INTERNATIONAL SUFFRAGE THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA

Edwardian Feminism on Tour

An English journalist commented in 1912 that 'Australia is now awakening' with a curiosity to see the modern plays which had caused so much 'discussion and abuse' in British and subsequently Australian papers. That 'discussion and abuse', claimed the journalist, was certain to 'create a desire to see works of...Shaw, and other revolutionaries'.[1] Australian audiences—to the delight of the said journalist—were no longer prepared to accept the inferior status of being merely a touring province for the 'Great London Successes' which characterised British theatrical exports. Australia was hungry for those theatrical 'revolutionaries' who were waging a war on the English stage which was resulting in 'the creation or evolution of a new kind of drama and dramatists'.[2]

The observations of this excited journalist were only partly true: Australian 'curiosity' had begun to be satisfied many years before, most notably with Janet Achurch's tour of *A Doll's House* in 1889.[3] Mrs Elizabeth Baker's *Chains*, a popular British suffrage play, had also been a 'triumph' with many audiences.[4] In the following discussion, two very different examples of international feminist theatre have been chosen to explore that influence in Australia: a tour of a London success, Cicely Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's*; and a play from an immigrant fresh from the British Suffragette scene, Adela Pankhurst's *Betrayed*. That both of these examples of international feminist theatre are British merely reflects the Imperial cultural 'supremacy' that Britain exercised in Australia and other domains during this period.[5] This is not to say that American theatre had no influence on

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[1] E F S, ' "Advance Australia" in the Drama', *Saturday Westminster Gazette*, 28 September 1912, from the 'Louis Esson Scrapbook' (CHC).

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] For an extensive coverage of this tour, see Deborah Campbell, '*A Doll's House*: The Colonial Response', in S Dermody (et al), *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends: Essays in Australian Cultural History*, Malmsbury, 1982, pp. 192-210.

[4] Review, 'Melbourne Repertory Theatre', *The Book Lover*, 6 January 1912. Gregan McMahon's Melbourne production of *Chains* was heralded as on of the 'chief successes' of the the year in the *London Times*, 5 April 1912. Both of these clippings are from the Esson Scrapbook, *op. cit.* See also E Irvin, *Australian Melodrama*, Sydney, 1981, p. 111 for more information on *Chains*.

[5] Bratton, (et al), *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage 1790-1930*, Manchester & New York, 1991, offers an account of the operations of this cultural 'supremacy'.

the development of Australian theatre at this time,[6] rather that American feminist theatre did not appear to have travelled to Australia during the suffrage years. As these two very different British examples demonstrate, it was left to English feminist playwrights to interact with the Australian theatre scene.

DIANA OF DOBSON'S IN AUSTRALIA

Diana of Dobson's provides a realistic depiction of women working in the retail industry, and an examination of love and marriage from an anti-romantic feminist standpoint. First performed at the Kingsway Theatre, London, in February 1908, it was produced by Lena Ashwell who also played the lead role. It is the story of Diana, a shop assistant, and her quest for independence and happiness. In four acts, the play charts Diana's quest from her beginnings as an exploited shop assistant, through her windfall monetary inheritance which takes her away from squalor and hard work to the life of the rich in Europe, and finally back again to the depression of the London Embankment. During the peak of this journey and her wealth she is courted by various men whom she rejects for different reasons. Back in London and destitute, she encounters once more one of her European suitors—Bretherton—living the life of a derelict, having accepted Diana's challenge to earn his own living. Now friends and equals, the play concludes with their enigmatic discussion of marriage. Most commentators agree that Diana accepted Bretherton's proposal.

Genre and classification

I am not convinced that Diana does intend to marry her suitor, which leads me to question the play's pure classification as a romantic comedy. Theatrical entrepreneur J C Williamson recognised the popularity and commercial viability of *Diana of Dobson's*, which is why he saw fit to bring it out from London; it had been, after all, the popular success of 1908. The play was billed in Australia, more so than in England, as a comedy. While this manoeuvre of Williamson's was financially astute and brought in large

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[6] For an account of the influence of American theatre on Australian theatre, see for example Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788-1914*, Sydney, 1990.

audiences, it ultimately confused critical commentary on the play. Australian reviewers were simply not prepared for its concomitant serious examinations. Was it a romantic comedy? The answer to this partially hinges on how the play's conclusion is interpreted.

Diana's reaction to the proposal of marriage, though encouraging, is not clearly affirmative. The ending is far too ambiguous for that certainty, with Diana's suitor Bretherton mentioning that so and so is a good chap, and declaring that he should be asked to the wedding. Diana's response, through a mouth full of food, is nothing more than 'M'm'.[7] The closest Diana had come to saying yes was to respond, half laughing with tears in her eyes, that 'It will be the blind leading the blind then—and the end of that is the ditch' [76]. A second before, she had made it quite clear to Bretherton that his offer 'of a home and what is to me a fortune' [75] is of equal if not more weight than love in her decision. When Bretherton says that he is also of course offering himself, Diana laughs harshly and responds with 'please don't imagine I forget that important item' [76]. The play was dubbed a 'romantic comedy' no doubt because of the perceived happy reconciliation and proposed marriage; a formulaic ending for conventional comedy.[8] It is arguable that Hamilton deliberately wrote a feminist non-closure for her play, but it appears that most productions made up for in action what Diana—or Hamilton—did not consent to in words.

Sheila Stowell pays detailed attention to *Diana of Dobson's*. She reads the play as the story of an industrial age Cinderella complete with Edwardian versions of the evil stepmother; Cinderella herself (Diana); the villainous step-sisters as various indications of capitalist greed; and the fairy godmother manifest as monetary inheritance.[9] Stowell convincingly argues, through numerous examples of characters enacting choices, that the play is indeed a romantic comedy in the tradition of light comedy which 'relies upon delicately rendered romance to side-step the potentially sticky moral and social problems it raises', theatre which uses comedy to 'coat the propagandist pill'.[10] The play can be

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[7] *Diana of Dobson's* in L Fitzsimmons & V Gardner, *New Woman Plays*, London, 1991, p 77. All subsequent page references are to this edition

[8] For a discussion of this issue, and how feminist theatre subverts those comic traditions, see Susan Carlson, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition*, Ann Arbor, 1991.

[9] Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992, p. 80.

