Australian, even if this was often undertaken in order to reveal the national character as a familiar yet inaccurate caricature. Although not the most well known, here is one such rehearsal of the national character, presented with some justification of its plausibility:

There is a common and well preserved belief that the people who make up any particular nation have certain typical characteristics that arise by virtue of their national background, their cultural tradition, conditions of life and, very often, their biological heritage. These beliefs about national characteristics are seldom valid for the majority of the population and they therefore represent only stereotypes. In Australia these stereotypes are given more than usual plausibility in that most Australians are in greater agreement about their own national characteristics than are people of other nations.

What image is conjured up by the phrase ‘a typical Australian’? The popular image is that of a man of 30-40 years of age, dressed indifferently, speaking with an unmistakable Australian accent, bearing himself with a casual but confident air, friendly and wearing an easy-going expression, but betraying a ready propensity to become aroused by any attempt to dragoon him or to invade his rights to self-determination. His occupation and class are vague as he could equally well be urban or rural, skilled tradesman or white-collar worker—it matters little as he is quite adaptable from one to the other. (Taft 1962: 191)

Whereas literary critic A. A. Phillips and historian Russel Ward had imagined the national character to be a myth or a legend with a difficult-to-determine and debatable relation to the nation’s history, the concept of the stereotype, as developed within social psychology and introduced to Australia by psychologist Ronald Taft, proffered a more precise method for investigating the social actuality of widely held beliefs about the national characteristics of the Australian people. Nevertheless, following the lead of Phillips and Ward, Taft proceeded to elaborate the masculine traits of the national character in familiar terms: his rural and working-class derivation and his anti-authoritarian stance; his emphasis on toughness and suffering rather than skill, vision, or success; his investment in mateship and an “exaggerated masculinity” (Taft 1962: 195).

In the same volume, writer and critic Max Harris wrote of “the masculinity of Australian life” in an essay addressing the “Morals and manners” of the nation in
which he accounted for a relation between national character and artistic expression in explicitly gendered terms. According to Harris, the Australian emphasis on "practical materialism," on the pursuit of "practical unimaginative activity" and on a capacity to improvise and make-do, meant that "social life, manners, imagination, and the arts are bred into the culture later on (if they are bred into it at all)" (Harris 1962: 60). Harris regarded this "practical materialism" as "an inborn interest in the male Australian." On the other hand, he regarded Australian women as "very little individualised from their British counterparts" (62). It is as if for Harris, as for other writers at the time, Australianness is itself gendered masculine.

Theatre played a role in these discussions about national character. Commentators and critics saw in the theatre of the late 1950s some of the traits of the national character that were being described and debated at the time. Taft noted how:

the traditional myth is concerned mainly with masculine behaviour, but it has a place for two types of women, both typified by the half-prostitute, half-mother barmaids of Summer of the Seventeenth Doll. (1962: 195)

And Harris recalled Alf from Alan Seymour’s The One Day of the Year saying, “I’m a bloody Australian. That's good enough for me,” in order to demonstrate how, in secular Australia, “it is more realistic to essay the moral ideal of being a good national than a bad saint” (1962: 50; see Seymour 1961: 26; also chapter 8). The discussions about national character also provided a framework in which scholarship on Australian drama emerged. Peter Fitzpatrick (1979) and Dennis Carroll (1985), for instance, both cite Russel Ward's more famous description of the typical Australian at the outset of their books, as does Leslie Rees (1973) in concluding his history of Australian theatre (see Introduction). In each case, an appeal is made to Ward’s synthesis of character traits as a yardstick with which to measure the Australian characters written by playwrights.

P. H. Davison’s essay “Three Australian plays: National myths under criticism” (1963) and H. G. Kippax’s essay “Australian drama since Summer of the Seventeenth Doll” (1964) both offered detailed, sustained, and explicit commentary on nationality and masculinity in their analyses of The Doll, The Shifting Heart and The One Day of the Year. In both essays, the discussion focuses almost exclusively on the male characters and their relations, troubled as they are in each play by differences of gender, ethnicity and generation. While Kippax offers a more sustained discussion of the plays’ literary nationalism, the introductory paragraphs of Davison’s article are indicative of the concerns with Australian masculinity in both articles:

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, The Shifting Heart and The One Day of the Year all say something about Australia and they say it well enough to have attracted attention outside Australia. These plays criticise aspects of contemporary Australian life and re-examine a number of Australian myths. Beynon, concerned with the relations of New and Old Australians and the supposed inherent superiority of the latter, says what he has to say, clearly, determinedly, and unsubtly. [...] Seymour, in his dramatisation of the attitudes of old and young to Anzac Day, strips away the illusions of father and son in such a manner that the play ends, not with the bang we are earlier led to expect, but with a whimper of resignation. Summer of the Seventeenth Doll reveals, beneath its simple story, an awareness of the
contemporary significance of the legendary prowess, strength, masculinity, and exclusiveness of the Australian bushman. (Davison 1963; reprinted in Holloway 1987: 203)

