Sumner Locke Elliott is remembered in Australia primarily for his novels and their popular screen adaptations. He is also known for his play *Rusty Bugles*, first produced in 1948. In the USA, he is known for his television writing. In spite of Locke Elliott’s immense achievements as a writer who successfully wrote in so many genres and quickly adapted his craft to the rapidly expanding medium of television, there is little scholarship about his contribution to drama on stage, radio or television, with the exception of commentary on *Rusty Bugles*. Moreover the network in which he worked from 1934 until 1948 has also suffered critical neglect.

This article examines Locke Elliott’s formative years working at the Independent Theatre in Sydney, the influence of Doris Fitton on his work in the theatre, and two of his plays written at this time, *Interval* (1938) and *The Invisible Circus* (1946). Both plays draw on Locke Elliott’s personal experience of the theatre and of radio and enjoyed great success when they were first produced at the Independent Theatre. Locke Elliott’s experience both in acting and writing during the years at the Independent, discussed
here, helped him to develop his skill as a playwright that culminated in his landmark Australian play, *Rusty Bugles*. The article reflects on the transformational qualities of the play and its place in Australian theatre history in light of its neglect by scholars and practitioners.

**SUMNER LOCKE ELLIOTT AND HIS LEGACY**

The early period of Locke Elliott’s career, in which he developed his writing for the stage and for radio in the 1930s and 1940s, is worthy of close attention because it demonstrates the importance of the work of the Independent Theatre in the development of theatre in Sydney and in Australia more generally, particularly for a number of actors who worked there before moving on to other ventures in Australia and abroad. It was also vital to the development of Australian drama because of the commitment that Doris Fitton demonstrated to presenting Australian plays whenever possible, among other works written by dramatists from all over the world. Many of the Australian plays presented at the Independent in its first decades remain unpublished and are held in manuscript in the Campbell Howard Collection at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales. These plays are part of a new digitisation project at the University designed to make them available for scholars and readers for the first time.1

When he moved to the USA after the Second World War, Locke Elliott began working with Fred Coe, a television producer at NBC. Locke Elliott was one of a team of writers who became known as the ‘The Golden Seven’. Besides himself, the team included Paddy Chayefsky, David Shaw, J.P. Miller, Tad Mosel, James Lee and Robert Alan Aurthur. For a short period, Horton Foote and Gore Vidal were also members of the team. The period working with Coe, in which Locke Elliott achieved extraordinary success when he left Australia, was as important as the
period of his career in which he worked with Doris Fitton in developing his writing for the stage in Australia.

Locke Elliott found satisfaction living in Manhattan, and he took out American citizenship in 1955. It was a golden age for television, and during the 1960s many actors became involved in the new medium. Some of the actors who appeared in screenplays written by Locke Elliott were Mary Astor, Maggie Smith, Angela Lansbury and Christopher Plummer. After this period of writing for television, Locke Elliott turned his attention to fiction writing and published a series of highly successful novels between 1963 and 1991, many of them set in Australia and several of them depicting the events of his own life. In the USA he met the writer Whitfield Cook, with whom he shared the last decade of his life, and in his last novel *Fairyland*, published in 1990, he drew on his own difficulties as a homosexual man, something he had kept hidden for most of his life.²

Three of Sumner Locke Elliott’s ten novels have been adapted for the screen: *Careful He Might Hear You* (1963), *Eden’s Lost* (1970) and *Water Under the Bridge* (1977). The character studies in these novels and the family dramas portrayed offer richly theatrical worlds. It is significant that the screen adaptation of *Eden’s Lost* was directed by the acclaimed theatre director Neil Armfield, the screenplay was written by the playwright Michael Gow, and most of the actors who appeared in this and Locke Elliott’s other screen adaptations trained for the stage and worked primarily in live theatre.³

**DORIS FITTON AND LOCKE ELLIOTT AT THE INDEPENDENT THEATRE**

Sumner Locke Elliott wrote plays as a teenager and, according to Sharon Clarke’s biography, by the time he was sixteen years of age he had written
some thirty one-act plays. The circumstances of his childhood were traumatic and difficult. His mother, the writer Helena Sumner Locke Elliott, died of eclampsia the day after he was born, he was estranged from his father Logan Elliott and his aunts fought over custody of him. The events of his childhood are portrayed in the autobiographical novel *Careful He Might Hear You*, which was adapted for a feature film in 1983.

