Glenn D’Cruz

‘Class’ and Political Theatre: the Case of Melbourne Workers Theatre

Traditionally, class has been an important category of identity in discussions of political theatre. However, in recent years the concept has fallen out of favour, partly because of changes in the forces and relations of capitalist production. The conventional Marxist use of the term, which defined an individual’s class position in relation to the position they occupied in the capitalist production process, seemed anachronistic in an era of globalization. Moreover, the rise of identity politics, queer theory, feminism, and post-colonialism have proffered alternative categories of identity that have displaced class as the primary marker of self. Glenn D’Cruz reconsiders the role of class in the cultural life of Australia by examining the recent work of Melbourne Workers Theatre, a theatre company devoted to promoting class-consciousness, in relation to John Frow’s more recent re-conceptualization of class. He looks specifically at two of the company’s plays, the award-winning *Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?* and *The Waiting Room*, with reference to Frow’s work on class, arguing that these productions articulate a more complex and sophisticated understanding of class and its relation to politics of race and gender today. Glenn D’Cruz teaches drama and cultural studies at Deakin University, Australia.

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to the play *Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?* (2000), its director, Julian Meyrick, recalls a key moment in the production’s genesis:

Early in 1997 the writers and composer went to a pub in West Melbourne famous for its vibrant, resistive, blue-collar atmosphere. What they found was a commercial shell, rattling with cable TV and pokies. In its hollowness and venality it seemed to sum up the vast betrayal the Kennett Government had perpetrated on all Victorians. Here indeed was an answer to the question the writers had been briefed with: who was afraid of the working class – *no one.*

If I read Meyrick correctly, no one is afraid of the Australian working class, at least as a category of identity defined by its relation to the means of economic production, because the working class is powerless and impotent in the face of a triumphant neo-liberalism. The play forces us to consider a number of vital issues concerning the social and political status of people marginalized and disposessed by the values of the free market. It also demands that we revise our sense of concepts such as class, and indeed, our notion of what constitutes ‘political theatre’ today.

Perhaps no one is afraid of the working class because we no longer have a clear sense of who actually belongs to the working class. I shall return to the play and Melbourne Workers Theatre at a later point in this essay. For the moment, I want to note that this paper undertakes the perhaps unfashionable task of re-examining our understanding of class and political theatre today. So, if you think the end of the Cold War rendered concepts like class and the practice of ‘political theatre’ irrelevant, think again.

In his essay ‘The Politics of Performance in a Postmodern Age’, Baz Kershaw observes that ‘old notions of “political theatre” are falling into intellectual disrepute’. He argues that this is primarily a consequence of two things — globalization and mediatization. Globalization has diminished the nation state’s political autonomy and its legislative powers, while mediatization ‘dispenses the theatrical by inserting performance into everyday life’. Kershaw’s use of the term ‘mediatization’ refers to the way in which various communications and entertainment technologies such as film and television mediate our experience and conception of reality.
Alan Filewow and David Watt agree that traditional conceptions of 'political theatre' have changed in recent times. They point out, with Kershaw, that the 'emergence of “identity politics” and “difference politics”. with their multi-focus on issues of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality among other things, has almost pushed class off the agenda, or at least eroded its claim to primacy. This analysis of the present state of ‘political theatre’ is, I think, essentially correct. It is no longer possible to assume that the term refers to a homogenous aesthetic style or a unified political agenda, if it ever did. Nor is it possible to assume that contemporary political theatre necessarily connects with the interests and concerns of the trade union movement or the working class.

Concepts of Political Theatre

These redefinitions of ‘political theatre’ and ‘class’ present a series of problems for Melbourne Workers Theatre (MWT), a company founded in 1987 in order to produce theatre in the workplace, and to ‘bring working class theatre to the working class’. The company’s founding ethos is clearly displayed in a photograph taken in the Jolimont Train Maintenance Depot. The wearing of overalls, boots, and hard hats signifies a close identification with the company’s constituency, the working class, and suggests that it subscribed to the classic Marxist definition of class, by which a person’s class accords with the position they occupy in the cycle of economic production. This, by extension, reduces political and ideological affiliation to the singular logic of the economy. While MWT has never officially contested this conception of class as a category of identity, its recent work, as we shall see, explores some of the tensions and contradictions involved in keeping class on the political and theatrical agenda.