[10] L Ashwell quoted in Stowell, *ibid*, p. 77.

performed as a light comedy if you believe that Diana accepts her final marriage proposal, but as I have mentioned, there is no 'yes' uttered by Diana in the play's finale. Stowell argues that the play's ending is problematic in its feminism because 'the taint of domesticity has merely followed Diana to the river's edge', where in the final scene the tableau of 'the happy couple enjoying sandwiches and coffee perched on a bench on the Thames embankment': but are they really a happy couple?[11] While Stowell sees the ending as redeemable if viewed with an ironic eye what is needed is scepticism—not irony—to trust Hamilton's feminist non-resolution. Hamilton is not writing irony here, she is deliberately setting up a scepticism in the audience to doubt whether or not the couple will indeed marry. And even *if* marriage was the resolution of the play, this comedic close was deliberately designed by Hamilton to raise more problems than it solved. What is more at issue in this exploration, however, is if this intention was stressed in production, and how audiences of the time read the play.

Audience reception on the Australian tour

Diana of Dobson's toured nationally, with a three-night season in Adelaide at the Theatre Royal, featuring Miss Tittell Brune in the lead role. (Due to space constraints, only Adelaide and Sydney receptions will be considered here. Stowell points out that—in the English context—*Diana of Dobson's* could be read as a feminist response to the fancy dress transformations of recent musical comedies which had romanticised the shop girl, for example *The Girl Behind the Counter* (1906). Some of these same musicals were performed in Australia, but it would be surprising indeed if Williamson had tapped into that feminist response documented by Stowell. Further, it is doubtful that the Australian production honoured Hamilton's deliberate ploy to de-eroticise the undressing scenes in act one. London critics 'were surprised at the way in which the disrobing of five shop girls making ready for bed [after a hard day's work] could be so mechanically unarousing'.[12] If Williamson's production had been sensitive to the operations of this feminist dramaturgy,

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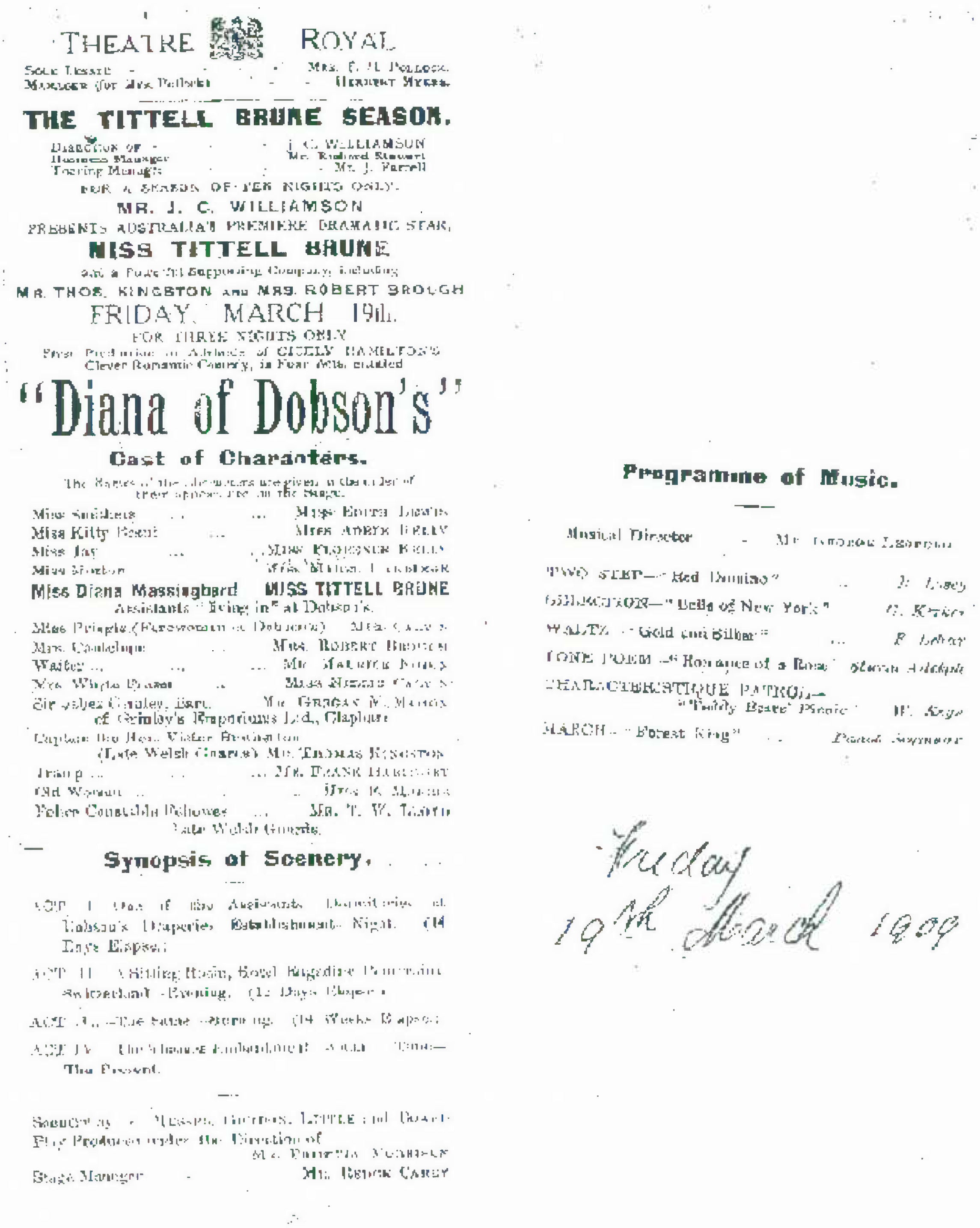
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[12] J Kaplan & S Stowell, *Theatre & Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 5.



THEATRE ROYAL

THE TITTELL BRUNE SEASON.

FOR A SEASON OF TEN NIGHTS ONLY.

MR. J. C. WILLIAMSON

PRESENTS AUSTRALIA'S PREMIERE DRAMATIC STAR,

MISS TITTELL BRUNE

MR. THOS. KINGSTON AND MRS. ROBERT BROUGH

FRIDAY, MARCH 19th.

FOR THREE NIGHTS ONLY

Clever Romantic Comedy, in Four Acts, entitled

"Diana of Dobson's"

Cast of Characters.

Miss Diana Massingbard ... MISS TITTELL BRUNE

Synopsis of Scenery.

Programme of Music.

Friday 19th March 1909

Figure 2.1 *Part of the (silk) program from* Diana of Dobson's *1909 Adelaide performance, (Performing Arts Collection of South Australia).*

it was quickly forgotten in his product on of Melville's *The Bad Girl of the Family* with its famous episode of shop girls unwittingly disrobing in view of a disguised male interloper.

