

Article

Australian Modernists in London: William Dobell's *The Dead Landlord* and Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral*

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Abstract: When Patrick White was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, it was primarily for his novels. Less well recognised is the significance of White's dramatic literature and his involvement in the theatre. This article offers a new analysis of White's first notable breakthrough into theatre and drama, *The Ham Funeral*, which he wrote in postwar London and which was produced in Adelaide in 1961. This article argues that a modernist idiom of 20th-century Australian drama can be found in this play that laid the groundwork for a poetics of language, image and theatricality. The play's aesthetic modernism is found primarily in the blend of expressionist and surrealist elements, the poetic language, the alienated creative subject and the representation of sexuality and the unconscious. White's thematics also become political, concerned with power, masculinity and gendered assumptions about rationality and emotion, poetry and the body. Having lived in London during the interwar years, White was also part of the networks that included Australian-born artists, and he was exposed to influences from visual arts as well as theatre. Of these, the artist William Dobell was central to the genesis of *The Ham Funeral*, as was the Polish-born modernist artist S. Ostoja-Kotkowski, who was critical to the design of the brooding expressionist set that set the standard for subsequent stage realisations of the play.

Keywords: Patrick White; *Ham Funeral*; modernism; theatricality; Australian theatre

1. Introduction

When Patrick White was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, it was primarily for his novels. Less well recognised internationally are his achievements in dramatic literature and his involvement in modernist theatre. This article offers a new dramaturgical analysis of White's first notable breakthrough into theatre and drama, *The Ham Funeral*, a two-act drama written in postwar London and produced in Adelaide in 1961.¹ It locates the work within a network of artistic influences in London and Australia spanning the interwar and postwar period. These include the Australian artists Roy de Maistre (1894–1968) and William Dobell (1899–1970), whose painting *The Dead Landlord* (1936) inspired the play; Polish-born modernist artist S. Ostoja-Kotkowski, who designed the set for the first production; and English-born theatre director John Tasker, who directed the premiere performance. The incubator was modernist London; each artist had struggled with negative anti-modernist sentiments

¹ *The Ham Funeral* was first performed at the Union Hall Theatre at the University of Adelaide in November 1961. White wrote eight published plays, all of which have had at least one professional production in Australia. Many have been produced by leading theatre directors including John Tasker, Jim Sharman, Neil Armfield and Benedict Andrews, with actors including Zoe Caldwell, Robyn Nevin, Kerry Walker, Kate Fitzpatrick and Pamela Rabe—such is the gendered division of labour in Australian theatre.

in Australia. De Maistre's early exhibitions were criticised to the extent that he emigrated permanently to England, and both White's and Dobell's works were initially rejected at home. The narrative of rejection and the ambivalent critical response to modernist works of art across visual arts and theatre contribute to the view that Australia was slow to adapt to modernism and, as a consequence, has only belatedly come to terms with modernity's social, economic and cultural impact ([1], p. 105).

In this article, I argue that *The Ham Funeral* does not so much come to terms with modernity but critiques its social and cultural impact, especially with regard to the formation of subjectivity. It examines how White's thematics are concerned with power, masculinity and gendered assumptions about rationality and emotion, poetry and the body. These assumptions, I suggest, are not reproduced uncritically but are presented in such a way as to reveal the cruelty and willfulness of subject formation of which the modern male artist figure is presented as a representative type.