Today, MWT occupies premises in Arts House in North Melbourne and, despite using Trades Hall as a performance venue, has no formal links with the trade union movement. Nonetheless, it remains committed to the idea of making theatre ‘for, with, and about working-class people’, despite finding itself in a political and cultural context that displaces class as a primary category of identity.

This paper outlines some of the difficulties involved in keeping the heritage of class struggle in play without resorting to dogmatism by scrutinizing a few notable contemporary conceptions of ‘political theatre’ in Britain and Australia. In short, I want both to examine the status of political theatre today, and to assess whether the term has any relevance as a description of a distinct genre of performance in the light of Kershaw’s comments about the ‘promiscuity of the political’. I’d like to examine some recent statements about ‘political theatre’ before examining two key MWT productions, Who’s Afraid of the Working Class? (1998) and The Waiting Room (2003).

The Guardian recently published a special report on the state of political theatre in Britain. Eminent theatre practitioners such as David Hare, David Edgar, Mark Ravenhill, Pam Gems, and a number of other luminaries wrote short articles on the topic. David Edgar defends a rather narrow and perhaps old-fashioned conception of political theatre when he notes:

The traditional argument against political drama is that it is both reductive and limiting. Surely, any serious dramatist will want to assert proudly: ‘I don’t write about politics, I write about people.’ Behind this lies an assumption that people reveal themselves most profoundly in private, because the things we do at home are the most intense but also the most universal of human experiences, as opposed to the quickly dated particularities of politics.

Edgar goes on to produce a spirited defence of ‘political theatre’ as a genre, arguing that ‘British political theatre will continue to be rehabilitated by new and established playwrights who understand there is no contradiction between writing about politics and writing about people’.

Pam Gems, on the other hand, is far less optimistic about the form. ‘What is political theatre?’ she asks, and responds by noting that, ‘Usually it means contemporary plays ranging from the journalistic through to the “commitment” play (now not so fashion-
able) to the ultra-pseudy and obscure. Why are they always so awful? She goes on to speculate that the dismal state of political theatre owes something to the fact that most writers don’t have any direct experience of what they write about.

It can seem impertinent for the privileged to claim that they assert on behalf of those whom they neither know nor seek to know. There is something improper about the well-heeled seeking to represent the disadvantaged; it is an unacceptable invasion of territory. And to write of horrors within living memory, if you are not to sicken, you have to be a paid-up member. Your name must be Pasternak, Havel, Mandela, Solzhenitsyn. Otherwise you are a scavenger.

David Hare makes an impassioned argument for ‘political content’ and believes that the most important question one can ask of a work of art is, ‘What’s it saying?’

Of course, the future of ‘political theatre’ is also debated in Australia, which brings me back to MWT, and local criticism of its conception of political theatre, which is more often than not framed by discussions about class. For example, Andrew Bovell launched a trenchant critique of ‘Anglo-Saxon, middle-aged, and middle-class theatre that dominates Australia’s main stages, and those critics constantly looking for the next David Williamson’. These comments, made on the occasion of MWT’s launch of its 2002 season, drew an irritated rejoinder from the celebrated playwright Joanna Murray-Smith, who argued that ‘theatre is predominantly the interest of the middle class, and this is true for the audiences of the more daring fringe companies as it is for the Melbourne Theatre Company’s safe and comfortable season’. Murray-Smith certainly has a point, particularly when one considers that the MTC and MWT often employ the same artistic personnel. It is also worth noting that the MTC and MWT audiences are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

It is, then, evident that any interrogation of the current state of ‘political theatre’ has to engage with the following questions:

- To what extent is it possible to accept the distinction some commentators make between the singularity of ‘political theatre’ and the universality of plays that focus on the so-called human condition?
- What is self-described ‘political theatre’, of the kind championed by David Hare, actually saying?
- What aesthetic forms does ‘political theatre’ use?
- And perhaps most importantly, for my purposes, what role does class, as a category of identity, play in contemporary ‘political theatre’?

Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?

