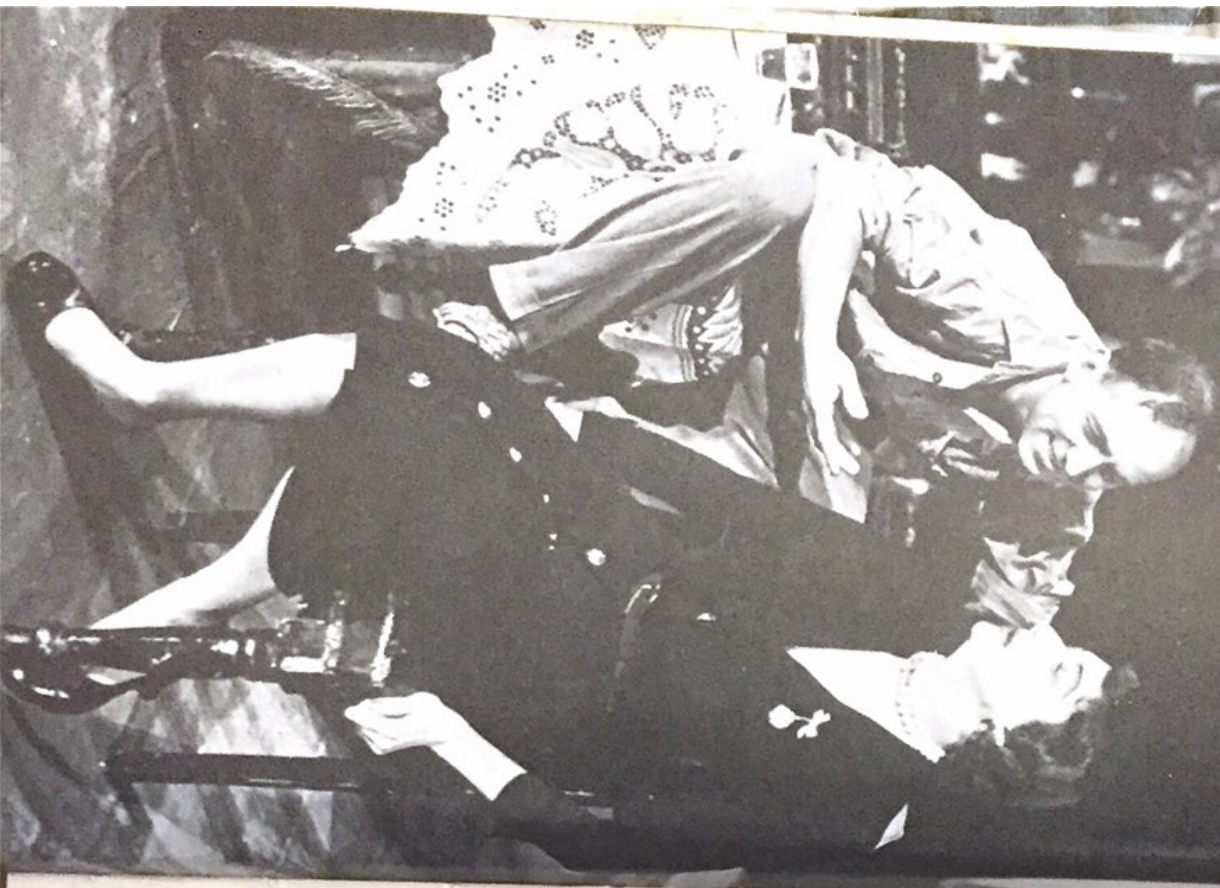


London production: Ray Lawler and Madge Ryan



## Growing up in Australia

KATHARINE BRISBANE

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is a play about growing up. It is about growing up and growing old and failing to grow up; and the study throws into relief not only the hopes and failures of a dilapidated Melbourne household, but the character of a nation.

For *The Doll*, as it has come to be known, could only have been written when it was: in the 1950s. It stands at the watershed of our national consciousness, answering at the time a need for something of our own, for some kind of self-definition, for a celebration of what is unique to ourselves.

The 1950s was a crucial period in the development of the Australian identity. It was a time of post-war reconstruction and immigration, of materialism, a wool boom, of suburban comfort and conservatism—the first decade since early in the century in which the ordinary Australian had not been hounded by war, depression and drought. The refinements of life began to surface after long absence. New skills were suddenly needed to administer our new-found prosperity. Industry began to answer the call of art, literature, music and drama with scholarships and competitions—and in that decade turned up, among others, Ray Lawler and Joan Sutherland. A self-assertion was in the air, uncertainly expressed in a yearning to mix on terms of equality with those older civilisations thousands of servicemen had glimpsed during the War and from which a daily-increasing number of “new Australians” had come. It was a worthy desire for self-improvement; but the methods first employed to achieve it were more like off-the-peg shopping expeditions than long-term investment in our natural resources.

Lawler's play was such an expedition: an unbeatable bargain for the newly-formed Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust: a mature, inspired work, totally original in content, sprung from a cottage theatre industry under-

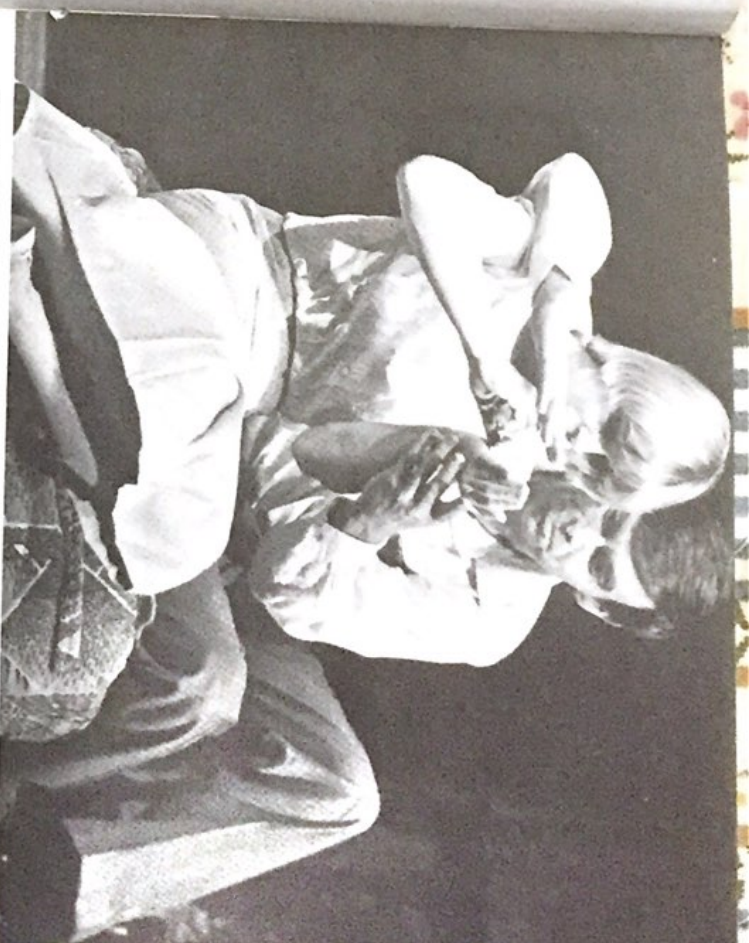


nourished and almost entirely derivative. Surely there were other such gifts awaiting the buyer? But *The Doll* was unique, because it defined a quality of life which those who sought to express it did not yet understand. It is a play about the deprivation of feeling and understanding deriving from the long, unbeaten struggle for survival in the sun; and how our long-felt admiration for youthful prowess has left us unequipped to fulfil our age, or even to recognise that there is a tomorrow. Years were to pass before Australia itself began to learn to grow up, to feel the truth of Lawler's statements and to lend a sympathetic ear to the role of the creative artist in showing us how to express ourselves.