Beyond their recognition of the playwrights’ contribution to the discussion on national character, Davison and Kippax both aimed at critically assessing the dramatic form of these new Australian plays and their effectiveness in the theatre. Their articles are, in fact, highly critical and urge Australian playwrights to learn from the shortcomings of their plays and to write ever more satisfyingly coherent, dramatically convincing and realistically Australian drama. Subsequent dramatic criticism in Australia differed in critical approach. Margaret Williams (1972, 1977), for instance, would dispense with the criteria of realism and the well-made play and take up the concept of stereotype in developing a response to the plays of the so-called new wave.

At one time, to describe a character as stereotyped would imply criticism of the playwright for failing to develop a character with realistic depth. Criticism in these terms was directed at the new wave playwrights by critics such as A. A. Phillips who claimed that “the adoption of stereotyping […] usually shuts a dramatist off from the greatest achievement within the character” (1973; reprinted in Holloway 1987: 337). But in Williams’s writings, reflecting in part her research into the stock characters of nineteenth-century melodrama in Australia, the stereotype was re-evaluated as a critical term indicative of the social critique at work in theatre. Indeed, what became valued in the plays of the new wave was not their concordance with aesthetic standards of dramatic construction or theatrical experience, in the way, for example, that The Doll was held up as a model of the well-made play. Rather, what Williams and other critics writing in the 1970s valued in Australian plays was an effective application of theatrical conventions and vernacular language within a project of social analysis and critique invested in and troubled by the masculinity of the national character.

Writing about Jack Hibberd’s White with Wire Wheels (1970) and Alex Buzo’s The Front Room Boys (1970), Williams argued that:

the stereotype is not simply a satirical cartoon, or even a levelling device which reduces the characters to conforming anonymity; it becomes a defensive shell, a protective ‘front’ to cover insecurity and limited awareness, and it springs a deadly trap, locking its victims into their adopted roles through the very ritual patterns that seemed to afford security. It is surely a dramatic exploitation of stereotype which grows out of this most conforming of societies, where the pressure to act the universally accepted image is peculiarly strong, and where its levelling and deadening effect is most clearly seen in the repetitious evasions of the vernacular. (Williams 1972; reprinted in Holloway 1987: 329-330)

Such an analysis deployed not only a dramaturgical conception of the stereotype as a recognisable stock character, but a psycho-social conception of the stereotype as an ideological formation that stands in a determining relation to social identity and behaviour. In a similar way, Peter Fitzpatrick’s (1979) interest in the stereotypes of the bushman and the ocker was indicative of a concern with the social relations of Australian plays, with the way theatre models a relation between ideal character types and the actuality of living or failing to live up to them. In the work of both
Williams and Fitzpatrick, there is an explicit interest in investigating how Australian plays, particularly those of the new wave but also those from the earlier realist phase, expose the psycho-social dynamics of Australian masculinity to critique.

**National Inarticulacy as Acting Style**

One of the recognised traits of the national character was inarticulacy. "He is usually taciturn, rather than talkative," wrote Russel Ward in his oft-quoted account of the typical Australian at the outset of *The Australian Legend* (1958: 1). Or as Brian Fitzpatrick wrote in 1956:

[The] Australian approach to articulation is best indicated by a generalisation: utterance is better not done at all; but, if it is done, when it is done, it were well it were done slowly and flatly and expressionlessly, to betoken that the subject, any subject, is hardly worth talking about.(Quoted in Fitzpatrick 1979: 10)

For Phillips, this national tendency towards inarticulacy set a challenge for the arts and arts policy. "A country cannot achieve nationhood until it has achieved articulacy," he asserted in *The Australian Tradition* (1958: 133). The task of national articulation presented a particular challenge for Australian playwrights and theatre critics. "In the disinclination of that stereotype of the Australian male to speak," wrote Peter Fitzpatrick, "there are very considerable problems for the playwright who would put him on stage" (1979: 10). However, we note that these “considerable problems” assume a classical conception of theatre as a genre of imaginative talk, a theatre in which linguistic eloquence is the key to emotional expression and theatrical success.

It is such a conception of theatre in which linguistic articulation is pivotal to the theatricalisation of emotion that underscored Hunt’s frustration with backyard realism, with the recourse to “fists and boots in a drama that cannot make full use of language” (1960: 17). Hunt’s frustration with the backyard realism of Australian theatre in the 1950s, with its dramatic conflicts “couched in monosyllables” and expressed in “physical violence” (17), thusarticulated a linguistic distinction of national significance. Hunt was an Englishman, a man of the theatre, with a taste for the eloquent language of the classical repertoire. Hunt directed productions of Euripides’ *Medea*, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*, and T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* in his time as director of the AETT.