2. In Touch with the Modern: Australians in London

White was born in London in 1912 to Australian parents, and he died in Sydney in 1990. The son of wealthy pastoralists, he attended boarding school in England, after which he returned to Australia to work as a jackaroo in New South Wales, before enrolling in modern languages at Cambridge University. On graduating, he returned to London where he lived in Ebury Street, Belgravia, concentrating his energy on becoming a writer, supported by an annuity from his father. White's period in London in the interwar years brought him into contact with many European and Australian-born artists, including the influential abstract painter and colourist Roy de Maistre, and William Dobell, who was on a scholarship at the Slade School of Fine Art. White had a short relationship and a long association with de Maistre, who became his "intellectual and aesthetic mentor" and helped to point him in a modernist direction ([2], p. 145). Dobell stayed on in London after finishing his term at the Slade School, mixing with Australian artists, travelling in Europe, and supporting himself by illustrating and sketching. Living in rooms in Bayswater and Pimlico, he began to exhibit his work in London and Australia, before returning to Australia permanently in 1939 [3]. White spent the war years serving in the Middle East, before returning to London where he continued to write, moving back to Australia with his partner Manoly Lascaris in 1948. By then he had published a collection of poetry—*The Ploughman and Other Poems* (1935)—and three novels: *Happy Valley* (1939), *The Living and the Dead* (1941) and *The Aunt's Story* (1948). He also wrote the plays *Bread and Butter Women*, *Peter Plover's Party* and *Return to Abyssinia*, which remained unpublished but were performed to moderate reviews in London and Sydney, with *Return to Abyssinia* inspiring him to experiment further with dramatic form ([2], p. 26). White continued to travel but lived in Sydney for the rest of his life.

3. Adapting *The Dead Landlord*

This section considers White's adaption of Dobell's painting *The Dead Landlord* into a playscript. The discussion draws on the "Author's Note on THE HAM FUNERAL", prepared for and printed in the program for its premiere season in 1961, after its much-publicised rejection by the Adelaide Festival. The note appears to address an audience that has not yet come into being, in recognition of the fact that—as Max Harris put it—the play "lies outside the current naturalist Australian tradition" and was unfamiliar ([4], p. 14). White makes this point directly in the note, stating: "It is not a naturalist play" [5]. The implicit invitation is for a new public to form itself around an affirmative collective response to the play and to mark its difference from the parochialism and ignorance of those who would object to the play's content. Indeed, the "Author's Note" provides a detailed, perhaps justificatory, explanation of the genesis of the play, of how—on a visit to Sydney in 1946—Dobell had told White the story behind his painting *The Dead Landlord*, suggesting "the incident might contain the theme for a play" [5].

The Dead Landlord is, as James Gleeson writes, "a strange and disturbing painting" ([6], p. 30) that has its origins in one of Dobell's East London boarding houses, where he was once called to assist the landlady after her husband collapsed and died. Afterwards he made a sketch of a moment when, after

lifting the body from the floor to the bed, he witnessed with astonishment his landlady as she paused to brush her hair. She later sent the young Dobell, who had never before seen a dead body, to notify relatives and invite them to a funeral, where she told him that ham would be served in the landlord's honour. Scott Bevan's recent biography of Dobell gives the latest account of this now apocryphal story, explaining that the experience made such an impression on the artist that he drew sketches for a series under the title 'Ham Funeral', later used as the title of White's play [3]. As it turned out, Dobell only completed the one painting in oil in 1936, giving it the title *The Dead Landlord* ([3], p. 75). The painting is held in a private collection and is not available for public view, hence the following commentary is based on photographic representations in Gleeson's and in Elizabeth Donaldson's books [6,7].

The viewer sees two figures illuminated in a dark interior, in which art deco curves mimic the shape of the corpse's large stomach and the widow's rounded body. The atmosphere is one of intimacy disrupted by the widow's preoccupation with her hair, in a way that radically reorients the bodily imagery from death to sensuous life. With his chin held high, the landlord might be a fallen tyrant lying in state, notwithstanding the humble origins of the iron bed on which he lies. The landlady has her back to the landlord and in half-profile to the viewer, who can observe her full figure and hair. In this composition, the painting does not include but recalls the presence of the Australian expatriate artist observing and exoticising London life. The landlord's body, in Gleeson's words, "glows in the foreground with a livid phosphorescence, like a great pale fish stranded on a double bed", while the widow is a more shadowy, mysterious presence off-centre ([6], pp. 30–31). Sitting in the shadows in front of a mirror, the landlady's act of brushing her hair might reflect a number of possibilities: a post-coital grooming ritual; her release from tyranny; vanity; sensuality; a moment to absorb her new situation. The dingy room and its furniture signal the erotic strangeness of the encounter that White goes on to develop further in his play. The original sketch was reproduced on the program cover for *The Ham Funeral*, and the painting itself was used for the cover of *Collected Plays Volume 1* and subsequent editions [8]. Clearly the fortunes of White, the playwright, were tied to artists such as Dobell, and later to John Brack, Sidney Nolan and Brett Whiteley, among others.