At the age of sixteen in 1934, Sumner Locke Elliott walked into Doris Fitton’s office at the Independent Theatre Club Rooms situated in King Street, Sydney. Fitton recalls that he said confidently: ‘My name is Sumner Locke Elliott and I’m a playwright. I would like to become a member of the Independent Theatre and study theatre from every angle.’ He began by attending play readings at the Club Rooms, and working backstage. Gradually Fitton began to cast him in various plays produced by the newly established Independent Theatre. His first role was playing Henry Susskind in *Counsellor-at-Law* by the American playwright Elmer Rice. In 1935, he played a ‘shrill, aged functionary’ in *Lady Precious Stream*, an old Chinese play ‘done into English according to its traditional style’ by S.I. Hsiung, and a Pierrot character in a studio evening, as well as serving as stage manager for a production of the three-act comedy, *The Improper Duchess* by J.B. Fagan, in the same year. Locke Elliott played Dick McGann in Elmer Rice’s *Street Scene* in 1936, and a reviewer named him as a ‘stand out’ for his performance in the role of Edward Lawrence in *Touch Wood* by C.L. Anthony in the same year. He also appeared in an ambitious production of *1066 and All That* in 1939, playing Christopher Columbus in one scene and Old Kaspar in another.

Locke Elliott continued to write plays and, over a fourteen-year period, the Independent Theatre produced seven of his works. Fitton and the company of actors encouraged him in his writing and provided a forum for readings and development. Acting helped Locke Elliott to
develop his writing for the stage. He realised that even saying ‘a few lines’ means that a writer ‘gets to understand the workings of the theatre, he gets to understand the mechanics of writing for the theatre, and indeed, I did’. The life of the theatre also attracted Locke Elliott and enabled his creativity and self-expression. He made life-long friendships at the Independent and was, according to one of his friends, the actor Gwen Plumb, who called him ‘Summie’, a witty and amusing person and often the two of them had a room full of people convulsed with laughter. Sharon Clarke documents this period of Locke Elliott’s life and reveals that he immersed himself in drama and read Shakespeare, Shaw, O’Neill, Chekhov, O’Casey and Emlyn Williams. Before long he was cast in roles that required more of him, and Fitton believed in him as a ‘good actor’. In fact Fitton took a special interest in Locke Elliott. According to another member of the Independent Theatre, John Kingsmill, who was in the original cast of Rusty Bugles:

Of all the people who belonged to Doris’s inner circle, I find it hard to believe there was another she loved as much as she loved Sumner, although in my time she had other favourite actors and actresses, close to the throne. He had, however, simply enchanted her, and no one, in my brief time, seemed capable of supplanting him in her affections. He was Puck, he was Ariel, and if she’d had the nerve to so cast him, regardless of age, he might have astonished even himself.

Fitton married a Sydney lawyer, Norbert Keck Mason (‘Tug’), in 1922 and, even though she was a young mother of two boys, she dedicated most of her time to developing the Independent Theatre at a particularly difficult time during the Depression and the War. This was a period
when there were no government subsidies, no public drama schools, and when the professional theatre was dominated by touring productions from overseas. Leslie Rees suggested that history would group Fitton with other ‘staunch creative’ women of the ‘twentieth century crusading theatre’, such as Lillian Bayliss, Lady Gregory and Annie Horniman. Without the care and attention offered by Doris Fitton, Locke Elliott and others would not have had the opportunities to develop their acting, writing and other theatre-making skills.