Striking a clear contrast with the linguistic eloquence of British theatre, Australian-born theatre director Wal Cherry described *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* as a play of “the inarticulate people” in which “actions speak louder than words” and “the inarticulate nature turns to violence, as it must” (Cherry 1956; reprinted in Holloway 1987: 186-187). He quotes Lawler as saying “These people feel emotions which are too deep for their expression” and diagnoses that “a major part of the tension of the play arises from the words which are not spoken, words which are expressed finally in action so tremendous that Roo’s life and Olive’s life are shattered beyond repair” (187). In acknowledging Lawler’s commitment to Australian realism, Cherry sought to recognise how violent action may, in some qualified way, substitute for linguistic eloquence as a means of emotional expression:

Roo and Olive [...] can never express their status, because they have no words of their own—only feelings too deep for expression and everyday words, whose roots
do not twine deeply in their hearts. In *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* actions speak louder than words. The play is dominated by a sense of energy; energy suppressed or lost or dissipated. So much of the movement is carried by the fight on the cane fields, the tremendous strength of Roo, the fight in the parlour, the vicious smashing of the dolls. But the commentary on this beautifully conceived movement lacks the finality, the deep penetration, which marks a great play. (Cherry 1956; reprinted in Holloway 1987: 187)

Tom O’Regan, a scholar of Australian television and film, recognised the significance of physical action as emotional expression in *The Doll* by suggesting a connection between Lawler’s play and method acting:

*The Doll* was created by an actor. It is an actor’s play. A method actor’s play. If its dialogue emphasises seeing and being seen, its stage directions indicate a level of gesturality, a dimension of hystericisation, an excess of the body of the actor—which is more familiar within method acting. (1987: n.p.)

O’Regan’s suggestion is that method acting, a realist style associated with the work of Lee Strasberg at the Actor’s Studio in New York, may have become known to Lawler in Australia through the films of Elia Kazan such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954). Unlike acting in the British classical tradition, the Method did not seek to express a character’s emotion primarily through the eloquent articulation of poetic language. On the contrary, inarticulacy—or, rather, an ineloquent way of under-performing the articulation of words and emphasising, instead, the paralinguistic aspects of utterance—became something of a hallmark of the style for male method actors on screen, as the performances of Marlon Brando and James Dean attest. The ineloquent masculinity that method acting lent to the performances of American and British actors in the 1950s and 1960s has been observed by others (Braudy 1996; Bracewell 1998). Film historian Leo Braudy describes how performances like Brando’s in *On the Waterfront* and Dean’s in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1956) created a “theatricalized masculinity […] that demands an audience just as often inside the film as outside—yet is simultaneously crippled and manipulated by it” (1996: 292).

The American actor Hayes Gordon introduced method acting to Australian actors in Sydney in 1958 at what became the Ensemble Theatre (Parsons 1995: 247; Lewington 2005). On the invitation to Gordon’s first production, which featured selections from the works of Tennessee Williams, one of the actors apparently wrote: “We haven’t a name yet. Yes, we admit to training—Strasbergian, Stanislavskian, Meisnerian, Gordonian etc and we emphasise what might be referred to as the ‘ensemble’ values in production” (quoted in “Company History” 2006). The slightly defensive tone of this admission may be responding to an attitude then prevalent that training betrayed a deficit of natural talent. Australian actors Michael Duffield and Dennis Miller of the Union Theatre Repertory Company (UTRC) (later the Melbourne Theatre Company), then under the directorship of Englishman John Sumner, spoke with hearty scepticism of the “Method” in a television broadcast in 1963 (*In Vision* 1963). As an actor with the UTRC, Ray Lawler performed the role of Barney in Sumner’s premiere production of *The Doll*, transferring to Sydney after opening in Melbourne in 1955, and then to seasons in London and New York under the auspices of the AETT. While it is unlikely that Lawler ever had an opportunity to train in method acting, it is plausible that an aspect of method acting evident in
Kazan’s films—namely, the significance of physical action for expressing the emotions of male characters—informed the scripting of stage action in *The Doll*.

**“Blokes of the She’ll-Be-Right Persuasion”**

Enactments of masculine violence abound in the realist plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Playwrights and performers used the emotionally charged methods of realist acting to generate moments of climax, in accordance with otherwise classically derived conceptions of dramatic form which, in particular, applauded playwrights who provided for a strong second-act curtain.