In the 'Note', White recounts how, on his return to London after the war, he began to work on the play:

I was the only lodger in a house in Ebury Street, where I had lived on going to London as a young man, to which I had returned on and off during the Nineteen-Thirties, and where I experienced the first months of the London blitz, in the basement, and the coal cellar under the pavement. As I sat in my empty room I began to play with Dobell's anecdote: of how his landlord had died, how the landlady had taken down her hair, announcing there would be a ham funeral, and that he must go to fetch the relatives [5].

Dobell's founding incident—a variation, surely, on Freud's primal scene—had captured White's interest but development of the theme for a play posed considerable challenges. This is not surprising. Where a painting captures a scene in a timeless frozen image, dramatic writing needs to suggest motion in time and space. The scene would need to be embedded in a longer duration of time and a sequence of more or less compelling moving parts that would require rhythm, energy and momentum tied together by thematic threads. In other words, dramaturgy comes into play, here derived from the classical sense of *dramatourgia* meaning 'to write a text in dramatic form' and *dramatopoiia*, as in dramatic composition ([9], pp. 10–11).

Where Dobell remained outside the frame of the painting, White puts a young male artist figure on stage to perform several functions: to mediate between the playwright and the audience; to perform in the primal scene; and, importantly, to play out its Oedipal implications while advancing thematics concerned with questions of artistic principles and practice. The addition of the Young Man seems to be the principal dramaturgical device for the transition from painting to drama, although there is an equally compelling argument that an expanded role for the Landlady is also a feature. The characteristics of the Young Man are functional, as well as characterological. He is an aspiring poet and thinker, afflicted by self-doubt and prone to irony. He embodies the necessary contrasting

worldview—through differences in age, class and education—from the Landlord and Landlady, and is therefore able to move the play beyond their confines to contemplate poetry, for instance (although again, the Landlady, while illiterate, has a gift for language). But White is also aware of the limitations of drama compared to both the visual condensation of content in painting and the descriptive capacities of the novel. Where he makes the Landlady talkative and the Landlord taciturn, he says he “wrestled” with the problem of “how to project a highly introspective character on stage without impeding dramatic progress” [5]. As a novelist, White is known for his deep concern with interiority, which he presents to the reader, as literary theorist Simon During notes, through “free indirect discourse”—a technique for describing “subjectivity from a character’s perspective but not in their words—that also allows for the perspective to shift from one character to another” ([10], p. 91). White’s problem is that of dramatic representation—the shift from narrative to drama, not telling but showing. His solution is to bring self-reflexive commentary into play, a device also associated with the revival of metatheatrical audience address in modern drama. For example, the play begins with the Young Man standing before the ultimate theatrical sign, the curtain, in a Prologue in which he announces: “As I am also a poet...though, to be perfectly honest, I have not yet found out for sure...my dilemma in the play is how to take part in the conflict” ([8], p. 15). Here White appears to enact in his dramatic writing what Clement Greenberg calls the “essence of modernism”, which he defines in the following way:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence ([11], p. 85).

In writing *The Ham Funeral*, White’s first accomplished rendering of subject matter in dramatic form, he finds that its “area of competence” lies primarily in its theatricality. In front of the curtain, the Young Man addresses the audience from the liminal position of being both inside and outside the play, revealing his/White’s dilemma: the problem with “conflict”, the compatibility of poetry and doubts about whether non-naturalist drama will work in Australia. The Young Man concludes that mastery is not the point, and that “all I can give you is the play, and plays of course, are only plays” ([8], p. 16). In this way, the Prologue marks White’s transition from novelist to playwright, from painting to theatre, embracing and incorporating his critique of the form into increasingly reflexive excursions into light, space and objects.