Fitton set up the Independent Theatre Company with a group of like-minded actors in 1930, after a short association with the Turret Theatre in Milsons Point under the direction of Don Finley. Each of the actors contributed a small amount of money to launch the new venture. With access to the St James Church Hall in Phillip Street, the new company under Fitton began to put on regular productions. Later they performed in the Savoy Theatre and the Conservatorium of Music theatre, until they moved to a theatre in Miller Street, North Sydney, which they eventually purchased in 1945. Fitton had trained with GREGAN McMahon as a young woman in Melbourne. She regarded him as ‘the father of repertory theatre in Australia’, and valued his tuition in naturalistic acting and in the study of Shakespeare during the two years she spent with him. In reading Stanislavski’s My Life in Art, Fitton felt inspired to try to create theatre that fulfilled the goals set out by the Russian master. She began to read and to study Stanislavski in a concerted manner and marvelled at the emphasis on discipline in his handbooks, retaining an attention to discipline in her life and in her theatre company for the next fifty years. In addition to immersing herself in the way in which actors should learn, Fitton took note of how a theatre should work and how ‘all concerned must serve’. Her guiding principles were those of Stanislavski: ‘to produce the finest plays available, to take care with every detail in production, for everyone to serve the play and for there to be
Fitton recognised a set of ethics as articulated by Stanislavski that she had observed in Gregan McMahon’s approach to theatre. Later on in her life, in 1965, Fitton travelled to Europe and visited the Moscow Art Theatre. She recalls in her own memoir seeing The Three Sisters at Stanislavski’s theatre and the use of a perfect revolve in this production.

**A NETWORK OF ACTORS AND WRITERS**

From the beginning, Doris Fitton was committed to producing Australian plays, and generally included one in each season. In the first twenty years of the Independent Theatre, in addition to plays by Sumner Locke Elliott, the following Australian playwrights had their plays produced: Kathleen Moneypenny, Hugh McCrae, Dorothea Tobin, Frank Harvey, Helen Bousfield, Sydney Tomholt, George Landen Dann, Hansby Read, A. Lynne Foster, Catherine Shepherd, Gwen Meredith, Max Afford, Margaret Pearson, Noel Rubie, Ruth Park, Leslie Rees and Thomas Alexander.

Hundreds of actors performed at the Independent Theatre over its long life. Many went on to become well known and to transform the theatre in Australia and abroad. In the period when Locke Elliott was working there, John Alden, Madge Ryan, Michael Pate and Peter Finch appeared in a range of productions.

Locke Elliott first met Peter Finch in the production of Rice’s Counsellor-at-Law. Although Finch only had a few lines, Elliott was struck by his acting ability, recalling that he:

… was electric. I mean absolutely more brilliant than anybody in the entire cast put together and more brilliant than anyone we’d ever seen. He was rather grubby, looked as if he needed a bath, in shabby clothes … But through the grubbiness … this brilliance
Locke Elliott was so impressed with the seventeen-year-old actor that he cast him in his first play, staged at the Independent in 1935. *The Café on the Corner* presents the reaction of a family when a middle-aged woman brings home a lover from an earlier period of her life. Fitton was particularly enthusiastic about this play. However, Finch enraged Locke Elliott by failing to appear for rehearsals and by disappearing until the night of the performance, when he waved to Locke Elliott from the audience as the actors were taking their bows.¹⁸

Fitton encouraged Locke Elliott to write for the Independent. He wrote some revue sketches and other one-act plays after the production of *The Café on the Corner*. William Rees, another member of the Independent Theatre who had moved to the USA, sent a copy of *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* (1937) to an American producer, who successfully staged the play in Los Angeles.¹⁹ Locke Elliott received a letter from MGM offering him dialogue work should he wish to move to the USA.²⁰ He did not accept the offer but did begin to think about the possibility of moving to London to take advantage of opportunities in the theatre. However, the Australian swimmer turned vaudeville and movie star Annette Kellerman convinced him that he was more likely to succeed in the USA. Kellerman’s sense of things proved wise in the long run. She told Locke Elliott at the time:

> You’d be just another drop in the ocean in England … because you’d adopt the English method of writing, and you’d not be unique in any way … You have the kind of personality that Americans will like [and] you have an opportunity there to be quite different.²¹
Doris Fitton continued to encourage Locke Elliott in many ways, introducing him to significant theatre figures. She invited Locke Elliott to a dinner in Noel Coward’s honour when he visited Sydney in 1940, ensuring that they had a chance to speak to him. Locke Elliott’s recollection of the meeting reveals as much about his sense of humour as it does about Doris’s behaviour and Coward himself:

It was not a theatrical occasion, purposely serious (it was a deadly serious time, France had just fallen) and the audience was decidedly not made up of theatre people. At the conclusion of his affecting speech it was announced that Mr Coward would personally greet everyone as they were leaving. On and on they filed past the tall, svelte figure. ‘We will wait until last’ Doris said firmly, ‘then we might have a moment alone with him’. At last our turn came and our names were announced. We shook hands with the Master, who had by then shaken four hundred and ninety-eight hands. There was a moment’s pause. Doris leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial way. ‘We’re of the theatre’. Mr Coward’s blue eyes snapped and then the internationally known clipped voice said, ‘I knew it. I could see it shining from you.’

Locke Elliott’s move from acting to writing was gradual and in this shift he is one of a large number of Australian actors who have become writers, such as Barry Humphries (who continued to perform) and David Williamson. Susan McKernan points to Oscar Asche, Bob Ellis and Michael Boddy who also turned from acting to writing, and argues that the ‘actor’s need for new material’ has been a significant factor in the creation of new Australian drama.
Sumner Locke Elliott wrote several three-act plays after his success with *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon*, including one set in the West End, called *Interval*, which Fitton sent to Noel Coward to read during his Sydney visit. According to Fitton, Coward acknowledged the ‘potential of the play and the writer’ but criticised the opening scene in which the young leading lady is late arriving at her dressing room on the first night, stating that ‘No leading lady would ever be late on a first night to prepare herself for the stage’. Although they were popular at the box-office, *Interval* and Locke Elliott’s other plays of this period were seen as derivative works that reveal the extent to which their writer was in thrall to the contemporary English playwrights, particularly Noel Coward. Later, Locke Elliott expressed regret at setting *Interval* in England, ‘where I’d never been’. But he drew on the world he knew, the world of actors and writers, and their struggles. He was also seeking to write drama that would appeal to audiences well used to English settings. In this play, he honed his talent for satire and sharp dialogue, and his sense of audience enjoyment was keen.

*Interval* was a huge success on the stage in Sydney, and was produced in other cities around Australia, in Rabaul before the Japanese Occupation, and on radio in Australia. It was scheduled for production in London, but this did not eventuate because of the outbreak of war. The play presents a backstage story that takes place during the course of a three-year season of a production in a West End theatre, and focuses on the impact of success on two characters, a playwright and an actress, revealing the drama between the players behind the drama, and the personalities of the actors in the acting. *Interval* is an ingenious, witty and colourful play that received solid reviews. Locke Elliott directed the play and also played the role of the understudy, Gavin Gallowary, who is desperate for his moment on the stage to arrive, and yet when it does he is paralysed with nerves.
Locke Elliott focused in this play on the corrupting effects of success in the theatre, and the processes of betrayal and division that develop over the long periods of joint endeavour between actors and others involved in a production. Through comedy, he exposes the ways in which people perform a role in real life and the intricacies of personality and self-delusion in human relationships. The opening scene presents the dresser Marthy and the publicity agent Joyce waiting for the young leading lady, Laura, to arrive for the opening night. Marthy is irritated by having to arrange boxes of flowers in the room. Joyce explains that she has been up since half past six, being sweet to the Press. We had a photo of Laura in a negligee looking rather desperately at a flowerpot. It’s in the *Tribune* tonight with the caption, ‘Young Actress Rests Before First Night’, which is all rather confusing, seeing that the photo has come out with Laura looking decidedly as though she was going to throw the flower pot at someone.29