Lawler was thirty-four years old when *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was written. He had been around the theatre for twenty years and had written nine plays before *The Doll*. Since 1948 he had been working as an actor and director and had learnt the craft of play writing from the British and American plays common to the Australian stage. It is unlikely any Australian work influenced him. *The Doll* when it came, combined the blessings of a refined framework in the European naturalistic convention and a vividly and exotically Australian content. Critics who delighted in the un-stagey, un-self-conscious vernacular and domestic attitudes were reassured in their approval by the sureness of the craftsmanship. Audiences, largely middle-class then, as now, found the colourful goings-on in the Leech household attractively new to their experience, but the people as familiar as old friends.

In what he has always seen as a personal statement, Lawler has unconsciously drawn upon the major themes of our literature: man pitting his strength against nature, mateship and freedom and alienation in the itinerant life of this vast country offers, rugged individualism and the resilient humour that shrugs off despair. He presses these country-bred virtues into a new, urban context and gently questions them one by one, finding behind the sun-blessed strength a tragic lack of spiritual resource.

Over the last two years lovers of *The Doll* have received a unique bonus. In 1975 Ray Lawler returned, after nearly twenty years abroad, to his native land and in the following



*Elisha Ballantyne and Peter Carlin in Kid Stakes, Melbourne Theatre Company production, 1976.*

months wrote two more plays about *The Doll* characters, tracing their life from the summer of the first doll through World War II to the fatal seventeenth year. The new plays, *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times* were performed by the Melbourne Theatre Company, by whom they were commissioned, in its season 1975-6; and the trilogy was then twice presented in succession on February 12 and 17, 1977, in an all-day marathon. Viewed separately, the works stand on their own as warm and nostalgic period pieces, their characters full of vitality and only coincidentally bearing names contained in a more famous play. Afficionados of *The Doll* can take pleasure in spotting the references as they surface through the mainstream of action.

But run together, the plays gain immeasurably from each other—an extraordinary achievement under the circumstances, as though the characters themselves had been living and growing in reality over the past twenty years. And so



they have, taking on a life of their own in our literature. The emotional impact of *The Doll Trilogy* on its audience was a tribute to the way in which, over the years, Olive, Pearl and Emma, Roo and Barney have crept their way into the hearts of Australians.

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in its exposition gives a number of clues to the characters' past: reference to the couples' first meeting, to Barney's way with women, to Babba's vicarious involvement in their life-style, Nancy's drinking, Emma's dubious money deals, old domestic rituals and so on. In this play they are small incidents spoken of in remembrance of past pleasures and disappointments; in the preceding plays they appear as they happen, as fresh joys and fresh wounds. The experience is like watching a favourite television serial.

The effect on *The Doll* is incomparable. Far from diminishing it, as was feared when the work was first projected, by duplicating the explanations of the first act, the exercise renders the desolation of the ending the more poignant.

The poignancy, too, hangs over the first play, *Kid Stakes*, as we follow Roo and Barney, Olive and Nancy through their first summer, knowing the outcome of their young dreams. The chief joy of *Kid Stakes* is our introduction to Nancy: Nancy who alone for Barney had the three qualities of a real woman, Nancy who had "got out while the going was good" into a reliable marriage before the curtain rises on *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Nancy, as seen in the light of the trilogy, is the gaiety and vitality of the Carlton household, the flame of urban living which after seventeen years has gone out in the life of those she leaves behind. *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times* show us the reason why. The date of *Kid Stakes* is 1937, the aftermath of the Great Depression and the eve of World War II. Nancy and Olive are two young milliners; Emma, Olive's mother, a widow in her vigorous fifties, is running a respectable boarding house and keeping a stern eye on her vivacious daughter and her spirited friend. Emma is expecting two prospective boarders. The two young men, when they arrive, are swathed in bandages: the result, so they say, of an accident mustering cattle on their Queensland station. Emma is impressed; but she soon tumbles to the fact that

her girls know something she does not. The men's impudence is exposed, the four admit they have met before; and Roo displays for the first time that slow, country charm which characterises him in *The Doll*, persuading Emma that what she sees as a disreputable confidence trick was only a harmless practical joke to amuse the girls.

The scene brings to life the moment recalled by Emma in Act One of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* when she says:

Ever since she brought you in and introduced us standing in that hall. You pushed back your hat and grinned at me. I summed you up right there and then; a packet of trouble, but he's honest. (p. 34)

Inevitably they stay and the rest of the play describes the blossoming of the problematical relationship between Roo and Olive, Barney and Nancy.

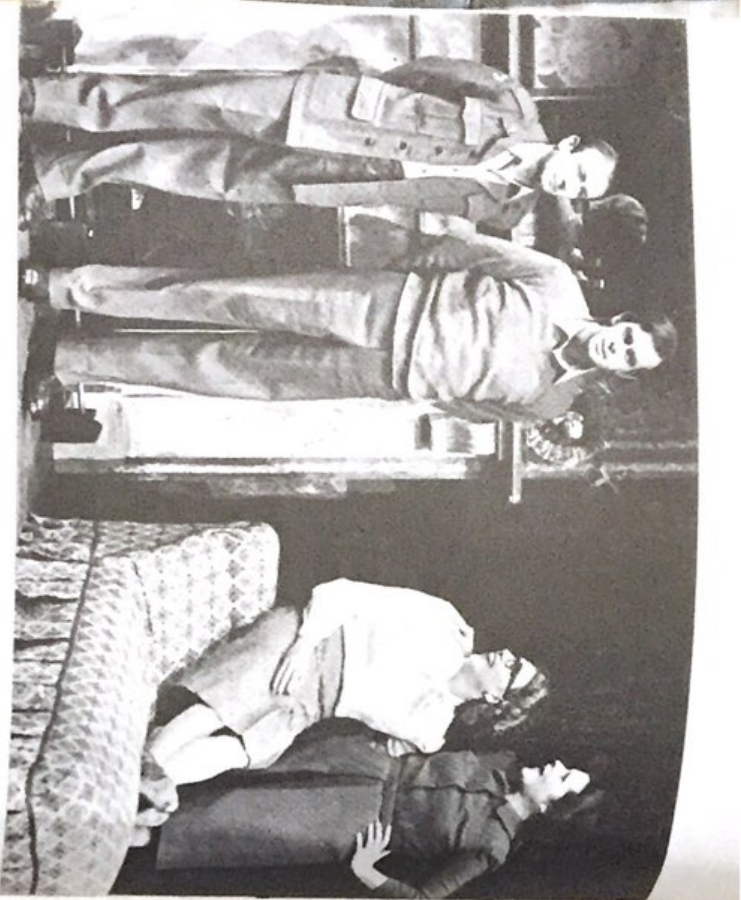
Nancy, even that early, sums up Barney as a man to whom women are irresistible but dispensable, who can be held for only as long as he believes himself free. When Emma announces that two mothers of five-year-old sons, both born in the same month, are after Barney and their maintenance, Nancy's stamina is sorely tested; but her resilient humour and common sense conquers her fears:

I knew what I'd got hold of, from the very start . . . a country boy out on a nature run . . . I mean, it's not as though we were engaged and this is gonna knock the bottom out of me glory box . . . it's what Barney said before, kid stakes. Nothin' to gain, and nothin' to lose . . . a lot of fun and skylarkin' around, and when it's over, then you pick up your cherry bobs and whatever else belongs to you, and everyone goes home. None the worse and happy as Larry . . . (Act Two, Scene Two)

Such are the ground rules for the life they are to lead—all fun and no responsibility: a seasonal romance which after seventeen years Olive sums up as:

. . . different all right. Compared to all the marriages I know, what I got is . . . five months of heaven every year. And it's the same for them. Seven months they spend up there kilin' themselves in the cane season, and then they come down here to live a little. That's what the lay-off is. Not just playing around and spend-





Other Times: Bruce Myles, Peter Curlin, Sandy Gore and Carole Skinner in the Melbourne Theatre Company production, 1976.

ing a lot of money, but a time for livin'. You think I haven't sized that up against what other women have? (p.13)

Nancy's sensitivity to what in truth there is to gain and to lose from the affair is strong in *Kid Stakes*, as is Olive's childish blindness to all but her desire to insulate her romantic dream from the depredations of the real world. Lawler defines this in the second act when a kewpie doll, a souvenir of a visit to Luna Park, assumes a sudden importance for Olive when she discovers its loss. Emma has given it to the infant Bubba next door. The loss, once discovered, recalls for Olive the night she and Roo committed themselves to each other and her possessive anxiety about losing her lover is directed to retrieving the doll. Thus the story of Bubba's

walking sticks, from the opening scene of *The Doll*, is woven into the emotional fabric of *Kid Stakes*.

The occasion is an evening when Olive is keeping a long-standing date with Dickie Pouncett, an old suitor. It is the end of the lay-off and Roo, torn between Olive and his roving life, has resolved to use the occasion to fly the coop. But Olive has a premonition and turns back from the dance. The action brings about a resolution of the unspoken conflicts and sets the pattern for "other times". The first day of reckoning in the kid stakes has come. Olive confronts her mother for the first time:

Dickie and me'll never get back to where we were, because I'm not the young miss that I used to be. The word is spoilt, Mum—you're right. For any plans that Dickie Pouncett has in mind, I've spoilt myself rotten. (Act Three, Scene Two)

The choice of the word 'spoilt' is characteristic. It represents not a looking forward to the self-determination and responsibilities of the grown-up world but an excuse for a retreat from them—a looking backward at something lost. This is further confirmed in the following sequence in which she and Roo settle their future. The mood is bold and courageous but the substance is sterile:

OLIVE: Well, let me tell you, marriage and a family's not the only traps. Marriage I can do without—and if I have to, I can live without the thought of kids. The real trap for me is seeing you walk out that door, and being left here with a few cheap souvenirs [*grabbing the doll from its case*]—knowing that I've had the best of it, and that you're gone for good, and—never—

[*She find it impossible to continue. ROO sits staring at his hands before him on the table, wanting only that the confrontation should end. In her agitation OLIVE has crushed the doll in her grasp and she now becomes conscious of it. She registers the object in a long pause, and then says slowly:*] I'll make a bargain with you.

ROO: [*wearily*] OI—

OLIVE: No. Listen to me.  
[*She smooths the crumpled skirt of the kewpie, very much aware that this is a last bid, and she must find the right words and*



phases.]

You spend the seasons up there, and you come down here for the lay-offs, like you said. And every year, in December, when you come down South, you bring me one of these.

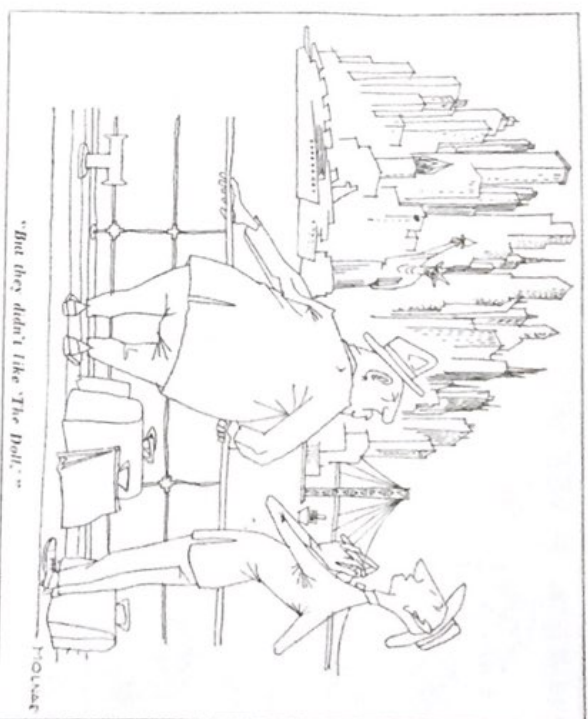
[*She moves towards him, holding the doll before her, facing him. A pledge:.*]

And I promise you—if I can have the rest of it—I swear that these are all the kids I'll ever need. [Act Three, Scene Two]

The awful retribution comes seventeen years later when Pearl pulls to pieces Olive's dolls' house and shows her the day-dream on which it has been built.

*Other Times* is set some eight years later at the end of the War. Five of those years Roo and Barney have spent as privates in the A.I.F. and at curtain rise they are awaiting their discharge. It is winter: the summer colour has gone from the house and the air is full of discord. The characters who once seemed so at home are suddenly misfits. The men, whom Olive had called eagles flying south for the mating season, are frozen in for the winter, trapped by useless regulations and discomforted by tropical rashes. For Olive, the War has been no more than an aberration from her private reality; ever backward-looking she dismisses the War as unable to touch her men and sees the peace as a way of "getting back to what we were". Eight years of work in bar rooms has wearied the women; the strain of gaily and freedom has taken its toll particularly upon Nancy, who is given to drinking, discreetly. Barney has coarsened; his pixie sense of humour is turning into cruel practical joking on Emma, he heartlessly attacks a gentle Austrian Jew who has found some solace in Nancy's bright bar-room chatter; his illiteracy is highlighted by Nancy's growing interest in books and in Bubba's education.

The turning point in Barney's and Nancy's relationship comes when Nancy admits to an abortion before the War. Her ironic account of her attempt to tell Barney of her pregnancy ends, as all their encounters do, in laughter; but there are tears too, and the scene comes closest of any in the trilogy to expressing in words Barney's real need for



February 28, 1958. Reproduced by courtesy of the Sydney Morning Herald.

Nancy. He has just lightened the air with a ludicrously small package of Evening in Paris perfume, bought with his gratuity:

BARNEY: Well, as you just been tellin' me, I got—bastards in the bush. I can't afford to lash out on no—silver foxes—[*His breath catches and NANCY takes him in her arms as though he were himself a child. He speaks with his face pressed against her, his words muffled:.*]  
One of ours... if it'd been one of ours...

NANCY: I know...  
BARNEY: ... woulda been different...  
NANCY [*soothing him*]: I know that... I know... [Act Three, Scene Two]

The moment is their last chance to break through the barrier of inarticulation and find security in a true expression of feeling. But Barney, like Olive, remains the child. There is little left the couple have in common—except the past. For Roo, too, there is a turning point, a moment of decision by which the rest of his life may be measured. Roo,



"SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL"



"If you hadna come, I'd've just a no-looker. You would've gone looking for me with a razor."