Australian audiences may have been less aware than their British counterparts of the pointed political criticisms in *Diana of Dobson's*, particularly those of the first act where Hamilton certainly does not romanticise the 'Living In' situation for female shop attendants. This system saw women workers housed in dormitory situations strictly controlled by the owner of the company for whom they worked. Discussions of this system were common in the English press at the time. As one critic said of the play's topicality, 'the theme of the play is so intimately connected with the subject which is at present attracting a large amount of attention'.[13] Hamilton is on record as saying she was intent on arousing public indignation about this issue. She so faithfully tried to recreate the horrors of the exploitation of shop girls that she enlisted the organiser of the National Federation of Women Workers to ensure the accuracy of her depiction (which by the way is an excellent example of realism working for feminist ends).[14] This connection between theme and subject was not so intimate in Australia, because the working conditions of women were different in what was then the most unionised country in the world. It is perhaps understandable then that an Australian audience would have responded more to the play's exploration of women's choices in love and marriage, which constitutes the larger comic exploration conducted in the play.

Adelaide reviews, when compared with London reviews, are revealing. The differing standards of dramatic criticism can partly be attributed to the long London run and large audiences—and therefore wider familiarity with the play—where many newspapers competed for a critically dominant voice about a successful piece of theatre.[15] Australian reviews say more about how the play was promoted than they do about how it was received and debated by audiences. Newspaper advertisements show exactly how Williamson expected his money to be made: he was banking on the popular Tittell Brune

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[13] Quoted in Linda Fitzsimmons' introduction to *Diana of Dobson's* in Fitzsimmons & Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[14] See Kaplan & Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 108, for contemporary press reviews.

[15] As Linda Fitzsimmons points out in her introduction to the play, *Diana of Dobson's* was so popular that Hamilton rewrote the play and published it as a novel. The initial production ran for 43 performances, toured nationally and internationally, and was revived again in 1909: *op. cit.*, p. 30.

in the lead role (who appears to be more central to the performance than the play itself); and relying on drawing audiences to see a 'Remarkable Successful Romantic Comedy'—that 'great Success of the London Season' which was still running at London's Kingsway theatre. This last fact was a bonus for Australian audiences, who usually had to wait longer to see anything new. The advertisement for the last night of the run declared that *Diana of Dobson's* had been the 'sensational hit' of the Tittell Brune season, and located the play's success squarely within the boundaries of popular comedy: 'Everybody, actually everybody who has seen this great production declares it to be the most interesting and best played Comedy Drama ever presented before an Adelaide audience, consequently, what everybody says must be true'.[16]

Certainly the reviewer in the *Adelaide Advertiser* agreed, adding the city's approval to that already expressed by the neighbouring states.[17] Special claims were made for the intelligence of the Adelaide audience which was 'a good one, and, as is customary here, all the brightness of the dialogue was instantly recognised and appreciated'. Much of the review consists of an uncritical plot summary and actor appraisal, which was mostly favourable. The stage settings, which were 'particularly good throughout', also received enthusiastic coverage. The only comment on the subject matter of the play was enigmatic and very brief: 'Here and there the chief character uttered some telling economic truths'.[18] All of those 'truths' were feminist ones, mostly to do with Hamilton's popular thesis of 'marriage as a trade'. It is interesting that they are not regarded as contentious by the reviewer.

More forthcoming was the *Adelaide Register* reviewer, who at least did not mistake the playwright for a man, and engaged in a more urbane examination of the play. Declaring it an 'artistic performance', with 'not a weak performer in the cast', the reviewer mentions that the play had faced a critical audience from the start, because the favourite *Girl of the Golden* west had been taken off at the height of its season to make way for

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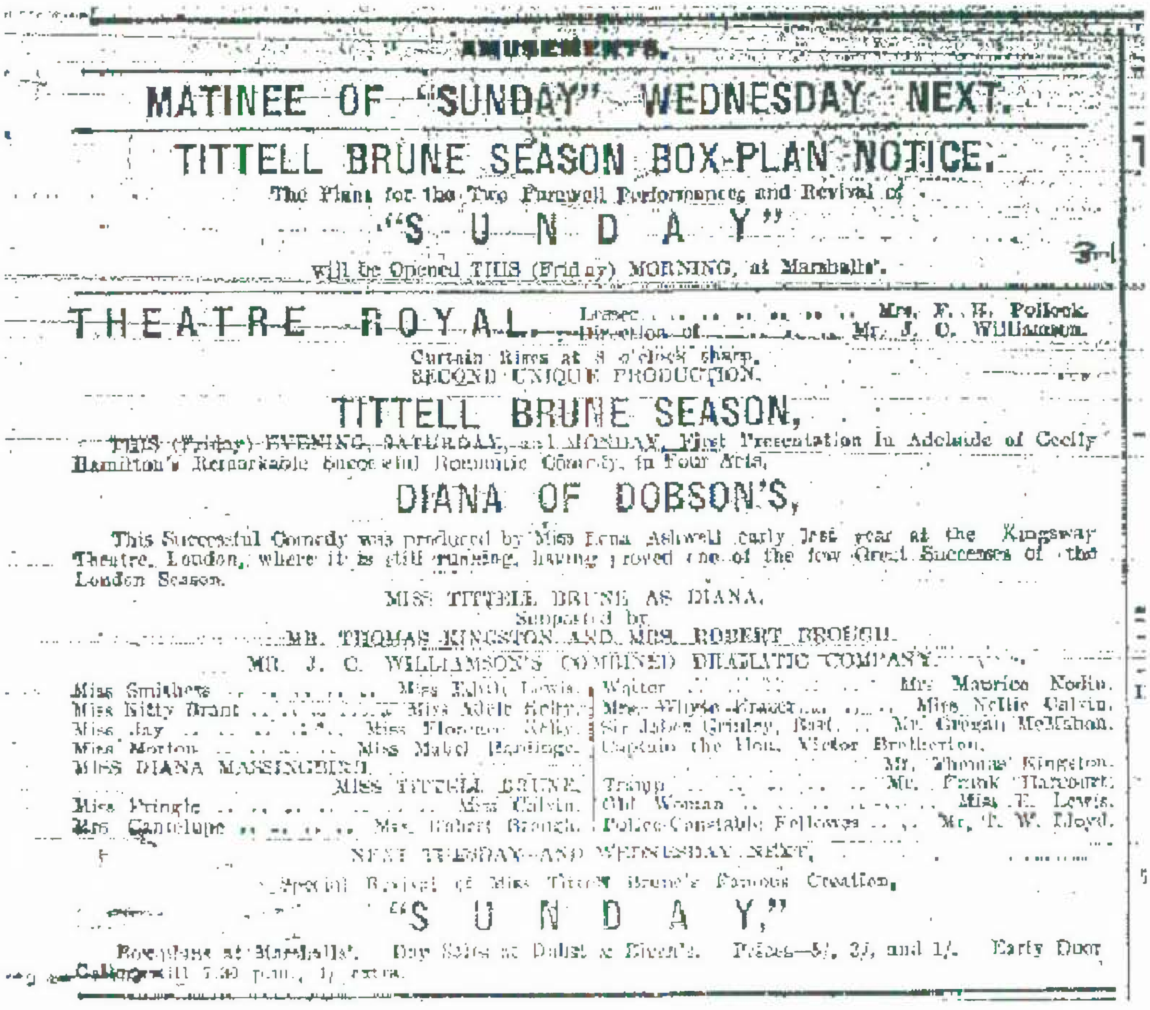
16 Advertisement, *The Register* (Adelaide), 12 March 1909, p. 10.
17 *Adelaide Advertiser*, 20 March 1909, p. 14.
18 *Ibid.*