To return to the details of what I am calling White’s “adaption” of *The Dead Landlord*, the transposition from one form into another, *The Ham Funeral* retains the primal scene, now observed by the Young Man through whose eyes the audience also witnesses it. Act One functions as a prequel for the scene that introduces the Landlord and Landlady and establishes the Young Man’s relationship to the couple and their situation. Here White plays on the elements of caricature in Dobell’s painting to name the couple Will and Alma Lusty, who reprise the daily performance of a dead marriage: “I loved you, Will. Afterwards I even got to like yer, and wanted you about” ([8], p. 18). Act Two begins with the funeral, featuring the slices of boiled ham and the gloomy Relatives, whose mood gives rise to the widow’s brilliant and bitter taunt: “Eat, damn yers! Fill yer bellies! That’s wot it’s ‘ere for!” ([9], p. 48). White adds conflict across the two acts between the Young Man and the Landlord (clash of values) and then the Young Man and the Landlady (sexual rebuttal), and provides further interior revelations about the artist through the creation of an ‘anima’, the Girl in the room opposite, to whom he speaks his thoughts.

Perhaps not surprisingly—given the controversy that flared around the play and its history of rejection—“the Author’s Note” downplays the vaudeville scene with the Old Ladies and the foetus in the rubbish bin, claiming it to be a mere device to allow the passing of time between the death and the funeral. Yet he goes on to reflect that the foetus and other surrealist images in the play “were already immanent in a poetic sense”, suggesting the timelessness that he “had been aiming at” and his own desire to create lasting significance for the play [5]. Here is an indication of the serious intent behind White’s theatre and an act of faith in its capacity for poetic expression.

May-Britt Akerholt suggests that the theme White developed from Dobell's incident concerns "the development of the artist", which relates more broadly to White's writings on the "artist-figure" as "visionary whose art is realized through communion with the world around him" ([12], p. 5). This post-romantic interpretation of the social dimension of art is broadly true, but it overlooks the paradox of the artist being both alienated visionary and a male body in the world with its privileges and freedom. Rather, White's *Young Man* develops themes to do with sexuality, masculinity and violence; the development of the artist is immersed in these themes, not separate from them.

4. Developing a Theatricalist Dramaturgy

The 'Author's Note on *THE HAM FUNERAL*' warrants further unpacking in terms of its insights into the dramaturgy of the play. Mary Luckhurst expands these terms to incorporate the modern idea of the writer's craft—the making, doing and composing of drama, and its realisation on stage—bringing the two activities together into the single entity of theatre. As she explains:

One of the two common senses of *dramaturgy* relates to the internal structures of a play-text and is concerned with the arrangement of formal elements by the playwright—plot, construction of narrative, character, time-frame and stage action. Conversely, dramaturgy can also refer to external elements relating to staging, the overall artistic concept behind the staging, the politics of performance, and the calculated manipulation of audience response (hence the association with deceit) ([9], italics in original).

Both of these common senses apply to *The Ham Funeral*. The writing is formally structured, as we have seen, with a Prologue and two acts; it has character, dialogue and action; and its timeframe and spatiality are central to the movement of the narrative. The politics of performance play out through the Young Man's violent rejection of the Landlady's sexual advances. Now also we see the "calculated manipulation of audience response" in the Young Man's joke about the quality of the play that it has paid to see:

YOUNG MAN:...[*Somewhat stern*] Probably quite a number of you are wondering by now whether this is your kind of play. I'm sorry to have to announce the management won't refund the money. You must simply sit it out, and see whether you can't recognize some of the forms that will squirm before you in this mad, muddy mess of eels ([8], p. 15).

The invitation to the audience is to attach itself to symbolic dis-order, to experience the disruption of representational forms that "squirm" and writhe rather than signify. The "muddy mess of eels" is suggestive of a dark mass of entwined, slippery words and images that conceal more than they reveal, but will produce affects and sensations. The Young Man will return to this theme when he reflects on the "knots" that form in people's memories ([8], p. 30) that refuse to unravel, choking progress and life. The creative use of disorder endorses a theatricality that disavows clarity and enlightenment. Hence it is theatricalist, in Elinor Fuchs' sense of the mixing of the everyday with "commensurate" worlds of more or less than human figurations, including anima figures and the dead ([13], pp. 39–40). Later plays—especially *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1965), *The Cheery Soul* (1965), *Signal Driver* (1983) and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987)—will feature razzle-dazzle lighting effects, imaginary animals, astral phenomena, illuminated objects and apocalyptic light blazes, all interwoven with emotionally unsettling everyday realism. As Fuchs writes,

Theatricalist plays multiply dramatic complexity by bringing different places of reality into the same structure. Conflict in these structures is played out more between levels of representation than by individual figures, and is resolved by victory or defeat for a contending ontological principle (or perhaps a cheerful truce) [13].