"A grown-up woman, short, ing over a nifty old kempie women you work, I'll be doll."

"Not anybair at all at this me own teeth, remember."

AN APOLOGY TO MANY NOSES

I made these sketches at the Elizabethan Theatre, sitting in the stalls during the first-night performance of the play "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll."

These are not drawings really. I could not see the features of the actors very well, and my sketchbook was in darkness. These are more like the graphs of a recording instrument, registering with crude mechanical lines the enchantment that descended on the theatre that night.

To find beauty on the Acropolis is easy. And easy it is to see beauty in Juliet. But so much greater is the art that finds the same elements in our everyday life and discovers the charm of rugged refinement in a terrace cottage at Carlton, and the adventure of joy and the dignities of sorrow in the life of concubines and barnmaids.

On the opening the usual first-night audience sat with cheerful scepticism, all verminous.

It was a great night. All of us who were there felt that something important was happening in the history of Australia and feeling grateful to the playwright, the summer and Hunt for producing a kind of capricious garden flowers from a land of suburban wallpaper and for enlarging its vistas to the far-away borders of our felt reality, built of dreams.

—By George Molnar

reads to be magnanimous. But as the rain went up a mind, I suppose. The theatre disappeared, there was no acting on the stage, there was no play to act it. We were in Melbourne, on a hot summer afternoon, in a stuffy terrace house, being the life of some stranger who was laughing and crying, we took up the bewitching legends of Pearl, the barnmaid friend of Emma, and Olive's barren resignation of Emma.

January 14, 1956. Reproduced by courtesy of the Sydney Morning Herald.

we learn, has spent five years as a private in the Army; and has turned down promotion. Why? Nancy knows. It is another toll paid to Olive's preservation instinct.

The sacrifice is a big one for Roo and discharge day brings an explosion of pent-up violence. When challenged afterwards by Olive, he explodes in exasperation:

You've shoved it all together like a two bob flamin' watch—okay, okay. If I'd been promoted, me and Barney would have had to split up and that mighta spoilt things down here the way they've been. But it'd also mean the end of knockin' around for me and Barney too, and maybe that's the reason for me jibbin' at it. If they offer me a choice between me mate and

stripes 'n' badges, then I'll choose me bloody mate. Or maybe I just got a gutful of the Army early on, and didn't want to help 'em organise their butcher's any more than what I had to—I was brought up on the Bible, you remember. I got lots of stuff like: "Scatter thou the people that delight in war"—"Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God"—and "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation"—rollin' round inside my skull. [Act Three, Scene Two]

*Other Times* is a play of disappointment which shows how fragile is Olive's house of dreams when the cold winds of change blow through it. It prepares the way for Nancy's departure and the shattering of the seventeenth doll.

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* opens with Pearl, Olive's new barnmaid friend, and Bubba, now in her twenties, discussing the legend of the lay-offs and Nancy's marriage. The recapitulation is taken up by Olive, preparing for the men's arrival. To those readers who come freshly to *The Doll* the information is new and it is easy to be taken in by her eagerness to convince Pearl that "these are men, not the sort we see go rolling home to their wives every night, but men." (p. 14). Her "five months of heaven" is believable, even enviable. The trilogy has subtly changed these scenes in our imagination. Instead we see a woman on the verge of middle-age, clinging to a youth already lost. Lawler describes that Olive in the stage direction:

[Despite a surface cynicism and thirty-nine years of age, there is something curiously unfinished about OLIVE, an eagerness that properly belongs to extreme youth.]

The burst of energy with which Roo and Barney launch themselves into the house, accompanied comically by Emma, supports Olive's portrait of them. The jokes, the old rituals, cancutters' gangster, has for the first time in his life lost a fight to a younger man and is broke. The event has split Roo from Barney, who in the heat of the moment had deserted his mate for the safety of the gang. The last seven months has seen destruction on both the male and female partnerships in this quartet.

Act One is occupied with the attempt to "get back to



what we were", to recapture the old *joie de vivre*. But the loss of Nancy is acutely felt and the prissy and unimaginative Pearl makes a pedestrian substitute. In Act Two it is New Year's Eve and the group are gloomily playing cards while Pearl harps on how her adventure had failed to live up to expectations. Barney tries to save the day with a sing-song from Emma; but too many nerves are frayed. His instinct is to clear out, to go fruit-picking with the gang; but Roo, doggedly loyal to Olive, responds with a threatening reproof. At midnight they shakily restore their spirits with a toast—an old ritual of Nancy's—to "happy days and glamorous nights".

Pearl deals her fatal blow:

PEARL. [*gasping*] Ooh—oh, you fool, Barney, don't say things like that.

OLIVE: What?

PEARL: D-didn't you hear him?

BARNEY: All I said was...

PEARL: [*tapping him*] Glamorous nights! I mean—look at us. [p. 57]

The reality of what they see is intolerable. By the time Scene Two opens Barney is drunk. His little world is falling apart fast and he has brought home Roo's young rival Johnnie Dowd in the hope of patching it up a bit. Roo takes badly his reluctant handshake: in his view another knuckling under and this is the flint that sparks off the burning resentment which has smoldered since the beginning of the play. He smashes into Barney and shatters for good the wealth of memories the house contains.

Act Three brings, inevitably, the bitter harvest. In the cold light of morning Pearl gives Olive a few home truths before walking out on the entanglement. But the threatened Olive seeks to shift the blame elsewhere:

PEARL: You're blamin' me, aren't you? Because I was here instead of Nancy.

OLIVE: Yes.

PEARL: I'm wasting my breath, then. If you can't see further than that, I'm just wasting my breath. [p. 77] Roo, equally dismayed and wounded, is casting about for blame. He turns to Emma for understanding. "C'mon,



London production: Ray Laster, Ethel Gabriel and June Jago.

Emma, you're supposed to know the lot", he says. "Whose fault do you reckon it was, mine or Barney's?" Emma thinks he's kidding:

How long did you think these lay-off seasons were gonna last—forever? They're not for keeps, you know; these are just—seasons.

ROO: I know, but whose fault was it we come a cropper? EMMA: Nobody's fault, yer melon!

ROO: Don't be silly, it must be somebody's.

EMMA: [*exasperated*] Why must it? All that's happened is you've gone as far as you can go. You 'n' Barney 'n' Olive, you're too old for it any more.

ROO: Old?

EMMA: That's it—old! Take a look in the mirror. [p. 82] The tragedy of Roo and Olive is that in seventeen years they never have looked in the mirror or taken a glance at tomorrow. In the path of time they are defenceless.

It is at this moment that the young bull comes riding in. Young Dowd has made overtures to Bubba about a day at the races, and fearful of Barney's interference, she enters, with all the single-minded, panicky possessiveness of a youthful Olive, afraid of losing her dream-of chance to happiness. Roo, still stunned by recent revelations, attempts to dissuade her:



BURBA: Dolls and breaking things, and—and arguments about who was best—what do they all matter? That wasn't the lay-off.

ROO: It's what it came to.