The prominence of these moments of climactic violence for audiences at the time is evident in a Cinesound newsreel from 1957 which announced the transfer of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* to London (“Summer of the Seventeenth Doll” 1957a). The newsreel’s producer chose to film the fight between Barney and Roo at the end of act 2 as the scene with which to metonymically represent the whole play. “Barney and Roo, for sixteen years, journeyed south from the cane-cutting fields of Queensland and each year they give their girls a kewpie doll,” explains the newsreel announcer as Barney charges at Roo. Roo swings a stage punch at Barney, grapples him by the throat and wrestles him down onto the table. Olive rushes in, yelling “Stop it, Roo, stop it!,” followed by Emma (“Pair of flamin’ larrikins!”), Bubba and Pearl. Olive breaks up the fight, but the scene is set for accusation, admission and climactic revelation. Barney challenges Roo to admit they had “a rotten season up north”; Barney, with his arm held twisted behind his back by Roo, reveals that Roo “never had a bad back”; and Roo, after tossing Barney into a chair, reveals how many knock-backs from women Barney has had. “And Nancy,” yells Roo at Barney, who is cowering in an armchair, “after seventeen years, you couldn’t even hold Nancy!” At this point, Barney reaches for a vase containing the kewpie dolls and swings it at Roo’s head, although it is Roo who, grabbing the vase, brings it crashing to the floor, smashing the vase and scattering the dolls. As Olive kneels among the shards and nurses the doll to her bosom, the announcer, leaping ahead to the end of act 3, condenses the whole play in this climactic moment: “The seventeenth doll is shattered, symbol of a broken romance. But for the cast it’s the end of another triumphant performance. And let’s hope there are many more like it, as *The Doll* goes overseas.”

There were, indeed, many more like it—many more performances of *The Doll*, but also many more plays like *The Doll*, which created climactic moments from the violence of men. Following *The Doll* with its blue between Barney and Roo at the end of act 2 and Roo’s fit of pique in smashing the doll at the end of act 3, there were stage productions of:

- Barbara Vernon’s *The Multi-Coloured Umbrella* (1961), from 1957, in which two brothers fight amid sexual jealousies inflamed by alcohol, one brandishing a broken bottle as a weapon, the other falling from a balcony in his attempt to retreat (see chapter 9)
- Richard Beynon’s *The Shifting Heart* (1958), also from 1957, in which the narrative is impelled by violent acts represented on stage in a parade of physical injuries and domestic conflict: Gino’s slashed face, Leila’s black eye, and Clarrie’s smashed fist
• Ru Pullan’s *Curly on the Rack* (1958), from 1958, in which a group of men come to blows over the spoils of war amid the tropical torpor and paranoid anarchy of post-war Rabaul (see chapter 5)

• Anthony Coburn’s *The Bastard Country* (1963), from 1959, a revenge play set in outback Victoria, in which a Greek peasant avenges the war-time rape and murder of his wife by infiltrating the perpetrator’s family, killing their farm dog, marrying the daughter, and murdering (in self-defence) the crazed father (see chapter 3)

• Peter Kenna’s *The Slaughter of St. Teresa’s Day* (1972), also from 1959, in which pandemonium breaks out, a man is stabbed, and another shot, despite Oola’s efforts to keep her annual St. Teresa’s Day party free of the alcohol and weapons which are so often coincident with violence

• John Hepworth’s *The Beast in View* (1961), another from 1959 (a good year!), in which a young man from the slaughter yards of an abattoir, at odds with the sexualised sophistication and alcoholic highjinks of his boarding house mates, bashes his girlfriend to death behind the couch

• Oriel Gray’s *Burst of Summer* (1960a; 1960b; 1998), from 1960, a study of race relations in a country town, in which an Anglo-Australian footballer blinds an Indigenous man with a broken bottle and attempts to take hostages with a shotgun (see chapter 4)

• Ru Pullan’s *Bird with a Medal* (1961), from 1961, a study of youth culture in which a young man, confounded by femininity and heterosexual desires, stabs another young man with a garden fork to prevent him from prostituting his girlfriend.

It was a winning formula: realistic enactments of masculine violence at moments of dramatic climax generated theatrical experiences that were socially compelling, distinctly masculine, and appropriately Australian. It was, in effect, a solution to the problems of staging “the masculinity of Australian life.” As Max Harris explained in his review of the premiere production of *The Beast in View*:

It would seem as if Australian drama is going to develop steadily along the lines of realistic melodrama. It is being peopled with characters who are tough, sinewy, and resilient, but by no means as insensitive as they seem. If you think of *The Doll*, ‘Shifting Heart,’ ‘Bastard Country,’ and now ‘The Beast in View,’ you will find the central figures are blokes of the she’ll-be-right persuasion who have become lost and bewildered in situations where this rough and ready philosophy won’t work. (Harris 1959)