The final victory will be for the artistic principle over the Oedipal beings in the basement, but not before the Young Man's surrealist impulses are tempered by the reality principle. After contemplating

eels, he moves to houses and doors, inviting the audience to remember “a great damp, crumbling house” that appears in dreams. In this house of many rooms, the Young Man sees how people live behind doors that “have never been seen open”, that protect the secrets and longings of people who bump around behind them, and, sadly, “fry little meals for their temporary comfort” ([8], p. 16). This vision of the chaotic, alienated structure of modern life, of a house divided into single rooms for solitary individuals, is marked by the absence of family, community and society. He sees that neurosis in the single room manifests in violence—there are sounds of breaking glass and disturbance at “five o’clock...when the fingers have turned to bones...and the sky is green”—and fears he will succumb as well ([8], pp. 15–16). To the solitary aspirational poet, the house is alive and confounds its inhabitants: the walls speak, the gas fires offer advice, and the mirrors of the dressing tables tell “living lies, down to the last vein in their eyeballs” ([8], p. 16). The house is realist and symbolic. It occupies, as Fuchs writes, “incommensurate ontological ‘worlds’—‘real’ and theatricalized, or real and dream-like” [13]. As such, it offers a concretisation of the fragmented human consciousness.

5. The Politics of Performance

White’s Young Man, as I have indicated, discovers the immanent violence of modern life, of which he is a part. Each actual or symbolic violent incident is gendered. The first of these violent moments is the confrontation with banality. In the opening moments of Act One, the Landlady announces that she is “sick of peelin’ bloody pertaters’ and asks her husband to do the impossible to acknowledge the affect of boredom, the flatness that attaches itself to the lack of meaning in human life ([8], p. 17). White’s stage directions indicate that Alma Lusty is “a large woman in the dangerous forties, ripe and bursting”, but the Landlord only looks at her “expressionlessly for a moment”, impervious to her frustration ([8], p. 2). The unhappy marriage of Will and Alma Lusty follows a sequence of well-rehearsed lines, recollections, admissions and denials that revolve around emotional affects of love and hate. This leads to the airing of the Landlady’s unapologetic confession of her attraction to other men and the tragedy of “the little, blue-faced” baby in the coffin ([8], p. 29). The scene ends with the Landlord first thumping his fist on the table and then raising his hand to strike her.

The combative basement scene is a variation of modern drama’s obsessions with the bourgeois couple, especially as represented in Strindberg’s *The Dance of Death* (1890) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907). As stated, although written in the postwar period, the play is closer in style to Strindberg and Wedekind than Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder and Terence Rattigan, White’s contemporaries. Will and Alma Lusty’s combative, unhappy marriage is a vaudeville version of Edgar and Alice, in *The Dance of Death*, in which an army captain and his wife live in a granite tower on an island fortress, locked in a love–hate marital war filled with cruelty and loathing, despair and distrust. Edgar, like Will Lusty, represents a depleted, impotent masculinity and while Edgar does not drop dead, he is prone to collapsing and crumpling. Edgar feels “as though his soul wanted to escape and dissolve in a cloud of smoke” ([14], p. 139). Alice, like Alma Lusty, still has a force, which has no outlet except for a brief flirtation with the younger Quarantine Master.

The second brutal incident occurs on the street outside, when one of the Old Ladies, while foraging for scraps, casually remarks that she was raped as a young girl: “I’ve not believed in anything in life since a copper pinched me maidenhead” ([8], p. 39). An unreported crime and a loss of faith reveal a hidden economy of rape and its aftermath in a woman’s fall from grace into hardship. The brutality is also contained in the matter-of-fact revelation of a life that does not matter.