BURBA: Well, it won't for me. I'll have what you had; the real part of it but I'll have it differently. Some way

I can have it safe and know that it's going to last. [p. 86]

And so the uncomprehending cycle of life goes on—the men with their bull energy and the women with their blind dependence. And no one has learnt a thing. Roo makes a last desperate attempt at adjustment: he proposes marriage to Olive, and in the play's most famous scene she rejects him. It is a woman's response that is needed here—but Olive in Roo's care has never grown to womanhood. She wants, not marriage but her girlhood restored.

Looking back one sees that the whole play which began with such brave assertions of perfection, is about loss, about the time that steals from youth, and gives age no dignity. The accumulated loss in the last act is immense. It is Lawler's unique achievement that, having created in a wide, falling curve of emotion one of the most perfect examples of the three-act play form, he has been able, by expanding the action backwards extended and widened the tension of that curve and made the height of the tragic fall the greater.

It is the passing of time, too, that has enabled us to see Lawler's intention more clearly than at first: and to admire the economy with which he expresses the inarticulate nature of the characters and the way the deprivation of language is related to a deprivation of spirit and intellect. Nancy is the one with a way with words. *The Doll* has an emotional depth and subtlety which the others lack because it was written from the centre of the conflict it describes. The stage directions betray the author's emotional closeness, there are touches of sentimentality that betray the period. The play is a work of discovery for the author in a way which the two others, being recapitulations, are not. It is that special vulnerability with which the author shares the process of his own very personal discoveries about himself and his country with his reader-audience that makes *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* a great play.

## The Play in the Theatre

*Lawler's play was brought to the notice of the Trust by sharing first prize in the Playwrights Advisory Board competition in Sydney. And I am sure that having the play put on the stage by a professional company will be much more encouraging than any cash prize offered to encourage writing for the stage.*

Thus the theatre critic Geoffrey Hutton in *The Age* [19th November 1955] cautiously opened critical comment in the daily press which, within a year, had made a household word of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. The play opened in Melbourne at the Russell Street Theatre on 28th November 1955. Next day Geoffrey Hutton noted that:

*Mr Lawler sets the scene well, establishing the characters and keeping a flow of genuine Carlton backchat going with no errors and few omissions. We are on the way to conviction.*

Biddy Allen's response in the *Argus* was more spontaneous: *A stunning success... He has written a play so subtly true to Australian thought and to the Australian scene that theatrical conventions disappear. Only the final curtain disappoints. A conventional vision of the great open spaces falls flat—the true Australia is in the sordid room alive with passion, folly, humour and love.*

In the *Herald*, Merle Orford was also worried about the conclusion:

*... the final scene could be rewritten more satisfactorily. As it stands, the climax becomes anti-climax, a childlike invention rather than realistic solution.*

The same day the *Herald* ran an interview with Ray Lawler in which he talked about the origins of *The Doll's* story:

*Two middle-aged couples had an uproariously happy time in a Melbourne restaurant seven months ago and brightened the place with their gaily. They delighted playwright Ray Lawler as he watched them but they saddened him, too, with thoughts of how such pleasures pass with age. Lawler said today that two Queensland cantanizers had given him a second motif for the play. The two men wood chorus girls at the Brisbane theatre where Lawler was*





*London production: June Jago, Kenneth Warren, Roy Lanchester and Madge Ryan.*



writing scripts. "They had a magnificent self-confident masculinity," he said.

Hugh Hunt, executive director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust who [according to Leslie Rees, then chairman of the Playwrights Advisory Board] had initially given only cautious approval to the play—"it lacks dramatic impact and for this reason would, I think, be unsuitable for the large theatres"—now called it: "The best play ever written about Australia." [Leslie Rees: *The Making of Australian Drama*, Angus and Robertson 1973, p. 257.]

Hunt took up an option on *The Doll* the night of its opening. On 27th December the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Lawler had received three offers for overseas rights—from the J. Arthur Rank Organisation, an overseas play agent and an American television company. The play was eventually presented in London by Sir Laurence Olivier in association with the Trust.

On 4th January 1956 Barbara Wallis in *The Australian Women's Weekly* set the housewives' seal of approval:

One of the most gratifying moments for Ray was when Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson saw the play. Dame Sybil announced afterwards: "This is a play which could only have grown from the soil of the country."

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* opened at the Elizabethan Theatre, Sydney, on 10th January 1956 directed by John Summer with the following cast:

BEVVA	Fenella Maguire
PEARL	Madge Ryan
OLIVE	June Jago
BARNEY	Ray Lawler
EMMA	Ethel Gabriel
ROO	Lloyd Berrell
JOHNIE	John Llewellyn

By this time the play's popularity was confirmed and the reviews of the next day reflected this. Lindsay Browne in the *Sydney Morning Herald* exclaimed:

*This fine play, untransplantably Australian in all its accents, gave Australian theatregoers the chance to feel as American audiences must have felt when O'Neill first began to assert American vitality and independence in drama, or the Irish must have felt when Synge*

*gave them "The Playboy of the Western World". This was real and exciting Australian, with Australian spirit springing from the deep heart of the characters, and never merely pretending that Australianism is a few well-placed bonzers, too-rights, strike-me-luckies and good-Os. . . . One hardly knows what to applaud most in Mr Lawler's work—the tension he holds till the last curtain, the dramatic strength of situation after situation as his people bicker and brawl and have 'a bit of a laugh' or 'a bit of a beer-up', the wit and racy volubility of his dialogue, or the full-bloodedness, variety and shrewd knowledge of people in his characterisations.*

J. Griffen-Foley in the *Daily Telegraph*, headlined "True Australian Play at Last" said:

*It has happened at last—someone has written a genuine Australian play without kangaroos or stock whips, but an indigenous play about city-dwellers.*

The *Sun's* heading was similar: "Fair Dinkum Play a Success". Under it John Kardoss wrote:

*. . . an unprecedented success at the Elizabethan last night. The play is as 'fair dinkum' Australian as the Diggers of two world wars, the Blue Mountains or the Murray River. Ray Lawler painted with an inspired brush word pictures of a certain aspect of the Australian way of life. He has one quality of the true artist: the power of observation—little happiness, little sorrows; hopes and desires; vanity, remorse, suspicion and sentimentality. As an actor Mr Lawler endeared himself with the audience from his just entrance. His Australian "accent" rang true as a bell.*

Other papers reported on the triumphant reception. Frank Harris in the *Daily Mirror* called it:

*. . . a significant night, not merely because the Elizabethan Trust was staging its first Australian play but because the heartfelt applause meant the death of the old and stupid notion that Australians could never create a worthwhile play.*

The *Sydney Morning Herald*, however, was not happy about the absence of the regular first-nighters at the opening of "the first Australian play to be produced at the Elizabethan Theatre. And with them much of the glamour of a 'first night' was also missing. . . . Fewer than a dozen women wore an editorial and the comment: "Perhaps there is some truth in the charge of widespread cultural immaturity and





London production: Kenneth Warren, Roy Lanceler, June Jago, Midge Ryan and Ethel Gabriel.

snobbery in Australia." The dispute was taken up by Andrea's page in *Truth* and in the correspondence columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sun*.