AMUSEMENTS.

MATINEE OF "SUNDAY" WEDNESDAY NEXT.

TITTELL BRUNE SEASON BOX-PLAN NOTICE.

The Plans for the Two Farewell Performances and Revival of

"S U N D A Y"

will be Opened THIS (Friday) MORNING, at Marshalls'.

THEATRE ROYAL. Lessee ... Mrs. F. H. Pollock. Direction of ... Mr. J. C. Williamson.

Curtain Rises at 8 o'clock sharp.
SECOND UNIQUE PRODUCTION.

TITTELL BRUNE SEASON,

THIS (Friday) EVENING, SATURDAY, and MONDAY, First Presentation in Adelaide of Cecily Hamilton's Remarkable Successful Romantic Comedy, in Four Acts,

DIANA OF DOBSON'S,

This Successful Comedy was produced by Miss Lena Ashwell early last year at the Kingsway Theatre, London, where it is still running, having proved one of the few Great Successes of the London Season.

MISS TITTELL BRUNE AS DIANA,
Supported by
MR. THOMAS KINGSTON AND MRS. ROBERT BROUGH.
MR. J. C. WILLIAMSON'S COMBINED DRAMATIC COMPANY.

Miss Smithers	Miss Edith Lewis.	Waiter	Mr. Maurice Nodin.
Miss Kitty Brant	Miss Adele Keller.	Mrs. Whyte-Fraser	Miss Nellie Calvin.
Miss Jay	Miss Florence Kelly.	Sir Jabez Grinley, Bart.	Mr. Gregan McMahon.
Miss Morton	Miss Mabel Hardinge.	Captain the Hon. Victor Bretherton.	Mr. Thomas Kingston.
MISS DIANA MASSINGBERD.	MISS TITTELL BRUNE.	Tramp	Mr. Frank Harcourt.
Miss Pringle	Miss Calvin.	Old Woman	Miss E. Lewis.
Mrs. Cantelupe	Mrs. Robert Brough.	Police-Constable Fellowes	Mr. T. W. Lloyd.

NEXT TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY NEXT,
Special Revival of Miss Tittell Brune's Famous Creation,

"S U N D A Y,"

Box-plans at Marshalls'. Day Sales at Duhst & Biven's. Prices—5/, 3/, and 1/. Early Door Callers till 7.30 p.m., 1/ extra.

Figure 2.2 *J C Williamson's advertising of* Diana of Dobson's *emphasised both Tittell Brune as the main attraction, and the fact that the London production was still running* (Adelaide Advertiser, *19 March 1909).*

Diana of Dobson's. Approval was easily won, however, and the play was forecast to be a success. The reasons why this endorsement was forthcoming are revealing: 'With its comedy, its melodrama, and its socialist tendencies, *Diana of Dobson's* should go like the proverbial hot cakes'. The reviewer, after discussing the politics of the play, sardonically comments that 'The socialistic supporters of this incident occupied seats in the dress circle on Friday evening'. Perhaps the most intriguing comment, though, related to the subject matter of the play: 'It is strange how almost every play that has recently been written is a satire on some British institution'.[19] This was the only reference made by any Adelaide review to the play's politics. The interesting aspect of these comments is that the reviewer seems to link the evils of capitalism with British Imperialism, blaming British institutions for creating the dire working conditions that Hamilton documents. The reviewer's comments about Adelaide's dress circle 'socialists' could imply that Australian capitalists are not only theatregoers, but fair bosses with nothing to fear from Hamilton's exposures. This is in stark contrast to one London review which noted 'How very pained and shocked' the 'fashionable audience' looked.[20]

Although this last review shows that Adelaide audiences were at some level engaged in a deeper experience of the play than mere comic entertainment, the majority of the press suggests that the audiences went along to catch a play with the reputation of being the latest London hit, and to have a laugh watching some of their most loved performers. British criticism of the play implies that critics, if not audiences, were engaged with other issues, including the uneasiness raised about both trade practices and aesthetic conventions.[21]

Had things been any different in Sydney? If the review in *Lone Hand* is anything to go by, they were indeed. This critic, Leon Brodzky, attacks both the play and the playwright for not going far enough:

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[19] *Adelaide Register*, 20 March 1909, p. 4.

[20] The *Clarion*, 21 February 1908, quoted in Kaplan & Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

[21] For example, English reviews remarked on the sexuality of the first scene where the women undress and prepare for bed in their dormitory. Some critics were offended by the scene, others lauded its realism. Other critics, some excited and others bored by the play's engagement with and questioning of theatrical decorum and dramatic traditions, engendered a debate over the genre and purpose of *Diana of Dobson's*. For a fuller discussion of this, see Stowell, *op. cit.* pp. 80-81 & p. 94.

> *Diana of Dobson's* endeavours to discuss the question of the social and economic position of the shop girl; but, not having been written for a 'theatre of ideas', fails to throw any light on the subject, either because the authoress lacks sufficient grasp and philosophic insight, or because she had not the courage to face the actual facts, or because she was not allowed to do so by the manager. Recently a London clergyman made certain statements about the private lives of many shop-girls, saying in effect that their conditions forced them to supplement their wages by resorting to prostitution. Now, Miss Cicely Hamilton has not touched on this or any other of the most serious moral and economic aspects of shop assistants' conditions. A dramatist, believing that he (or she) had a serious mission as a thinker, would not flinch to present a reasoned-out view of the situation...[22]

Brodzky has attacked here the form of the play, implying that romantic comedy is no place for serious political explorations. He then becomes bellicose about the play's content, accusing Hamilton of misrepresenting and romanticising the situation of shop girls, which is interesting considering what lengths Hamilton had gone to to reproduce actual conditions. Bearing this in mind, suspicions are aroused as to exactly how faithfully Williamson staged this vital first act. What Brodzky does not mention at all is the remaining three acts of the play: possibly he left in disgust after the first.