The third incident alters the mood again, amid the singing and foraging, when the women discover the remains of a foetus in the bin: “SECOND LADY goes and looks into the bin. She too lets out a scream, or series of dry, gasping retches” ([8], p. 43). The foetus conjures unknown off-stage brutal acts—of rape, incest, stillbirth and abortion, followed by the possible death of an unknown woman or girl. Shocked and frightened by their own haunted memories, the Ladies exit. The Young Man, recognising the unexpected appearance of the tiny object within the comic vaudeville interlude, greets the “Tender, humorous foetus!” ([8], p. 43) in a phrase that is striking and odd. The sudden appearance

of the absurd, and change of mood, recalls Martin Esslin's understanding of the absurd as signifying "a disillusioned, harsh, and stark picture of the world" ([15], p. 16). The textual image of the "tender, humorous foetus" also carries the proposition that it will have to be realised on stage, somehow, and that there will have to be a transition from vaudeville to the absurd. That is, a bringing to the surface of the harsh picture that often underpins lowbrow comedy—here, the dark poetics of sexuality and fertility.

The final act of brutality occurs after the ham funeral. This troubling scene caused problems for director John Tasker, not the least of which was that it prompted one critic to refer to it as the scene in which the Landlady was "tragically unraped" [16]. However, this Oedipal scene is set up in Act One when Alma weeps once more over her lost child, and identifies the Young Man as its adult self. The Young Man is fascinated and repulsed by the Landlady, who—intoxicated by ham, stout and grief—envelops him in an embrace, pressing her body against his and kissing him. In his struggle to get away, he resorts to sexist clichés and cruel taunts: "I'm damned if I'll wear the landlord's old glove" ([8], p. 67). He then attempts to strangle her, the all-consuming mother. John Tasker recalled that

Mrs Lusty and the boy played their scene perilously on top of the kitchen table. And inside the play it did have certain logic. Will Lusty had pounded that very table ("this table is love") in Act I: the savagery and pathos of the moment thus became more strongly underlined ([16], p. 300).

White's assembling of this sexualised, maternal, desiring and desirable figure makes the Oedipal scene ambivalent and conflicted, filled with the unresolved tension of the original scene as described and painted by Dobell of the landlady brushing her hair. While the Young Man voices a censorious patriarchal culture by calling her a 'whore', Mrs. Lusty only partially absorbs its censure. Far stronger is the comfort she draws from her bodily warmth, expressed with her own poetry of the body: "Alma Jagg breathed life into the hedges. The frost melted when she lay beneath 'awthorns. I touched the warm, moist earth with my 'and" ([8], p. 65). By comparison, the Young Man admits that his life amounts "to little more than acts of self-abuse in an empty room" ([8], p. 70). He is drawn to the feminine figure in the basement by a disposition, which we can understand through Julia Kristeva, as the need for an energy that will set him going. He is the poet, who is "not yet constituted", who is still dealing with "constraints" but is moved towards a body that generates modes of expressivity and kinetic energy that he wants but does not have ([17], p. 93). Disavowing this being, the Young Man nevertheless takes her vitality to energise his entry into the world, leaving the widow a shadow of herself. Here we see that the focal point of the play is not the Landlord—as in Dobell's painting—but the Landlady, Alma Lusty, whose vibrancy the Young Man takes from her. She represents an earthy, maternal femininity, admirable as Dobell and White paint her, but subject to the cruelty of abjection in the eyes of the masculinised artist figure. This feminine figure is symbolically left alone in the dark, in a gesture that speaks to the unexpected empathy of the playwright and the theatre for her emotional state.

6. From Still Life to the Stage: *The Ham Funeral* in the Theatre

To transform an idea behind a painting...into something warm or pulsating with life such as this play was a masterly achievement reflecting the skill of the producer John Tasker, as well as the author [18].