In a long review for the *Bulletin* [18th January 1956] its anonymous critic, after conceding that:

"The packed first-night audience was obviously with it all the way, and, if the curtain hadn't been ruthlessly shut down on them after about six calls, would probably have kept applauding until dawn" had some strong views about how he [or she] would have written the play:

*Too much of Lanceler's play consists of retrospective talk, describing scenes that would be much more effective if presented in actuality. The long opening scene, for instance, is all about the great times which Lanceler's cancutters had had during previous years on their "lay-off" with their girlfriends in Melbourne: they could just as well, without any interference with the essential course of the plot, have been shown in the last of the good times.*

*Most of the subsequent talk, again, is about the fighting and fading that has been going on on the canefields during the year, between the burly ganger and a hefty young rival. Why not show it? How much more of the feeling of the Australian earth there would*

have been if a scene actually located in the canefields had been worked in; the tall green sugarcane, the fires, the men black with ashes, the big dangerous knives, the braiding. Canecutting, as canecutting, is really hardly present at all... The play also needs, so it seems to the present commentator, more of a canecutting ending... Unless it is to be wild, extreme and exalted like "Lear", the drift into age makes merely a depressing theme; and in any case Lanceler's two cancutters seem still too young to go tottering off, half hopefully, half tragically, into the sunset at the end. At the end of the second act, when the mates fall out and fight, it would have been possible to make a rough and tough tragedy of it, with the burly man killing the short one, as O'Casey, O'Neill or Steinbeck would probably have arranged it. Or the burly fellow might have scratched it into comedy by marrying his girlfriend and taking her up to the canefields with him. Or altering the whole present course of the action but in a direction very strongly suggested by the immanent possibilities, the amorous little Barney's former girlfriend, the absent Nancy, might have come back into the story to renew relations. Even, for comedy, the mothers of Barney's illegitimate offspring—"in three States"—might have come to claim him.

On 28th January Hugh Hunt announced a country tour and a return Sydney season. On 13th February the following cast set out on a thirteen-week tour of New South Wales and Queensland:

- |         |                 |
|---------|-----------------|
| BUBBA   | Yvonne Lewis    |
| PEARL   | Jacqueline Kort |
| OLIVE   | June Jago       |
| BARNEY  | Robert Levis    |
| EMMA    | Ethel Gabriel   |
| ROO     | Kenneth Warren  |
| JOHNNIE | Keith Buckley   |

Later changes of cast included Pat Hill as Olive, Dorothy Whitley as Emma and Malcolm Robertson as Johnnie. The return Sydney season opened on 27th March as part of the newly formed Australian Drama Company, joining *Twelfth Night* [in which Lawler played Feste] and *The Riders* on a tour of Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart and Launceston. A second company undertook another country tour. By this time the play had been tightened and revised. On 22nd May *The Doll* opened in Brisbane. "What a



relief it is to welcome an Australian play to town without having to apologise for it", wrote Roger Covell in the *Courier Mail* the next day. Along with Lloyd Berrell, Ray Lawler and Ethel Gabriel in their original roles the name of Jacklyn Kelleher [later Jacqueline Lawler] appeared for the first time in the role of Bubba. The *Sydney Morning Herald* announced the couple's engagement on 29th June 1956. On 13th June *The Doll* won the Sydney Theatre Critics' Circle award for the best Australian play and Madge Ryan was named best supporting actress as Pearl.

"A big crowd at the Comedy Theatre [Melbourne] stood and cheered tonight when it was announced from the stage that *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* will go to London", reported the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 21st June. Lindsay Browne commented [23rd June]:

*It may well be found to mark the coming-of-age of Australian drama after what has been, in effect, a leap-year baby's childhood. It may abolish for good the one-way traffic sign between other English-speaking dramatic cultures and our own.*

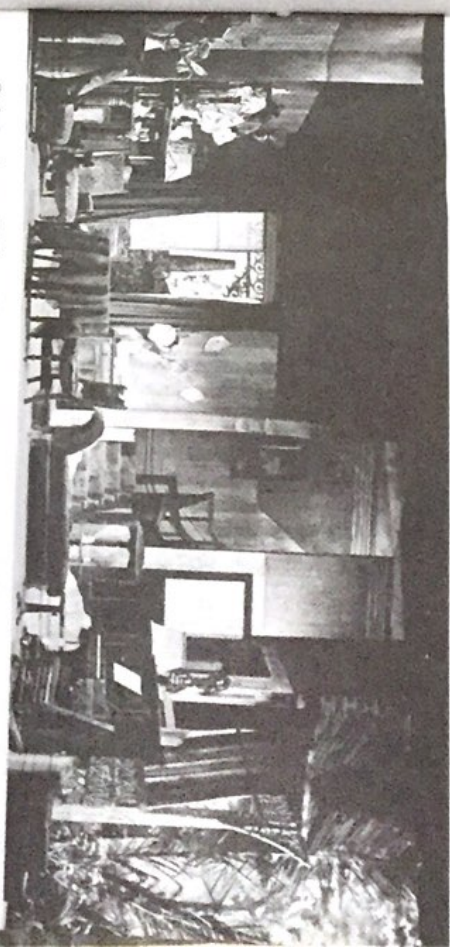
On 25th June *Woman's Day*, noting that a record number of 33,240 people had seen the play on the NSW and Queensland tour, said "a few had criticised the 'morals'."

LONDON

After a run in of the cast in Sydney and a civic farewell, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* set off for London with the following cast:

- BUBBA Fenella Maguire
  - PEARL Madge Ryan
  - OLIVE June Jago
  - BARNEY Ray Lawler
  - EMMA Ethel Gabriel
  - ROO Kenneth Warren
  - JOHNNIE Richard Pratt
- After a week in Nottingham and a week in Edinburgh the play opened in London at the New Theatre on 30th April 1957.

The co-producer, Sir Laurence Olivier commented: "It's a damn good play. It's as simple as that. Good plays are not easy to find." The playwright Terence Rattigan said: "I found the play utterly modern, absolutely contemporary,



Original set: Union Theatre (1955)

about real people, and deeply moving. I will come to see it again." [*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2nd May.] He was not the only person who found the Australian claque in the audience on opening night a distraction.

The veteran critic Harold Hobson is revealing of the exotic impression *The Doll* made in Britain [*Sunday Times*, 5th May]:

Ray Lawler's "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" is about sugar-cane cutters in Queensland. These men form a closed community, like bullfighters, or coal miners, or circus artists, or dramatic troupes. Natural leaders, distinguished for their muscles and their determination, emerge among them; and these leaders form round themselves a gang as the bullfighter forms his cuadrilla, each member months of the year [that is, during the English summer] these cancutters separate themselves from ordinary life and are devoted, heart, flesh and mind, to whatever it is that cancutters do. Then, during the English winter, when the heat of Queensland becomes excessive even for their gigantic strength, they come south to the great cities of Australia. In these cities they maintain floozies, who welcome them to five months of riot and sex and drinking, and all those pleasures on which is put a sharper edge of enjoyment when they are not sanctified by respectability or the Church. To these floozies it is





London production: Fenella Maguire and Richard Pratt.

their custom to present some whimsical and unusual present, such as a self-contained community fascinated me on the first night, with a member of the audience who had actually cut came himself informed me that I was getting the whole thing wrong. He assured me that the giant Roo and his sexy friend Barney [who had learned a lot from the rabbis which have played so prolific a part in Australian history] were not social examples, but individuals. One must not conclude from the fact that Macbeth murdered Duncan that it is habit of all Scottish soldiers to cut the throats of their superiors and the behaviour of Barney and Roo, it appears, commits no-one but themselves. . . . In other words, what during the first act had interested me as a generalised social study seems to be really a highly personal drama.