The dialogue is sharp and the transformations in the characters reveal their darker side as the season progresses. The humour lies in the acidic repartee, the rapid changes of pace, and clever juxtaposing of scenes. At the beginning, the young leading lady is almost sick with nerves and kind to everyone in the cast and crew. But as she becomes celebrated for her performance over the ensuing months, she changes, beginning a secret affair with the leading man, Warwick, even as she plans to marry the playwright, Terry. The action of the play shows three intervals in a long season. A full year passes between Acts One and Two, and four months between Acts Two and Three. Each character in the cast faces a crisis or a disappointment. Joyce, the loyal publicity agent, is in love with the playwright who is smitten with Laura; Decima Leyland, the
betrayed wife of the leading man, loses her husband but behaves with quiet dignity. Colin, the house manager, who holds a candle for Joyce, makes a fortune in reviving vaudeville theatre, and informs her that ‘there’s no money in this arty tarty repertory game’. Throughout the intervals, the producer and his bossy wife and a series of older actors and hangers-on arrive backstage, commenting on everyone in the play, and their personal business. One of the visitors is an older, broken-down and penniless actress who tries to help Laura but is shunned by most of the others.

Many of the smaller parts offer amusing portraits: the assistant stage manager ‘Corpsey’ Kent, who is awaiting news about the birth of his first child on opening night, gives graphic updates at inopportune moments to the cast as they wait to go onstage. Gallowary, the ambitious understudy, eventually takes on the leading role as the leading man leaves the production for an opportunity in New York. In the second interval, the producer Goodman is struck down by a stroke. The cast attempt to shield his body from Laura, so as not to put her off the play and her next entrance. She is upset but is more focused on confessing to Joyce that she is breaking off her engagement to Terry than on the death of Goodman. The comic elements are exaggerated and ridiculous, but Locke Elliott exposes the theatre as a workplace like any other, full of vulnerable workers who fixate on their problems just like any other human beings. But the precariousness of the profession makes the actors particularly susceptible to narcissistic behaviour. In spite of the dead body in the offstage hallway, Corpsey reminds Laura of her next entrance and she rallies, readying herself instantly. The stage direction for her is ‘Suddenly galvanised into action’ as she says: ‘Quick, my fan and the scroll. Mind my train!’

*Interval* is a morality play offering a hectic backstage milieu and a human drama that transcends its comic mode. In spite of the criticism
of the play as ‘highly derivative’, it is a timeless play in which the London setting is unimportant, and the ideas are resonant for human beings everywhere, particularly theatre practitioners and audiences. The acute pressures on the cast, as they strive to succeed and to please everybody, infuse the play with authenticity and energy. Locke Elliott was a playwright ahead of his time, as Interval prefigures the comic chaos of Michael Frayn’s Noises Off (1982) without so much slapstick, and also invokes the undercurrent of human frailty of Ronald Harwood’s The Dresser (1980).

The behaviour of actors always fascinated Sumner Locke Elliott. Later when he moved to New York, he wrote Buy Me Blue Ribbons (1951) in which he retold the real life experience of Jay Robinson, a young and wealthy actor who had been replaced in the lead role of a recent Broadway production that went on to succeed without him. Robinson, who was embittered by his experience, convinced Locke Elliott to write a satire of Broadway machinations that would be fully financed by Robinson. Locke Elliott could not have predicted that Robinson was in fact not up to the role that he duly wrote for him, and although the actor displayed flashes of brilliance in the rehearsals and previews, Buy Me Blue Ribbons was panned. Robinson’s behaviour throughout the process was more extreme than any actor invented by Locke Elliott in his plays, and after this experience he turned his attention to television writing.