The "Author's Note" reveals that the script was not initially considered a masterly achievement, even in London where White had friends. The script was considered interesting in London but not favoured for production, then it sat in a drawer in Sydney for nine years before his friend Frederick Glover—a banker and a producer of plays—encouraged him to revise it. It was then politely rejected by the Royal Court Theatre in London; a New York option on the play was not taken up; Hugh Hunt of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was impressed but felt that it was a box-office risk; then it was controversially rejected by the Board of Governors of the Adelaide Festival [5]. (Among the many

faults that the Governors found in the play was its disconsolate emotional tone and lack of a happy ending, which they thought would make it a penance for audiences rather than an entertainment.) White concluded the “Author’s Note” with the modest hope that the courage of the Adelaide Theatre Guild combined with the skill of the director John Tasker “will dissolve my stubborn groups of statuary into the fluid lines of workable theatre” [5].

Tasker was crucial to its success. White explains in his “Author’s Note” that he originally set the play in postwar London, but that Tasker suggested it should be moved “for visual reasons” back to 1918 and the end of the Great War. This period made sense, as it was also closer to the highpoint of expressionism, which along with surrealism gave White’s play its stylised, theatricalist aesthetic. Hence the final piece in the transformation of Dobell’s painting to the stage was the direction and design of its first performance, praised by the critic Harold Tiderman in the epigraph above.

S. Ostoja-Kotkowski designed the set for *The Ham Funeral* and drew heavily on expressionist influences. Ostoja-Kotkowski was himself an abstract expressionist painter, who in 1949—at the age of 27—migrated to Australia from Poland via the postwar European migration scheme. He later became a multi-award-winning visual artist, celebrated as an innovator in laser art and sound installations. He had trained at the Dusseldorf Academy of Fine Art in Germany and the National Gallery School of Arts in Melbourne before moving to South Australia, where he worked in theatre design for drama, opera and ballet. He designed the set for the South Australian non-professional theatre production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1958.

Ostoja-Kotkowski is recognised for his responses to the iridescence of the light and colour of central Australia, and became an innovator in Chromasonics—the science of translating sound into visual images. Adrian Rawlins argues that “Ostoja-Kotkowski had two basic aims in the pursuit of his art and its presentation to the public. The first was an expression of the essential qualities of light, and the second the freeing of the creative imagination from the impediment of means” [19]. He adds another layer of European influence to the fledgling Australian modernist scene, with an uncanny interest in colour that White had first encountered through Roy de Maistre. The networks of influence are fluid at this time of increasing global mobility that come together briefly in *The Ham Funeral*.

White’s symbolism runs riot as the play reaches its final scene, and Ostoja-Kotkowski’s compact set design brings visual order to it. The set features two staircases and two levels of the boarding house, with the fourth wall open to the audience. The lower level, on the stage floor, has a raised platform on which is set the basement living quarters of Mr and Mrs Lusty. The one-room space helps to establish the relationship between character and place. It is oppressive and cluttered, with a mismatched wooden table, odd chairs, a stove, and a dresser with a vase that attempts to create a pocket of beauty and colour in the dingy room. Above the basement room on the upper level is a bed and dresser, indicating the bedroom of the Young Man. The upper level occupies approximately two-thirds of the vertical stage space, with the Landlord and Landlady living in a gloomy space below. Here, the expressionist design intensifies the emotionally unsettled, everyday life of the beings in the basement. The complexity of the design successfully incorporates “different places of reality into the same structure”, that Fuchs associates with the theatricalist stage [13].

The available photographs of the Young Man and the Girl place them not only in a different ontological reality but in a different emotional space as well. The relationship between the Young Man and the Jungian anima figure is inevitably sympathetic, directed at resolving conflicting and unsettling forces as represented by the combative couple in the basement, the poor foetus in the rubbish bin, the querulous relatives and “the mad, muddy mess of eels” ([8], p. 15). The two are both young, and the Girl—suitably ethereal, with long hair and a white top—is seen gently holding the Young Man’s hand, as he stands awkwardly in his room. The artistic principle at stake in the encounter is the resolution of a rational, ordered world of meaning with creativity—the Apollonian and Dionysian opposition—which the Young Man will partially achieve at great cost to the Landlady, whose vitality he steals. The staging also supports the contrast White establishes between the raised consciousness of the Young Man and the Girl compared to the pinched existence of the Landlord and Landlady—the

Oedipal beings in the basement—who are shown to be, by virtue of their social position, politically disadvantaged and expendable.