This alters one's point of view. Instead of absorbing information one seeks emotion. From this altered attitude it appears immediately that Mr Lawler has one of the qualities of a first-rate dramatist that of being able, like Racine [and unlike Shakespeare] to put his finger on the exact point at which the fortunes of his character reach their climax and begin to decline. This seventeenth year is momentous in the lives of Barney and Roo as was to Neo in "Britannicus".



The New Theatre, London. 1957.

nius" the moment when he made the decisive turn from good to evil. Hobson goes on to compare *The Doll* with John Osborne's *The Entertainer* which opened the same week and finds Lawler's writing the less dense.

If I have cauteriously suggested that I do not exactly know what conceptions do, it is to emphasise the fact that nowhere in his dialogue does Mr Lawler hit on any phrase or picture which brings their working lives to our eyes. His characters' conversation is dull, flat and unrevealing.

Kenneth Tynan of the *Observer* in a now famous review [5th May] was impressed by the innovation of presenting the working class as "simple human beings";

Last Tuesday, against all augury . . . one of Her Majesty's subjects turned up with a play about working people who were neither "grim" nor "jumpy", neither sentimentalised nor patronised, neither used to point a social moral nor derided as quaint and improbable right, exalting in universal pleasures and nagged by universal griefs. They were poor only in passing. . . . The play that pulled off the feat is "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll", and if Roy Lawler, its



Australian author, is aware of the magnitude of the achievement, I shall be the most astonished critic in London, for I am sure revolution was not in his mind when he wrote it. He was merely born with something that most English playwrights acquire only after a struggle and express only with the utmost embarrassment—respect for ordinary people.

It takes more than that, of course, to make a good play. The exciting thing about Mr Lauder is that he can also construct. Out of unremarkable gaites and regrets, out of everyday challenges and defeats, he has composed a story as gripping in the theatre as it would be in life. It has to do with the reluctance of people to grow up; to prepare for age, to exchange immaturity for responsibility. . . . When the curtain falls, reality has demolished the romantic myth of the past; but we have laughed too much in the process to call the play a tragedy. It records a mischance that has befallen a special group of people whom since we love them, we regard with unique compassion. . . .

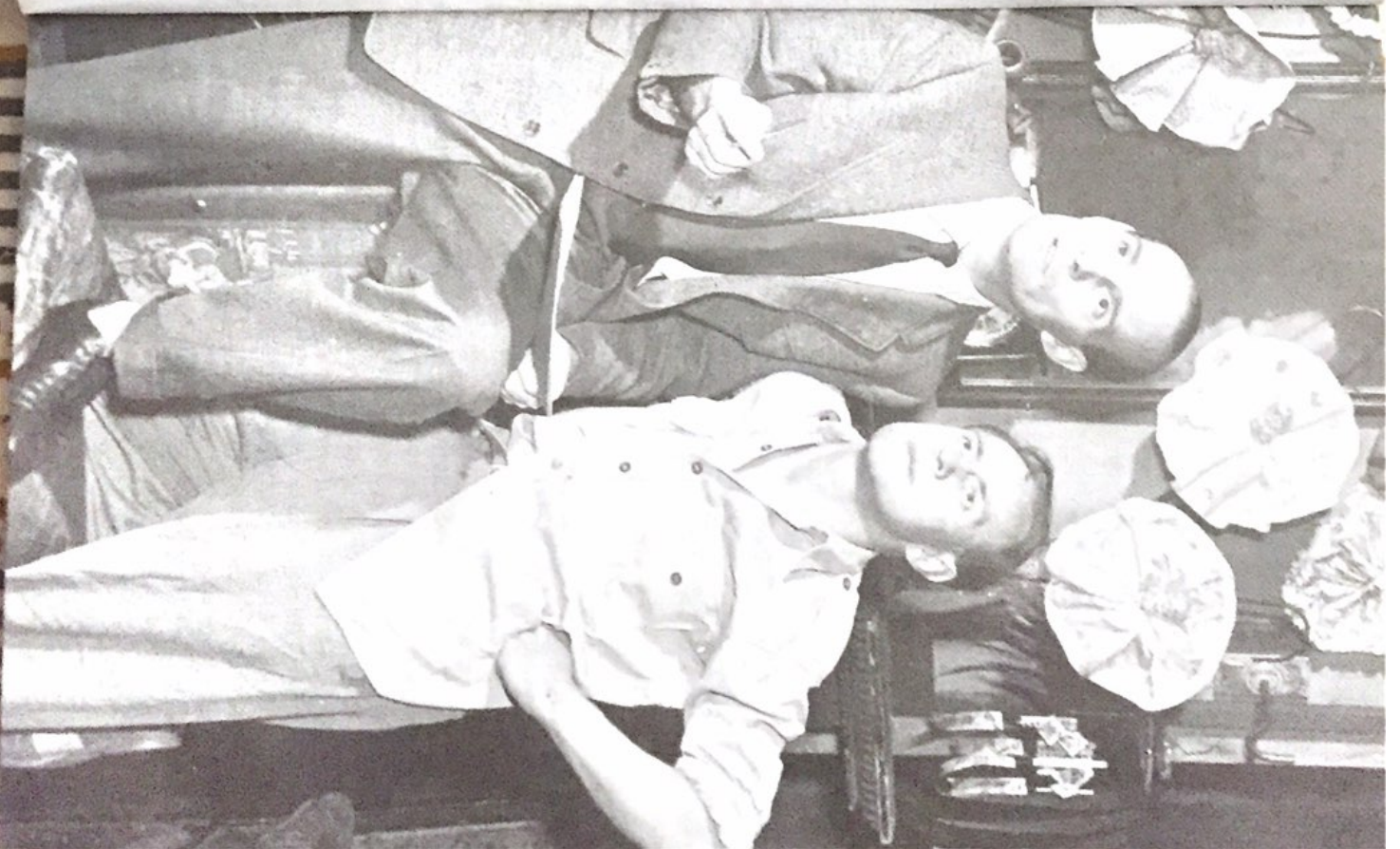
Mr Lauder has been strangely described as the Australian Tennessee Williams. The comparison is just only in that both writers deal with people who live in a hot climate and speak racy and freely about their emotions. But where Mr Williams concerns himself with odd men out, Mr Lauder concerns himself with even men in. The results, though different, are not less rewarding. In short, we have found ourselves a playwright, and it is time to rejoice.

On 9th May the Sun reported that Prime Minister Menzies had 'lost a five shilling bet to Commonwealth Bank chairman Dr H.C. Coombs. Menzies bet Dr Coombs that the hit play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* would be a flop in Britain."