Perhaps his critical disappointment could have been better directed at Williamson's production, which may have been a lot fluffier than the London one. Did Williamson edit the script at all to make it more to his liking, just as he once tried to alter the ending to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*?[23] After all, it is intriguing that no Australian reviews consulted so far have mentioned the undressing scene of act one which so occupied British debates about the play. Regardless, Brodzky's review expresses a contemptuous tone not emulated in the London press. Taken alone, this review cannot necessarily imply that Sydney audiences were more political than Adelaide ones, but it would be highly tempting to pursue that supposition. There were many issues, gleaned from these few examples above,

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[22] Leon Brodzky, 'Drama of Ideas', *Lone Hand*, January 1910, p. 342.

[23] This story has achieved folklore status in Australian theatre history. A copy of Williamson's script of *Diana of Dobson's* is held in the Australian National library, and could possibly answer my questions about how the Australian production may have been--as I suspect it was—substantially altered. Williamson's business correspondence has also recently been made available for consultation, and his dealings with Lena Ashwell would no doubt provide further valuable insight. Unfortunately I have been unable to consult these sources due to financial constraints.

with which the Australian press did not engage,[24] but these reviews are still quite revealing about social and political differences between 'post-suffrage' Australia and England, still engaged in the suffrage struggle.

Through this limited examination of audience reception to *Diana of Dobson's* distinctions between Australian and English audiences, and cultural and political differences between Australian states (so few years after Federation) have been revealed. There are other examples of suffrage theatre on tour in Australia that would also be illuminating, and suggest fruitful areas for further research. Elizabeth Baker's *Chains*, for example, shows how feminist drama was handled by small repertory theatres rather than large commercial managements. A fuller study of international feminist theatre on tour in Australia—or suffrage actresses and managers, for that matter—is one project that needs to be undertaken.

The Australian tour of *Diana of Dobson's* is part of the early feminist tradition in Australian theatre. The production of this play indicates that entrepreneurs such as Williamson, who had a reputation for impairing the development of local drama, were sometimes unwittingly responsible for bringing feminist theatre to Australia in the quest for the entertainment dollar. 'Unwittingly' is the key word here, because Williamson was clearly devoted to profits and not politics in theatre (feminist politics at least). He did not act further on his own precedent of exposing Australian audiences to English feminist theatre. Instead the fare in years to come included such greats as the aforementioned Frederick Melville's *The Bad Girl in the Family*, which enraged many Australian feminists. While some journalists enthused over the play, saying that Shaw is 'all very well in his way, but this is the real thing', it was too real for some. Muriel Matters, an ex-Adelaide suffragette, 'bitterly attacked' *The Bad Girl of the Family* as 'a libel on her sex'.[25] The play caused riots in Perth, Western Australia, where enormous crowds trying to purchase tickets wrecked the sales office and smashed windows were stopped only by the

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[24] See for example Stowell & Kaplan, where reviews quoted discuss the beauty of the fashion in the play, reading it as 'a sure prediction' of upcoming fashions: *op. cit.*, p. 112

[25] *Adelaide Critic*, August 1911, clipping contained in the J C Williamson archives (ML).

police. The successful national tour even included the Australian outback and was advertised with the very cheery recommendation that it was the last play the King saw before he died.[26]

No doubt more people saw Melville's play than Hamilton's, but the impact of *Diana of Dobson's* was still significant. Australian audiences responded differently to the play than their British counterparts for various reasons, but most likely because they viewed the seriousness of the dramatic situation as a foreign experience. Australian workers may have truly believed they were better off, and Australian women that their life options were decidedly different. Feminist and socialist audience members would have identified most closely with the play's politics, and it is possible that the success of *Diana of Dobson's* provided inspiration for local activism—perhaps even feminist writing. *Diana of Dobson's* can be seen as having had a beneficial effect on the development of Australian theatre, exposing as it did new concepts of dramatic negotiation to willing audiences.

ADELA PANKHURST: THE ONE WHO STAYED

Adela Constantia Mary Pankhurst (later Mrs Walsh) belonged to that famous Pankhurst family, founders of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which comprised much of the militant suffragette faction of the women's movement in England. Adela was born in 1885, the fourth of five children after Christabel, Sylvia, Frank, and later Harry, of Emmeline and Doctor Pankhurst. The girls had been named for the heroines of Coleridge and Shakespeare, and fulfilled their 'heroic' obligations later in life.

A suffragette rebel in England

Adela had a privileged upbringing, receiving an education that resulted in her procuring work as an elementary school teacher in Manchester. This work did little to hinder her involvement with WSPU agitations; Adela was no exception among the Pankhurst women when she was arrested and imprisoned for her protest activities, where she was not above

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[26] *Ibid.*

participating in hunger strikes.[27] Although she was actively involved in militant suffragette activities, Adela was concerned with other political actions as well. In the early days of the WSPU the organisation agitated for other reforms than the franchise, such as unemployment. In the summer and autumn of 1906 Adela was in Yorkshire mustering support for the WSPU. She embroiled WSPU members in the midst of a textile strike by organising them to picket. Adela herself wrote articles on these strike campaigns for the *Labour Record.* This independent activity of Adela's was 'totally at variance with the policy of Christabel' who desired to concentrate WSPU efforts on the vote.[28] Christabel's efforts to eradicate Adela's wider political concerns from the activities of the WSPU both increased friction between Adela and her family, and revealed the strength of Adela's political philosophy, which continued to inform her entire writing life.

Suffragette militancy had a 'profound influence in accentuating militant tendencies in Left Wing working class movements'.[29] Adela was the WSPU organiser most closely linked to those movements, but instead of her efforts being lauded, they were criticised by Christabel and her mother. 'She might be as Red at heart as she pleased, provided she left the control of Suffragette policy to her WSPU leaders',[30] said Sylvia, but Adela had

different dreams for the women's movement. Her passionate involvement with the working class created increasing tensions and ultimately meant that Christabel no longer trusted Adela with positions of authority. Adela was no longer allowed to organise or run meetings, because such authority figures were meant to be women who could be trusted not to offend conservative audiences which provided a growing and respected support base for the suffrage movement.