THE INVISIBLE CIRCUS

In order to make a living in Australia, Locke Elliott wrote radio plays and was highly successful in financial terms. Throughout his life he was quick to realise opportunities and to experiment with his writing. Although he regarded radio drama, the serials, as an inferior form to that of writing for the stage, he recognised the need to finance his unpaid ventures at the Independent Theatre. He worked freelance for four years before
his appointment in 1938 by George Edwards as staff writer and actor for George Edwards Productions, based at 2UW in Market Street, for whom he contributed serials that ran to 104 episodes, and he acted in some of these as well. The serials included *The Crazy Family* (1939), *Grand City* (1942) and *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1941).34

The antics and personalities of the radio stars whom Locke Elliott observed in the 1930s and 1940s inspired him to write his satirical comedy *The Invisible Circus* that drew on George Edwards’ company, and closely observed the rivalry and ambitions of those around him. Like the earlier play *Interval*, *The Invisible Circus* is a study of actors and writers and the commercial environment in which they work. It is a microscopic examination of the excesses of fame, commercialism and its effect on those who try to live creative lives. The comic tone of the play is distinctively Australian. It is an original, witty and withering attack on the corrupting power of commercial radio on writers and actors. Its blend of dizzy and dissipated personalities is darkly comical as it evokes the amorality of a busy radio station relentlessly chasing sponsor subvention. *The Invisible Circus* is still resonant today, only now the culprits are the celebrity announcers or ‘shock jocks’. In this play, Locke Elliott’s view of writing anticipates David Williamson’s biting satirical dialogue, and its resonance is potent for any writing that is driven by commercial needs at any time in history. For example, Mark, the depressed and exhausted writer in the play (who surely embodies Locke Elliott), towards the end laments:

> Radio has become blackmail on a national scale. From the sponsor right down the line. Boy you’re part of the greatest national hypnotic force of all time … They’d sell heaven if they could get into cartons, and find a sponsor … buy your eternity now in the new cellophane package the handy size …

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The writers are full of self-loathing for the work they do, and a moment later this same character says to another, who is determined to earn enough money not to have to write for radio: ‘I’m just one of the tired tumblers going through my routine falls in the circus, because that’s what we’re in Bradley … an invisible circus … the great arena’. It is through the vulnerability and imperfections of the characters that our sympathy is aroused, and sustained. *The Invisible Circus* focuses on Mark, the principal scriptwriter, his girlfriend Courtney and a new writer at the station. The play begins with a description of the ‘large and vulgarly ornate’ studio entrance area complete with a speaker ‘in the shape of a rubicund gold cupid whose perennially open mouth belches forth whatever programme is on the air’. Locke Elliott introduces each character as they come in for their day at work: Mona, ‘the receptionist, a word that covers a multitude of raw deals’; a shy, new, shabbily dressed writer, Bradley McGee; Bette Rundle, ‘20, blonde and a smiling vacuum’; the actresses Freda and Lottie, who gossip about another actress, Iris, whom they believe ‘after seven hundred episodes as gallant Brenda … can’t be anything else’ – except, as Freda points out, ‘Dead’. They watch as the new young writer Brad is led in, ‘another lamb to the slaughter’, one actress quips to the other. Iris arrives in a flurry and says throatily to Mona, ‘Hullo my radiance’, gushing about fan mail. The chaos of the station continues around them with forgotten theme music, panic when the station boss arrives (they call him God), harried phone calls from listeners about lost pets, and lamentations about missing commercials during one of the drama serial episodes. Mark says with glum resignation: ‘They don’t need a commercial for that, they need an anaesthetic’. There are interruptions by strange visiting fans and exhortations to the writers from the executive to ‘keep your casts small. The slump’s coming.’ Eventually, after a series of problems, the writer Brad is signed up for a series and insists on doing ‘the story his own way’.
The pace is rapid and full of small incidents, with each character worrying about their next role or writing job. The gag writer is reduced to looking for lines in a big volume called *A Century of Humour* and he never smiles, carping: ‘How would you feel having to be funny six days a week?’ A bitter argument between Mark and Courtney is sharply rendered, revealing Locke Elliott’s strength in evoking sympathy for multiple characters in a large cast and his ability to create layers of pathos and humour. The hilarity reaches a ridiculous climax when Brad tries out his ideas for a new serial with the bosses (‘the brains trust’) and they keep interrupting with inane reservations, telling him how to write the story, and how to get ‘a good strong character with plenty of boom’.