Herbert Holman [Bulletin, 15th May] gave a glimpse of the theatre currently running in London's West End. The impact of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* launched the previous year was soon to bring about a social revolution to which Kenneth Tynan and *The Doll* contributed:

There are thirteen theatres in and about St. Martin's Lane. On 29th April six were given up to light musical entertainment and six to plays. The latter comprised two thrillers, two comedies [one by an English author whose speciality is the aristocracy and the other with

*John Sumner and Ray Lauder: original production.*







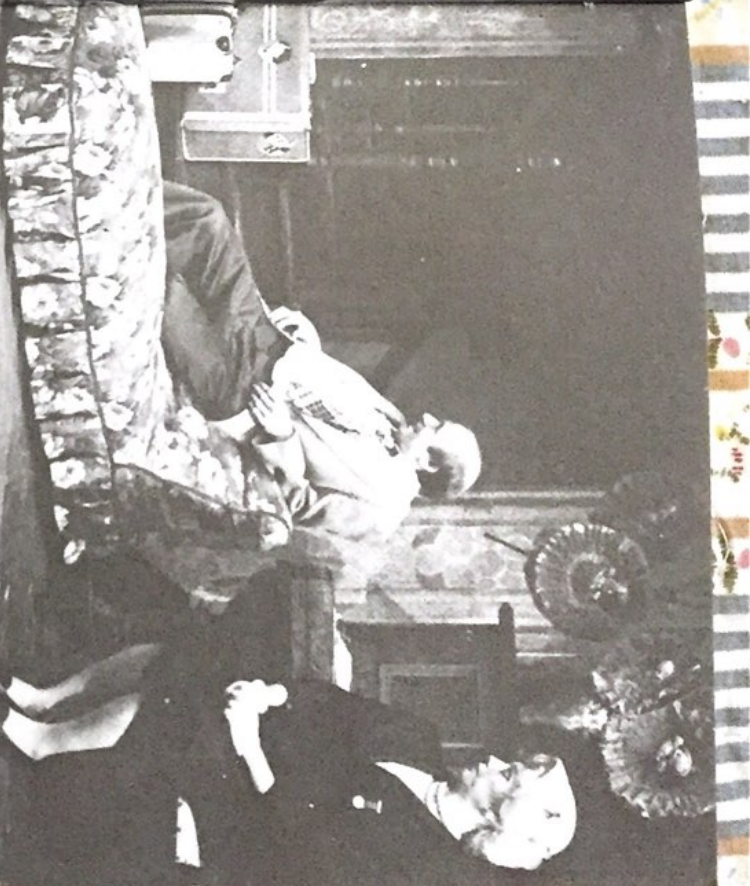
Melbourne Theatre Company production 1976-77: Pat Gurr, Carole Skinner, Irene Inescort, Bruce Miles and Sandy Gore

a well-known English actor as star and joint-author) and two American importations both of which are more than usually sony and morbid.

On 30th April the first Australian play to be performed in England with an all-Australian cast came to the one vacant theatre, the Xcel, where it is bounded to the west by a French revue and a long-running pastiche of the 'twenties and, to the south, by the latest hundred per cent American musical comedy, with baseball as its theme and with an ice-skater and an Australian music-hall comedian as stars...

He goes on to quote from the critical reviews of *The Doll*: Daily Mail [Cecil Wilson]: *Nothing could be fuller-blooded than the way this company brings [the characters] to life. I found the early scenes rather trying, but once attuned to the accents and the slang, I lost myself in the raw humanity of these people—a humanity that reduces our own anaemic drawing-room plays to still-life.*

News Chronicle [Alan Dent]: *The rich Australian accents,*



so remarkably like *Cockeye*, give an unusual tang, which makes the play seem distinctly better than it is.

Daily Telegraph [W.A. Darlington]: *Mr Lancel has woven a rather casual pattern of rough lives, of racy talk and down-to-earth emotions; and one admires the gallantry of an author who writes himself a part which entails his being apparently half-killed by an infuriated partner twice his size.*

Financial Times [Derek Granger]: *... a working-class drama without condescension or sentimentality that is richer still in national self-criticism, feeling and humanity. This beautifully-shaped and sharply-written play is a fine illustration of how deeply unaccare and intricate people can be surprised by suffering; and it gains all the more in impact from the fact that it is the rugged simplicities of their wanted way of life which let them down... and it is a refreshment to hear a stage for once alive with an unmistakably authentic accent.*

On 18th July the Australian papers announced that the independent U.S. film company Hecht-Hill-Lancaster had bought the film rights for 134,000 Australian pounds, of



which Lawler would receive sixty percent [the rest went to the play's producers]. Dame Sybil Thondike sounded a warning which history bore out: "Watch out what those Hollywood fellows do to *The Doll* when they get hold of it. They could play merry something-or-other with it." [Adelaide Advertiser, 25th July]. Translations began to appear. "How do you say 'you little trimmer' in German?" someone asked. A Swedish production was first. The *West Australian* [5th December] quoted the *Svenska Dagbladet* critic:

*A new continent makes its entrance on the Swedish stage and does it with fine effect. It is not impossible that Australian actor and dramatist Ray Lawler will come to mean the same to Australia as Tennessee Williams does to the American Southern States. He introduces a completely new milieu.*

And in Norway the *Oslo Aftenposten* said:

*We witnessed the debut of a new culture. Lawler is a culture-making dramatist, and has a perspective equally applicable in London or Oslo.*

#### NEW YORK

After a record-breaking seven-month season which subsequently won them the 1957 Evening Standard Award for the best new play, the cast decided to take a rest and then move to America. It proved that what was "equally applicable in London or Oslo" was not applicable to New York.

A warning of what was to come was contained in a report from the New York bureau of the *Daily Mirror* [23rd January 1958]:

*Across Times Square is a huge poster five storeys high of a very young girl carrying a doll and wearing a shortie nightie and a troubled come-hither look . . . The same picture appears on billboards at the theatre and at all ticket agencies. It is hard to imagine that the respected Theatre Guild and Playwrights' Company, which are jointly presenting the play, feel the public must be lured to the theatre on the pretext that they will see another "Baby Doll".*

Perhaps that was where the comparisons with Tennessee Williams ended. The play opened on 22nd January 1958. Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times* wrote:

*Probably the trouble is the language. Since the Australians speak*

*Melbourne Theatre Company production 1976-77: Carole Skinner and Christine Amor.*





English and so do we, we assume that "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" says the same thing to us that it does to Australians. But . . . this theatregoer felt that the real quality . . . was escaping him. To an outsider, unfortunately, "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" seems like a commonplace drama written around commonplace people. Although it is good natured it lacks distinction.

Walter Kerr in the *New York Herald Tribune* echoed this disappointment:

*The difficulty is, I think, that the party is really over—not only for them, but for us. Somehow we have missed the moment of attachment: we have come in for the deflated reprimandings, and the moral . . .*

Richard Watts, of the *New York Post* perceived a likely reason for the failure with first-nighters:

*The vitality of its impact is less startling in the American theatre, which goes in for vigour, whatever its other defects. And I suspect that its material, dealing as it does with the roving workers of a vast and youthful land, isn't as exotic to us as it appeared to the playgoers of Britain . . . Its difficulties are regrettable, yet I think the play possesses notable virtues which deserve our attention, respect and admiration.*

The run lasted five weeks.

And so ended the spring of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Ethel Gabriel returned to Australia in March 1958. June Jago, Madge Ryan and Kenneth Warren settled in Britain and became part of the English theatre. *The Doll* continued to tour Australia through 1958; and in due course a mediocre film was made for Hollywood, directed by Leslie Norman with Ernest Borgnine as Roo, John Mills as Barney, Anne Baxter as Olive, Ethel Gabriel as Emma and Angela Lansbury as Pearl. The setting was moved to Sydney and a happy ending added with Olive changing her mind and marrying Roo. Since then the play has been performed in many languages, studied and revived in performance in Australia. Among the latter have been a production by the Q Theatre in Sydney in 1965, in which Ethel Gabriel gave one of her last performances before her death, one by the Nimrod Theatre in 1973 and by the Queenstand Theatre Company in 1974. The Melbourne Theatre Company revived it in 1977 as part of *The Doll Trilogy*.