A second staircase leads from the stage floor to the outside world, marked at street level by an elegant and moodily atmospheric Edwardian lamp. Hedley Cullen's black and white photos of the set capture the dinginess of the house, with its stained walls thick with soot and mould. The upper bedroom walls can be removed to create the street scene for the Young Man and the Two Ladies.

The available visual record of this 1961 production includes images from Scene One, in which Will and Alma Lusty play out their combative and violent marriage. In one image early in the scene, they sit at a round table. Hedley Cullen's Will Lusty sits in his dark grey longjohns, smugly holding his pipe close to his chest while his other arm rests on the table. He is looking down at the pipe as Joan Bruce's Alma leans forward, speaking to him or at him. Her hand is closed into a fist on the table. The image in close-up appears naturalistic—a married couple trapped in everyday boredom relieved only when it is time for tea or bed—but the stage design sets the scene in a wider framework of reduced and stagnant human lives. Another photograph shows the action towards the end of the scene. Both characters are now standing by the table but Will has stepped forward, towards Alma. He now looks her in the eye and raises his hand to slap her. The photograph captures the moment before the slap, in which Will holds the gesture in an attitude of censure while Alma stands, silently watching him, protecting her stomach and leaning away from the hand. The gestural system highlights the violence in daily married life, where the silent Will Lusty—who does not bother to get dressed for the day—assumes the right to punish his wife for speaking.

A third photograph captures the pivotal scene of the dead Landlord in which Tasker and Ostoja-Kotkowski reference the composition of Dobell's painting. The Landlord wears the same long underclothes tied at the bloated abdomen, yet unlike the painting the body is filled out with human flesh. Dobell's expressionist body—with its still-proud, jutting chin—is replaced by the more peaceful repose of Cullen's Will Lusty. Joan Bruce as Alma Lusty wears black, in contrast to the white dress which figures in Dobell's painting. The citation of the painting gestures towards the modern stage as an increasingly intertextual space. Dobell's story shifts from one medium and context to another—from London to Australia, from artist to writer, from sketch to painting, painting to theatre, theatre to photography and so on—signifying the opening-up of closed forms to a greater fluidity of shape and form.

7. Conclusions

In embedding Dobell's experience in his own, White stages an encounter between the Australian artist and the earthy, popular vigour of the Londoner. With its genesis in the Australian experience of London, White extends the commentary on the exotic life of the "imperial metropole" through experimenting with the metatheatrical possibilities of the modern playtext. The play is complex in form and style, projecting a modernist break with fixed genre and its predictable emotions, floating freely from one to another, not only borrowing but anticipating the field of modern drama post-World War Two. In the manner of Strindberg, Joyce and Wedekind, *The Ham Funeral* is shaped around the impressions and experiences of the self-conscious and slightly alienated young male with poetic aspirations. His mode is one of self-poiesis or self-fashioning that takes place in relation to people and place, with their affective moods captured in visual art and theatre.

Impressive productions of Patrick White's early plays—*The Ham Funeral*, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* and *Night on Bald Mountain*—over the last decade suggest that artists, critics and spectators continue to find the plays both challenging and compelling. Yet *The Ham Funeral* and *Night on Bald Mountain* were infamously rejected by the Adelaide Festival Board, and the final four plays—*Big Toys* (1978),

Signal Driver (1983), *Netherwood* (1983) and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987)—have hardly been produced.² This review of White's early play hopes to initiate an ongoing and belated reassessment of White's theatre through the lens of the present. At the time, however, White's literary and dramatic work—with its modern European influences, its cosmopolitan publishers in London and New York, and its socially progressive and politically leftist orientation—was too confronting for parochial Australia, tied to its colonial past. Recent publications indicate a revival of interest in White's literary output and the rich vein of cultural enquiry contained in the history of its reception. This article contributes in a small, focused way to this revisionary discourse and orients it towards a reconsideration of the importance of the plays to White's output.

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² *The Ham Funeral* was considered 'unappetising fare' and rejected by the Board of Governors of the Adelaide Festival of Arts. *Night on Bald Mountain* was rejected in part due to its themes of female alcoholism and incest.



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