What troubled these “she’ll-be-right” blokes of the realist plays was their entanglement in shifting dynamics of gender and ethnic difference. Their response to the situations they blunder upon and become bewildered by was invariably and inevitably violent. This is how Harris describes, with some sympathy, what happens to the “she’ll-be-right” bloke of *The Beast in View*:

Bodge, a 21-year-old slaughterman, [is] a ring-in from the espressos of the Cross, confused as a penned ox in this atmosphere of beat-up sophistication. Seduced by Elli [the boarding house landlady], and teased by a little tart from the Cross he has brought home, Bodge deals with his caged misery the only way inarticulate man or beast can […] by violence. He strangles his little tart. (Harris 1959)

The idea of entanglement as a way of describing the gender trouble that precipitates enactments of masculine violence arose from a survey of publicity photographs from productions of these plays. One kind of image that was generated in production and
selected for publicity purposes depicted male and female actors in close physical contact, with their limbs crossing or entwined, and their musculature manifesting degrees of tension or strain. Textually, these moments of entanglement are structured in play scripts as oscillations between romantic affection and sexualised violence. One such moment is from The Beast in View. It reveals how such oscillation is textually composed from a sequencing of physical actions and verbal utterances. Bodge, who is also known as Joey, is at a cafe with his girlfriend, Kathie, who has just been evicted. Keen to help out, Bodge shows Kathie a one pound note that he had borrowed earlier from his landlady:

Kathie

And what do you think you can buy for that, boy?

Bodge

You don’t buy outright these days, girl—no-one pays cash—it’s all time payment—and here’s our deposit on the whole world!

Kathie

Except for me, brother—except for me.

Bodge

(still playing it light) Can’t you be had by installments?

Kathie

Strictly for cash, boy, and if that’s your offer it’s good for a short-time—down in the park—bending over.

(Bodge’s face is suddenly deathly white. He reaches his hands across the table and seizes her hands. She gasps, immobilised, but her neck stretching with the sudden pain.)

Bodge

Don’t say that.

Kathie

(gasping) What did I say? … you’re hurting …

Bodge

You’re not a tart—you’re just a kid—(shakes her) understand that! There’s nothing clever or smart about being dirty like that.

Kathie
(with playful defiance) And I suppose you’re just a clean-living boy … it’s just the dreams that keep you awake and give you bags under the eyes … you never played sniggle in the long grass on your way home from school. (Bodge shakes her) … You’re hurting.

Stubbsy

(appears, laconically) Hey Joey! (Bodge relaxes his grip on her but does not turn around at Stubbsy’s voice.) I do not mind how my customers get their kicks—live and let live is my motto—but I am trying to run this as a family establishment—if you please! (Pause)

Bodge

(speaking to Kathie, not to Stubbsy) … Sorry …

Stubbsy

(shrugs) Maybe it’s a way of life … (off)

Kathie

(massaging her bruised wrists) What’s this—the big strong male?

Bodge

I’m sorry …

Kathie

Oh sure—that’s a way of making everything right, to say I’m sorry …

Bodge

(his face whitening again) … what the hell else do you want me to say …?

Kathie

I don’t want you to say anything … I don’t belong to you, boy … no-one puts their hands on me … I don’t want anything from you. Stick it!

Bodge

(on his feet, shivering with the effort to control himself) Right, doll. Go your own way … just keep away from me … (He turns to go. As he reaches the edge of the light, Kathie calls.)

Kathie

Joey!
Bodge stops. Tormented, irresolute.

Kathie

Joey. I’m sorry.

He turns slowly. And when he speaks it is almost beseeching.

Bodge

Don’t do that again, doll. I may not be able to walk away.

Kathie

(coaxing) Come back.

Bodge walks back slowly and walks behind her chair. He puts his hands on her shoulders. She is sitting straight and still. His hands linger lightly around her throat. One hand moves up and strokes her hair.

Bodge

Baby. (His inflection is oddly the same as Elli’s in the first scene.) Don’t ever do that again.

(Hepworth 1961: 1.2.3-4)

The oscillation in this scene between romance and violence, affection and aggression is obvious enough. What is interesting is how crucial the stage directions are to this oscillation. It is overwhelmingly Bodge who is the subject of stage directions: it is he who visibly experiences emotions—his face whitens, he shivers; and it is he who acts upon Kathie: seizing her hands, shaking her, touching her shoulders, stroking her hair. In contrast, Kathie’s fewer stage directions mostly qualify her speech—she “gasp,” she “coaxes,” she speaks with “playful defiance.” In just one instance, she is directed to attend to the impact of Bodge’s actions upon herself by “massaging her bruised wrists.”