*The Invisible Circus* was performed all over Australia after its première at the Independent Theatre in 1946 sold out for a six-week season. The most recent known production was at the New Theatre in Sydney in 1991. Leslie Rees recognised its strength, declaring that Locke Elliott ‘was able to release his gift for gay, extravagant, spontaneously gossipy but pointed dialogue’. The play was adapted for radio by George Farwell, and Locke Elliott and Peter Finch performed in this radio version broadcast in 1947. Doris Fitton described Locke Elliott as a ‘satirist with a highly critical view of human nature’. *The Invisible Circus* demonstrates Locke Elliott’s strength and vigour as a satirist and as a writer of comic, realistic dialogue in which all his frustrations as an actor and writer are laid bare.

**THE DOCUMENTARY PLAY: RUSTY BUGLES**

Locke Elliott’s extensive radio work was interrupted by the War and his service as a private at an ordnance depot in Mataranka in the Northern Territory and other places. The experience transformed his life and his work, and led to the composition of his best known play, *Rusty Bugles,*
which demonstrated his sharpness as a writer of comic dialogue in the Australian vernacular. It contrasted with his earlier plays in that it moved away from the sophisticated, fashionable and light, well-made comedies of his early career to something with a more serious theme. This landmark anti-war play of ten scenes portrays the confining life of the soldiers, and their isolated, boring daily round of chores, as they serve in a desolate Northern Territory outpost in 1944, waiting to learn whether they will ever see ‘active’ service. Elliott told Miles Franklin that ‘All the boys were real characters, and in some instances I didn’t even change the names’. In fact, he described the play as a documentary.

*Rusty Bugles* broke all box-office records in 1948 when Doris Fitton produced it at the Independent Theatre and this success was followed up with tours and new productions all over Australia. Moreover, it was the only successful play by an Australian writer produced in the decade after the war (until *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1955). But it was not published for twenty years, and was never seen by its author on stage. Although it has gained a place in theatre history, it has never been fully recognised for its qualities of realist comedy, structure, skill in dialogue and thematic scope and depth. Nor has it been properly acknowledged as a watershed play. Most theatre histories regard the turning point for Australian theatre as 1955, when Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* premièred. Peter Fitzpatrick notes that one of the reasons for this is that Lawler’s play offered ‘characteristic elements of conflict in the bushman stereotype … especially of mateship and physical prowess’. *Rusty Bugles* offers a puncturing of these values too, but Fitzpatrick, like Alan Seymour, criticised the ‘indeterminate shape of the play’. Yet *Rusty Bugles* anticipated Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) in its exploration of non-action, waiting, boredom and existential anguish, while offering an Australian idiom, Australian humour and an acutely observed study of protest behaviour during the war.
The critically acclaimed power of *Rusty Bugles* owed its existence to Locke Elliot’s years of experience gained in writing for a popular audience, and writing for a living. Without the experiments in the commercial world of radio and the amateur theatre in Sydney, where Locke Elliott’s more derivative genre works were produced in the 1930s, and without that experience of writing comedy and the encouragement of Doris Fitton, a play such as *Rusty Bugles* could not have been written or performed. In these earlier plays and in his classic *Rusty Bugles*, a developing vigour and precision in dialogue, comic situation, character and incisive structuring of scenes is clear. Locke Elliott’s capacity to write character is particularly strong in *Rusty Bugles*. At a time when Australians are commemorating the centenary of the Great War, *Rusty Bugles* is especially resonant as it explores the reality of the Anzac legend and soldiering on the home front during the Second World War. So it is difficult to explain the neglect of this play by practitioners since the 1960s. Perhaps because of Locke Elliott’s absence from Australia, his early association with amateur theatre, his attempts to write popular plays, and his success in so many modes, his work has been undervalued by scholars and largely forgotten by theatre practitioners.