Adela had no time for such strategies, and came to be regarded by Christabel as 'a very black sheep amongst organisers because the intensity of her socialism did not always permit her to comply with this requirement',[31] that is, of appealing to wealthy women in the

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[27] Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Details*, Virago, 1977, p. 212. On this occasion Adela was arrested whilst trying to rescue a male Liverpool Councillor who had joined their protest march in Manchester. Later she was arrested at Parliamentary protests in London, and on other occasions.

[28] *Ibid*, p. 224.

[29] *Ibid*, p. 367.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

interest of gaining the vote. Regardless, Adela continued her campaign work, often with such diligence that her health suffered severely. It was during one such illness, following pleurisy and a complete loss of voice, that she made a decision to cease active involvement with the WSPU. Fearing inaction, Adela resolved to train as a gardener instead. This decision was informed by the knowledge that 'though a brilliant speaker, and one of the hardest workers in the movement, she was often regarded with more disapproval than approbation by Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel'.[32] Recognising this and tired of being subject to harsher criticism than other organisers had to face, Adela accepted her mother's offer to fund her horticultural studies in return for her promise never to speak in public again in England. After the completion of her studies, and disillusioned with her career choice, Adela regretted this promise, and longed to return to the movement.

Exile and growth in Australia

This was not to happen in England. Through an association with Vida Goldstein whom she had met in London, Adela moved to Australia in 1914.[33] Although she left England in a state of grief, she made many friends in Australia, achieving a great popularity, and becoming 'happier than she had ever been in her life'.[34] This was no doubt due to the warmth with which she was received in Australia by Goldstein and other feminists. When Adela was exiled from England, Vida assured her that her 'banishment from the movement did not extend to Australia'.[35] Thus entered a new element in Australian feminist politics. Adela worked as an organiser for the Women's Political Association, leaving after some time to carry on similar political work for the Australian Socialist Party.

Just as Adela brought fresh life to Australian feminist politics, she had much to offer as a feminist writer. Equipped with a first hand knowledge of suffrage theatre organised by the WSPU and the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), she was no stranger to political theatre. From the time she was a young child Adela displayed a great interest in

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[32] *Ibid*, p. 406.

[33] Later, other militant suffragettes were to join her, most notably Mrs Baines, who was charged with blowing up an empty railway carriage. Fearful of death in prison, she emigrated with her family to Australia, becoming a 'coadjutor with Adela Pankhurst': *ibid.*, p. 496.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] J M Bomford, *Vida Goldstein: That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman*, Melbourne, 1993, p. 137.

things dramatic. Having spent the first three years of her life in splints, Adela's development was somewhat retarded and certainly solitary, but her sister Sylvia remembers her as 'a child apart' in other ways:

> She spent much of her time improvising dramas she called 'prince tales', and acted with much vigour, herself playing all the characters, and using everything she could lay her hands on as stage properties. She was...a great favourite with visitors, whom she lay in wait to approach with the question: 'Shall I tell you a tale?' As long as they could be induced to listen, she would pour her romance into their ears.[36]

'Romance' is a key word in this memory. The romance of possibilities for a better world is what propelled Adela through her tumultuous life. This romance, manifested as socialist anger, is apparent in her Australian play *Betrayed.*

Betrayed

Published in 1917, *Betrayed* is categorised as a war drama. Its treatment of war as dramatic subject, however, earns it a unique place in this genre where playwrights' fictional accounts of war rarely strayed from unconditional nationalistic support.[37] In Australian literary history it is recognised that despite the 'intense national sentiment aroused during the first world war' and the accompanying protest and peace movements, this disillusionment was not reflected in a dominant way until after the war .[38] *Betrayed* was nothing if not a drama of disillusionment and in this sense was stridently ahead of its time. Prompted by a plethora of socialistic concerns relevant to the conditions of war, *Betrayed* was perhaps most timely in its response to the conscription issue. The Australian Government had held two non-compulsory referenda on conscription, in October 1916 and December 1917, both of which were voted down by voters. Furore surrounding the conscription issue was therefore at its peak while Adela was writing *Betrayed,* which was published shortly before the second referendum. Its theme and treatment clearly locates

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[36] Sylvia Pankhurst, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[37] Susan Cullen notes that 'few Australian plays dealing with the war were written during the First World War', and of those 'handful of minor plays' that were written, demonstrated a nationalistic support for the war: 'Australian War Drama 1909-1939', unpublished MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1989, p. 44.

[38] T Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature,* Sydney, 1971, p. 113.

Adela as a political writer, bravely confronting extremely sensitive issues most writers chose to ignore.[39]

The action takes place during five acts in the mythical Orry (Australia), 'A Province demanding Self-Government and in Revolt against Imperial Authority'.[40] The plot revolves around how the leaders of Orry betray the workers, who had elected them in good faith, and the revolutionary subversiveness that consequently erupts. The workers are tricked by the government into fighting in a foreign war, thus displacing their energies which should be focussed on their own battle for better working and life conditions. Soldiers from England are imported to control revolutionary trouble which results when the workers learn of their betrayal. When the workers also lose this battle they turn in misplaced disillusionment against their own leaders. Those revolutionaries are in turn imprisoned or executed by the government.

Susan Cullen, in her work on Australian war dramas, pays some attention to *Betrayed*.[41] Her synopsis begins with this description, prefacing her reading of the play as a drama about conscription: '*Betrayed* uses the anti-conscription argument that while men are fighting overseas, cheap foreign labour will be imported to take their jobs'.[42] While this was an argument favoured by anti-conscriptionists, and while Adela did present this issue in *Betrayed*, it is hardly the focus of the play. Such a reading can be imposed only if the play is viewed narrowly as a war drama. Cullen champions the play as an unusual example of a war drama, pointing out that despite Australians' 'no' vote to conscription, *Betrayed* gives 'some idea of the divisiveness of the issue'. She goes on to argue that 'no

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[39] Cullen suggests that it was this sensitiveness to the 'emotional furore' of the conscription issue which warned writers off the subject. While this hesitation is perhaps understandable at the time, 'the issue was also largely ignored in plays written between the wars, when Australians began to examine the war critically': *op. cit.*, pp. 53-4.