This imbalance in the way actions and words are textually apportioned between the actors culminates in one of those photogenic moments of entanglement. As Bodge places his hands on Kathie’s shoulders, one hand lingering lightly around her throat, the other stroking her hair, Kathie sits straight and still, tensed but otherwise doing nothing. It also makes for some distinctly gendered irony as Bodge inverts the imbalance and blames Kathie for instigating the scene: “Don’t do that again, doll … Don’t ever do that again,” beseeches Bodge. Indeed, Bodge’s abdication of agency in this scene and elsewhere in the play is consistent with the way inarticulate enactments of violence are made both sympathetic to an audience and symptomatic of masculinity. “I never even thought about—it just happened,” says Bodge of his affair with the landlady; “I didn’t mean to do it. […] I just meant to shake her … Then I couldn’t stop” says Bodge when Kathie’s body is later discovered (see also chapter 7).
Depicting male characters as sympathetic victims in their perpetration of violent acts is not a straightforward task. One strategy that the realist playwrights took was to stage scenes of frustrated rage in which a male actor, overcome with emotion, lashes out with destructive futility and inflicts violence, not at other people but at other objects or the self. In a photograph from a production of Pullan’s *Bird with a Medal*, we see Georgie, played by Peter Oyston, stabbing at a comic book with a garden fork. The corresponding pages from a typescript of the play have handwritten alterations for an actor playing Georgie, with words struck out and inserted as indicated (italic) in the following excerpt. Jennie and Col have just exited to the bedroom of Jennie’s flat, leaving Marry and Georgie alone with a parcel of hot chips:

Georgie

*(staring after them)* Where does all this stuff go?

Marry

Who cares *(moves a few plates to one end of table, puts the newspaper parcel on the clear space and unwraps it. Georgie starts to read comic.)* What’s this? *(finds garden fork)*

Georgie

*(taking it)* It’s for them weeds.

*(Marry helps herself to chip potatoes from the parcel. Georgie stands at table reading the comic, drumming a tattoo with the fork.)*

Marry

*That a new book? I’m beat …*

Georgie

*I don’t know …. I just seen it …. look, Mary …. here’s somebody on a bike …. looks like Col. Marry … There’s a picture … man on a bike …. looks just like Col …*

Marry

*(glances at comic—shrugs)* So …

*(Georgie digs at the comic playfully with the fork. At that moment Jenn giggles from the bedroom. He looks up quickly and begins to stab again and again at the comic until the movement is unmistakably vicious and out of his control.)*

Jenn

*(Off)* Oh! Col.

*The curtain falls to indicate passing of fifteen minutes.*
At rise, the gram is playing loudly and Marry and Georgie are standing at the table, eating fish and chips from the parcel. Col enters from the bedroom, doing up the zip of his pants … a moment later Jenn follows him, wearing a loose shirt in place of bra.

(Pullan 1961: 3.18)

The handwritten alterations to the typescript suggest that it was a difficult moment for the actor to perform, requiring not just a giggle off stage but an “Oh! Col” from Jen as the trigger to shift Georgie on from digging playfully at the comic to stabbing viciously, again and again and out of control. This action, which occurs some way into act 3, anticipates the climax a few pages later when Georgie actually does stab Col in the stomach with the garden fork. As an acting challenge, this scene makes similar demands of an actor to those made in similar moments of solo male violence in other realist plays.

There is a scene in The Beast in View, where Bodge, alone in the cafe, sits sullenly through the waiter’s diagnosis of “doll trouble” until he can take it no more. The stage direction at this point specifies that “Bodge suddenly lifts his fists and smashes them again and again on the table” before jumping from his chair and rushing off left (Hepworth 1961: 3.1.2). And there is a comparable moment in act 3 of The Shifting Heart: it’s Christmas morning and Clarry finds himself alone in the backyard. His wife is upstairs about to give birth and he’s outside nursing a bruised and bloodied fist that got injured in a fight last night.

Clarry looks up at the window; moves wearily to the bed [on the veranda] and flops on its side, his head sagging uncontrollably. Silence. Then the sound of children—shrill with the excitement of newfound toys. Clarry flings himself from the veranda.

Offstage, the children laugh in high-pitched squeals. He sags against the fence R., turns to face it, supporting himself—arms outstretched along its top. Then he brings his right fist down and painfully, wilfully begins to punch, and punch the fence. Each new punch squeezing gasps of uncontainable pain from him.(Beynon 1958: 92; see chapter 6)

For an actor playing Georgie, Bodge or Clarry, these scenes demand a capacity to sustain the trajectory of an emotional score through action alone, through a progressively sequenced emotional crescendo of otherwise senseless and repetitive action.