**SUMNER LOCKE ELLIOTT: CONCLUSION, A NEW ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Locke Elliott was fascinated by the world of the theatre and found his place as a successful writer in many genres. In Australia, he wrote stage and radio plays, and he quickly adapted to writing for television when he moved to the USA. His work at the Independent Theatre in Sydney as an actor and a writer reveals an important network and training ground for playwrights, actors and other theatre-makers that illuminates the development of theatre in Australia at the time. It also reveals the
dynamic work of Doris Fitton as a director and entrepreneur who was operating well before the period of major change that took place in theatre in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. *Interval* and *The Invisible Circus* offer rich insights into the worlds that they dramatise. They also present a darkly satirical study of the work of creative artists attempting to make a living, both in Sydney and in London, that resonates with the real world of making a living in the theatre at any time. These plays and Locke Elliott’s better known play *Rusty Bugles* are worthy of new attention from scholars, practitioners and historians, especially those interested in Australian history and Australians at war.

Locke Elliott is a transformational playwright, a pioneer of television writing and a fiction writer whose novels defy easy categories of literary and popular writing because of their broad appeal. He began as an actor and worked in many media. His decision to leave Australia to live in the USA has cast a long shadow on his legacy and may partially explain his neglect. There is a great deal of work to be done by scholars in analysing Locke Elliott’s numerous American television plays. But the power and resonance of his writing for the stage, radio and in the novel are not in doubt.

NOTES

1 The following plays have been digitised and are available online through the University of New England’s Campbell Howard Collection and at the Research Data Australia online site: H.D. Armstrong’s *A Pretty Bargain*, Harold Bell’s *Died of Wounds*, E. Coulson Davidson’s *The Moon Child*, Louis Eason’s *Digger’s Rest*, Shipwreck and *Australia Felix: A Dialogue*, Doris Hayball’s *Out of the Clear Sky*, Musette Morell’s *The Quick and the Dead* and Russell J. Oakes’ *Woolgathering: An Original Three Act Farce*. Campbell Howard worked in Adult Education at the University of New England from 1956 until 1972. He believed that there was a flourishing Australian theatre before Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* made its première in 1955, and that there were many plays performed prior to that important play by reputable companies. In 1957, he set about collecting playscripts when the excitement about Lawler’s play drew new international interest in Australian
drama. Howard sought advice from Vance Palmer and from Harold White before setting out to collect contemporary Australian plays, and received funding to collect the plays from both the University of New England and the National Library of Australia. The plays that Howard collected are now held in the Dixson Library at the University of New England, with some copies held in the Eunice Hanger Collection at the University of Queensland Fryer Library and the National Library of Australia.

2 *Fairyland* was published in a new edition by Text in 2013.

3 Julia Blake, Robyn Nevin, Arthur Dignam, Victoria Longley and others appeared in the adaptation of *Eden’s Lost for television broadcast in 1991*.

4 Arthur Dignam, Victoria Longley and others appeared in the adaptation of *Eden’s Lost for television broadcast in 1991*.

5 Sumner Locke Elliott was born on 17 October 1917.

6 Doris Fitton, Introduction to *Rusty Bugles*, ix.

7 Trafford W. Whitelock, no publication details, 4 March 1936.

8 Clarke, *Sumner Locke Elliott*, quotes Locke Elliott, 117.


10 Fitton, Introduction to *Rusty Bugles*, ix.


14 Clarke, *Sumner Locke Elliott*, 121.

15 Ibid 34.

16 Ibid 138.


18 Ibid 69.

19 Clarke, *Sumner Locke Elliott*, 121.

20 Ibid.


22 Summer Locke Elliott, Foreword to *Fitton, Not Without Dust and Heat*, 10.


24 Fitton, Introduction to *Rusty Bugles*, ix.

25 Ibid.