[40] It could be argued that the description of Orry may well refer to Ireland, another island suffering British imperialist rule, given that *Betrayed* was published in 1917, a year following the Easter Rising. The parallels between the plot of the play and Adela's own experience, (her perceived betrayal of both the women's and socialist cause by Mrs Pankhurst's and Christabel's conduct of the WSPU), should also be noted. While there is no objective internal evidence in the play for locating Orry specifically in Australia, the political situation in Australia as perceived by Adela certainly matches the fears and sentiments she expresses in *Betrayed*, seen in particular in her treatment of the conscription issue. Further, the fact that Orry may have a shifting nationality reflecting international concerns does not detract from the main argument of this chapter: that Australian suffrage theatre was influenced by external circumstances and trends and global issues.

[41] See for example S Cullen, 'Australian Theatre During World War One', *Australasian Drama Studies*, no 17, October 1990, pp. 157-181.

[42] Cullen, MA Thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

play written during the war gives any real idea of the extent of the split caused by opposition to conscription'.[43] While this may be true, it almost becomes an irrelevant comment if the central concern of *Betrayed* is *not* conscription. Despite its popular appeal as the subject of contentious debate, the conscription issue was just one dramatic issue in a play full of such bellicose confrontations.[44]

A closer reading of *Betrayed* reveals that while the treatment of conscription adds considerable dramatic flesh to the play, the bones of the drama constitute a socialistic critique of society, the informed strength of which relies on feminist insight. Whereas Cullen sees these feminist concerns as 'also' factors in her analysis,[45] they are in fact crucial to the play in keeping with their centrality in Adela's life philosophy. *Betrayed* is a play that warns about the disillusionment that can cripple progress when trust is misplaced and hope is disappointed.

What did Adela bring to this dramatic exploration that an Australian playwright could not? *Betrayed* is squarely placed in this 'international feminist theatre' section for two reasons: because of the 'foreign' eyes with which Adela viewed specifically Australian historical circumstances and conditions; and because of how those observations influenced Australian readers and writers.[46] It was this 'seeing', informed by Adela's own historical circumstances, which resulted in a drama like *Betrayed*, with its unique feminist gaze inherited from extrinsic experiences.

Adela's early socialist activism has already been discussed and these personal sentiments are easily located in the play. Progress was for her a clearly formulated concept. Its achievement could only be frustrated by betraying the goals of that progress, which can be measured in terms of material feminism, and it is those goals of equality and

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[43] *Ibid*, p. 57.

[44] The importance of conscription as a political issue given high profile in the play should not be dismissed: the argument here is simply against its centrality to the plot. Adela herself was arrested because of unlawful and offensive behaviour following 'a huge and somewhat destructive procession through the streets of Melbourne, and fiery speeches against conscription': Susan Hogan, 'Adela Pankhurst Walsh' in H Radi (ed), *200 Australian Women*, Sydney, 1988, p. 149.

[45] See synopsis of *Betrayed*, *ibid*, p. 56.

[46] Cullen's research into Australian war dramas reveals that many published plays were never performed, though she does not address this inquiry specifically to *Betrayed*. A search on the Auslit database indicates that the play was performed, citing two reviews as sources. These citations were regretably incorrect, and a preliminary search of newspapers located no performance reviews. Though this does not rule out a production history, it is more than likely that *Betrayed* was meant as a drama to be read, which was not uncommon for the period. It was perhaps reviewed as literature rather than live theatre.

peace—and their frustration—which are dramatically explored in *Betrayed*. The play expresses concepts that are a neat marriage of feminism and socialism. Adela could not entertain the idea that an international federation of workers where women were included in all decision-making processes would be impossible in real life,[47] and for this reason all major political decisions in the play await the reports of women.[48]

Feminist equality is seen as a fundamental prerequisite for a socialist future, as this example illustrates. It also shows how closely Adela's socialism was linked to her feminism. Here Edward Morley, brother and critic of the head of the government Spencer Morley, is discussing Orry's future with Spencer and his wife Iolanthe. They are concerned about the country's unity and prosperity:

> EDWARD: I suppose we ought to be thankful they have given it at last...I suppose it's alright about the franchise—complete adult.
> IOLANTHE: Isn't it splendid? Orry is to start fair by giving justice to her women.
> EDWARD: Is it to be adult suffrage, Spencer?
> SPENCER: The constitution gives us the household franchise, but we shall have the power to extend it [33].

While Iolanthe is delighted that women (of her class) have the vote, Edward is more concerned about the extent of Orry's new enfranchisement laws. It is as if Iolanthe symbolises the sentiments of the WSPU, discussed earlier as so angering Adela because they favoured middle class achievement of the vote for women. In this analogy, Edward symbolises Adela's socialistic disillusionment with that limited vision. This example underlines how *Betrayed* brought that particularly British dilemma to Australian audiences, especially considering how Orry's limited franchise 'victory' contributed to discontent later in the play.

Demonstrating a less personal and more general insight peculiar to British rather than Australian experiences are Adela's expressed emotions about war. Although Australian soldiers had served in all of Britain's wars since colonisation, Australia's experience as a nation confronting the realities of war was vastly different in 1917 to

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[47] *Ibid*, p. 231.

[48] See for instance Adela Pankhurst, *Betrayed*, Fraser & Jenkinson, Melbourne, 1917, p. 45. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

Britain's. Even though *Betrayed* is a post-Gallipoli play (where Australian soldiers suffered their first monumental casualties in 1915), different perceptions of war arising from a long history of close association and keenly felt consequences of conflict operated in Britain.

Whereas Australian playwrights were concentrating on bringing the war in Europe to the attention of audiences through more innocent theatrical endeavours such as pantomimes, pageants and fund-raising concerts,[49] Adela was more concerned about bringing home the consequences of war. As a result, *Betrayed* does not shy from graphic descriptions of the war's horrors. Here Edward, a volunteer and an officer, describes his experiences:

> The dead men lying in their own blood in all sorts of queer positions and bits of bodies all mushed up with uniforms and bowels of horses...we could smell burning flesh, and there was fat in the smoke that stuck to us...The sound of the wounded men groaning has got into my ears somehow—horrible [34].

The portrayal of such grim consequences were intended to operate as a direct call to action and protest. Given the press censorship of the period, the effect of reading such material should not be underestimated. It is impossible to calculate whether or not the play had any direct impact on converting readers or inspiring action on this or any other issue raised. There were however few stauncher advocates for change than Adela, and even fewer examples of literary evidence capable of such inspiration.