Masculine Violence as Emotional Expression

In the realist plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s, intimate interactions between men and women oscillated between romantic affection and violent action. Sex and violence were dramatised as the flip sides of men’s response to their emotional entanglement in gender relations. In moments of intimacy that mingled violence with affection and in sympathy-inducing solo moments of frustrated rage, dramatists directed male actors to draw on a physical capacity for emotional expression, increasingly without recourse to linguistic expression. This emphasis on physical action afforded a more realistic, more masculine, more Australian mode of theatrical expression than the linguistic eloquence associated with British tradition of classical acting. In short, the men acting in these plays were required to get just as emotional as the women, and often more so. But they were also required to express emotion
on stage, not with recourse to linguistic eloquence, but in realistic acts of violence which effectively theatricalised the “masculinity of Australian life.”

There was no question, however, that Australian men should experience emotion and express it on stage; nor that enacting emotional experience should be the business of an Australian theatre—even when characters were required to experience emotions “too deep for their expression,” as must an actor playing Roo in performing that almost inexpressible affect prescribed by Lawler in a stage direction at the end of The Doll.

His body sags as the tremendous energy sustaining him through this last effort starts to drain away. Swaying a little on his feet like a beaten bull, he slowly folds down on to the piano stool and buries his face in his hands. Something breaks deep within him, but there is no movement in his body, he is far too inarticulate for the release of tears. (Lawler 1957: 128)

Whatever the challenges of enacting emotional inarticulacy for an actor, there can be little doubt that audiences of The Doll enjoyed seeing male actors express emotion on stage. An audience member recorded his response to actor Kenneth Warren playing Roo at the Theatre Royal, Adelaide, on 9 September 1956: “I particularly liked the last scene where he ripped the 17th doll to shreds, and broke down in uncontrollable tears” (White 1956). Whether Warren did, in fact, cry uncontrollable tears in that performance or whether the spectator’s memory embroidered the emotional intensity of the scene, this memory-image of a man on stage overwrought with emotion is strikingly fresh.

Examination of a prompt copy used for The Doll’s regional tour from 1956 to 1958 partially reveals two earlier versions of the final scene, both of which differ markedly from the published version in their apportioning of words and actions, particularly to Roo. In the prompt copy’s uppermost version, after smashing the doll, Roo “turns to Barney, speaking in a voice nakedly torn with frustration” and exclaims: “Well what are you waiting for—pack up! You heard what she said—we’re finished here. And there’s a whole bloody country out there—wide open before us!” (Thompson 1956: 3.28-29). In an earlier version, which is partially obscured, the scene has Barney delivering this line: “We’ll be on our own, Roo, making a fresh start—the whole bloody country wide open before us!,” and the play ends with Roo “repeating mechanically,” “The whole [bloody] country wide open before us …” (Thompson 1956: 3.29). Evidently, during those early years of rehearsal and production, Lawler experimented with the mix of words and actions in finding the best way to resolve relations between Barney and Roo at the end of the play. What becomes apparent when comparing the different endings in succession is that spoken words are progressively withdrawn from Roo and replaced by increasingly elaborate directions for physical action. As Roo becomes less verbally articulate with each version of the scene, his physical actions become more expressive of emotional affect.

Reconceiving acts of masculine violence in the realist plays of the 1950s and 1960s as a theatrical mode of emotional expression draws into question popular ideas about Australian men, their emotional inarticulacy or immaturity and their recourse to violence. What has developed in the decades since then is a critical perspective on the way realistic portrayals of emotional drama in gender relations have, according to dramaturgical convention, naturally resulted in violence. Violent acts enacted by men
continue to animate performances and attract audiences for such plays as Gordon Graham’s *The Boys* (1994), Nick Enright’s *Blackrock* (1996c) and Daniel Keene’s *Untitled Monologue* (2000a). But whereas such violent acts may once have indicated the natural expression of a man’s national character, they now come reconfigured within a marginalised disposition comprising youthfulness, unemployment, criminal delinquency and social disadvantage which men may potentially transcend (Butterss 1998).

In *Gary’s House* (1996), Debra Oswald revisits the traditional inarticulacy of the national character.8 Gary is a practical man of action, a traditional bloke drawn from a vanishing Australia. He stubbornly tries to fulfil the traditional bloke’s dream of earning the right to fatherhood (his girlfriend Sue-Anne is pregnant) by building his own house on his own land. Emphasising Gary’s “practical materialism,” the house itself is built by the actor on stage as the first act progresses. But the landscape has changed. Having gone bush to salvage their lives from welfare dependency and suburban boredom, to eke out a life of their own on the margins of mainstream society, Gary discovers that the land is not his to build on alone (it is a joint inheritance with his sister, Christine). What is more, Gary’s recourse to inarticulate violence is no moment of climax at the end of the play. It is presented from the outset in the opening scene:

Gary is working on the site, hammering down sheets of flooring onto the brick footings. He calls to the campsite offstage. […] There’s no answer […] he hurls the hammer down and stalks towards the campsite, winding himself up into a stiff-necked rage […] until the sinews in his neck are snapped tight. The rage overtakes Gary physically, like a fit that he’s accustomed to handling […] He stabs his head against the air, arms jerking to stop himself punching at nothing. He circles, trying to absorb the anger in constant movement. Finally he stops, sucking in short, sharp breaths. He consciously places his body in a controlled posture, to make his body act out the movements of a calm and reasonable person. He walks back to the footings. He starts nailing again, attacking the task fiercely, pushing the rage into each swing of the job. The rage subsides gradually. (Oswald 1996: 1-2)

In earlier plays, a propensity for inarticulate violence entangled men in their relationships with women, and here it is Gary’s girlfriend, Sue-Anne, who has the greatest capacity to wind him up. Where *Gary’s House* differs from the earlier plays is that the characters, including Gary, do not regard violence as natural, inevitable or excusable. Violence now figures as a cultural response which can be actively resisted: for the most part, Gary’s aggression is channelled constructively into the act of house-building.

Gary’s character has also been influenced by changes in social attitudes to fatherhood. As a father-to-be, Gary cares for his partner and her unborn baby in a knowledgeable and nurturing way, which contrasts with Clarrie’s comparative indifference to his wife’s pregnancy in *The Shifting Heart*. Not that the problems Gary encounters in relating to Sue-Anne and his sister, Christine, are readily resolved. On the contrary, Gary’s relationship with Sue-Anne worsens during the first half of the play to the point where, shockingly and unexpectedly before interval, he shoots himself.
The second half of the play explores the possibilities of more sustainable gender relations for the other two male characters who, though less aggressive than Gary, are no less inarticulate. By the end, they seem to have achieved this in strange but workable relationships with Sue-Anne and Christine. In a final action, wordless again yet emotionally articulate, Gary reappears as a ghost, a memory or fantasy of what might have been:

[...] the door swings open wider. Gary is standing in the doorway of the house. Christine stands and stares at him, holding the crying baby. Then, on impulse, she hands the baby over to him. He pulls the baby in close to his shoulder, head cradled into his neck. He rubs the baby’s back soothingly, drinking in his feel and smell. The baby settles into silence within seconds. Gary and Christine exchange a smile.(86)

Gary’s House stages a plausibly successful resolution to the problems encountered by Australian “blokes of the she’ll-be-right persuasion who have become lost and bewildered in situations where this rough and ready philosophy won’t work” (Harris 1959). It demonstrates the possibilities of men constructively expressing emotion and achieving sustenance in gender relations, even without linguistic articulation, eloquent or otherwise. But in bringing back Gary as a dead man to act out these possibilities, the play recognises that such solutions may not be straightforward or even possible in the social world of its audience.

Notes

1. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was first performed at the Union Theatre, University of Melbourne on 28 November 1955 in a production directed by John Sumner. The production transferred to the Elizabethan Theatre in Sydney, in January 1956, and returned to the Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, in July of that year. The AETT toured productions of *The Doll* around Australia from 1956 to 1960 and the play has been regularly revived since that time.

2. Robin Lovejoy’s premiere production of *The Slaughter of St. Teresa’s Day* opened at the Elizabethan Theatre, Sydney, on 11 March 1959. The play was also produced by the Melbourne Little Theatre (opening 26 October 1961) and the Adelaide Repertory Theatre (8 May 1962). On 23 May 1960, ABC Television in Sydney broadcast a studio production directed by Alan Burke. Production details on other plays are provided when they are addressed in this and other chapters as indicated.

3. *The Beast in View*, directed by John Edmund, produced by the Adelaide University Theatre Guild (AUTG), opened at the Union Hall, on 20 November 1959. It received two subsequent productions, in Richmond, Victoria, at the Arts Theatre in 1961 and in Sydenham, NSW, at the Pocket Playhouse in 1962.

4. Pages in the typescript are numbered according to act and scene. Slight alterations have been made to spelling and punctuation where necessary to correct errors in the typescript.

5. Peter Randall’s premiere production of *Bird with a Medal* opened at Melbourne’s Little Theatre on 16 March 1961.
6. *The Shifting Heart* premiered at the Elizabethan Theatre, Sydney, on 4 October 1957; the producer was May Hollinworth. The AETT toured the production around Australia and to London in 1958 and 1959.


8. Kim Durban’s premiere production of *Gary’s House* opened at the Q Theatre, Penrith, on 1 March 1996, and later played for seasons at the Playbox Theatre, Melbourne, from 29 March, and the Gold Coast Arts Centre, Surfers Paradise, from 15 May.

References


**Source Citation** (MLA 8th Edition)

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1100117058