An even more personal expression of the international influence of the play can be chartered in the expressions of feminism it contains. Those same feminist issues which occupied Adela's political life in England continued to be predominant in her feminist campaigns in Australia. These include: the condition of women workers in factories; the particular costs of poverty for women; how war erodes gains achieved by the women's movement; and prostitution. The character Alice voices many of these issues throughout the play, and she is eventually condemned to death for her revolutionary activities—but not before she she sets the judge straight, though:

> ALICE: ...The gentleman who prosecuted us says we are discontented and turbulent. Is that a crime, when our people are starving and oppressed? Can

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[49] See for example Cullen's article, *op. cit.*

> anyone deny the wrongs we complain of exist? The sweated workers, the unemployed, the homeless girls, the hungry children—can anyone deny that girls and women in Orry are driven by privation to a life a shame? Go into your hospitals and your workhouses, and you will find them there in thousands lying, slowly rot ing to death [75].

A hard disenchantment characterised Adela's feminism, a result of many years of frustrated promises experienced in the English suffragette movement. It is not unusual then that Adela kills the female heroine Alice (the male hero also dies). It is meant as an omen: do something about the situation before it is too late.

Adela's treatment of the enfranchisement of women is one that only a writer from an 'alien' situation could construct. Whereas Australian women playwrights were concerned with broader post-suffrage concerns. Adela is still busy promoting the bonuses of the vote, mindful of the fact that her sisters in England were still disenfranchised. In this example, the head of the Provisional Government, in the despairing epilogue which sees the workers temporarily defeated, lamenits that the women of Orry are so discontented. He is anxious, as the gaols are full of agitators:

> ...we've discovered unpleasant things...revolutionary literature—even amongst the women—so much discontent. Yet they've the vote, and can work...Why, we've a woman judge—she can order a man to be hanged—and still they're not satisfied as a sex. They begin agitating for for all sorts of mad things—against war—in favour of social ownership. Really, I consider this woman emancipation as very disappointing. I expected it to act as a bulwark against the flood of revolution, but it seems as if it were going to be the reverse [85].

Adela has paid tribute to Australian womens' progress to date, as can be seen from the none too subtle compliment to Vida Goldstein and the Women's Peace Army. These praises, however, do not mean that Adela misses an opportunity in *Betrayed* for some feminist self-criticism directed at Australian women.

The particular observations of a woman longer acquainted with the struggle for the vote and the traumas of the unenfranchised are revealed in Adela's documentation of why women are not satisfied, even when they have the vote. Mindful of the obligations to use the privilege of the vote well, *Betrayed* warns that a vote for the wrong government can be a vote for your own oppression. As Spencer innocently says, in a capitalist system that

exploits women as lower paid workers 'everything is open to them—factories, agriculture, mining—more avenues than for men Employers *prefer* them' [85]. The vote is not enough, Adela warns. Feminist equality is useless in a capitalist world which exploits all workers, and especially women: the further step to socialism needs to be taken to protect the liberties of equality symbolised in the vote. Only a playwright from a nation where women were disenfranchised could point such a finger, encouraging women voters to vote wisely. For this reason alone, *Betrayed* can be regarded as an international influence in the development of Australian feminist theatre.

Many subjects are explored in *Betrayed* other than the ones discussed above. It is a very dense, political play, ranging over concerns as diverse as anti-Semitism, the concept of Home Rule, the development of the women's movement, Australia's role in an emerging world, and much more. Leaving these major thematic concerns aside, the joy of the play, apart from the sharp satire, lies in its weighty knowledge and command of all the subjects it touches upon. References to all sorts of world leaders from Jane Addams to Billy Hughes abound, spiralling around each other to create a sense of the deep importance of the concerns expressed in *Betrayed*: with all this leadership, how can disillusionment prevail?

A feminist legacy

'The dust that was your hearts, does it not bleed...for your children's wrongs? Awake!...come to our deliverance' [88], asks a young man at the close of the play. Just as these final lines plead that something can be learned from their elders, this examination of Adela Pankhurst's contribution to Australian theatre history calls for similar recognition. The tradition of feminist political writing for the theatre in Australia was certainly inspired by such early experiments as Adela Pankhurst's *Betrayed*, which remains today as an example of the international discourse in women's theatre during the suffrage period.

In a 1914 interview in *The Lone Hand*, Adela said that 'Australian women did not value the vote because they got it so easily and could not understand what it was like in

England'.[50] This characteristic outspokenness stemmed from her intense concern for the issues involved, where British women were still 'in chains'. Adela perceived the political climates of Australia and England to be vastly different in suffrage matters, but as *Betrayed* demonstrates her political sympathies found a neat home in Australian theatre. Whilst English suffrage playwrights were locked into stricter confines, Adela joined a tradition of feminist writing for the theatre which was concerned with wider social and political issues. In this sense, she brought to Australian feminist politics more than she did to feminist theatre (this is her only published play compared to her multifarious non-fiction publications).[51] *Betrayed* provides an unique example of international feminist theatre which found a voice and a home in Australia when even the most radical English suffragettes were not ready to listen.

CONCLUSIONS

The influence of international suffrage theatre on Australian feminist theatre was manifest in two ways: firstly, through the emigration of feminist writers to Australia who participated in women's theatre; and secondly, through the production and touring of British suffrage plays throughout Australia. In the context of early twentieth century theatre history, it is important to remember not only the greater world into which Australian women expatriate playwrights moved, and the richness of the theatrical world they left behind, but the extent to which that richness was informed by international developments in feminist theatre; the examples offered here address just those contexts. On the one hand there is the sponsored smash hit *Diana of Dobson's*, on tour in Australia irrespective of the reputation of its suffragist playwright or the feminist concerns of the drama. Disguised as a commercial product, and thus promoted, it won the respect and approval of Australian audiences. Its impact can not be fully assessed here, but—theatrically misunderstood in Adelaide or not—it was clearly an influential breath of fresh

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[50] F Sternberg, 'The Militant Suffragettes', *Lone Hand*, July 1914, pp. 96-7.

[51] Susan Cullen points out in her MA thesis, however, that the war dramas of this period added 'considerably to the knowledge of attitudes to war' (*op. cit.*, p. 6). In this sense Pankhurst's unique perspective on war in *Betrayed* made an original contribution to that knowledge gained from literary sources.

air. On the other hand, there is the example of Adela Pankhurst, an immigrant British suffragette who, secure in her new world, applied her international experience as a writer and feminist activist to produce one of Australia's first dramatic pieces from a political 'refugee', *Betrayed*. These examples of international feminist theatre performed in Australia during the suffrage era give some indication of the type of dramatic negotiations that were occurring in this country as a result of international influences. In the following chapter, the reverse situation will be explored: what did Australian feminist dramatists offer to the rest of the world?