First performed at the Victorian Trades Hall in Melbourne on 1 May 1998, Who’s Afraid of the Working Class? was arguably MWT’s most successful production to date. The production received highly enthusiastic reviews, attracted large audiences, and won a host of awards, including three Victorian Green Room Awards and the 1999 Australian Writers Guild award for best original theatre script. The play consists of four distinct stories – Suit, written by Christos Tsiolkas; Money by Patricia Cornelius; Dreamtown by Melissa Reeves; and Trash by Andrew Bovell – woven together to create a compelling portrait of the struggles facing people on the fringes of Australian society.

Part of the play’s success stems from the fact that the writers created vivid characters who find themselves struggling for survival in a unforgiving political milieu that rewards material success and punishes the weak. Who’s Afraid of the Working Class? is the kind of play David Edgar would be pleased to endorse, since it is about ‘people and politics’. More importantly, however, it dramatizes the limitations of traditional class analysis by exposing the competing and contradictory economic, political, and ideological affiliations of its characters.

This is perhaps most evident in Christos Tsiolkas’s Suit, which opens with a scene titled ‘Kennett Boy Monologue’, delivered
by a young boy in his mid-teens (played by Bruce Morgan) who expresses his admiration for and sexual attraction to Jeff Kennett, the conservative premier of Victoria for much of the 'nineties, who was renowned for his anti-union policies and antipathy to socialist values. Here are a few extracts from the monologue:

I love Jeff Kennett. I think he's a good guy, a sexy guy. I like it that he's tall. I like it that he's smart. I like it that he doesn't give a shit about anyone. ... My father hates Jeff Kennett. He calls him scum, says he's destroying unions and the working class. But I can tell that deep down he respects him. You've gotta. Kennett doesn't give a shit about anyone, does whatever he likes. ... I want to go down on Kennett. When I do go down on a guy, when I come to that, I'll have to be someone like him. ... Kennett, when he got elected, there was this big rally in the city. It was fucking enormous, about a hundred and fifty thousand people. He had closed down my old high school, that fucking waste of space. ... But Mum and Dad, of course, Mum and Dad were angry. (Mimicking) 'You've got to come to the rally, it's important.'

I looked up. In the window there was Kennett, looking down. ... That moment, that's the moment I knew he was a god. ... All around me people were singing union songs. Crap hippy shit. We shall bloody overcome, for Christsakes. I looked around, saw my old man. There he was, little Sammy Destanzo, little Sammy who hasn't done one thing of note in his whole wasted fucking life.18

Dad says to me, do you want a job on a building site, and I just look at him. A real dirty look. He goes ape-shit, calls me a bludging cunt. ... I'd rather be a fucking whore. Work, grog, sleep. Work, grog, sleep. Work, grog, sleep.16

The boy's sense of identity is complicated by the fact that he is gay, a migrant, and aggressively macho. These character traits point to the poverty of traditional class analysis because the boy's place in the production process, or his father's place in the production process, do not necessarily imply any specific form of political consciousness. There is no necessary connection between the character's class position and his politics because the discourses, institutions, and desires that shape his subjectivity -- the discourse of machismo, the impoverished state school, his homosexuality -- cannot be reduced to the logic of the economy.

Of course, the mere identification with the signifiers of power and success does not ensure that the Kennett Boy will actually succeed in escaping the drudgery of the 'work, grog, sleep' cycle -- a point made by Tsiofkas as he pursues this theme further in the next scene, Suit. The suit in question belongs to Jamie, an Aboriginal investment salesman -- 'a blackfella in a suit and tie' -- who is both the victim of racial prejudice and also a perpetrator of sexual violence.

In the first scene, set in a cheap rural motel room, Jamie is lying on the bed, answering several calls on his mobile phone. There's a knock on the door. Jamie opens it. Claire, a middle-aged prostitute, enters the room. The ensuing encounter is one of the most confrontational and revealing moments in the play, since Jamie has hired Claire for more than sex, and engages in a series of taunts and power plays that are made possible by his apparent wealth.

JAMIE: Strip.

CLAIRE: starts taking off her clothes.


CLAIRE: continues stripping.

(Gruning.) You are an old whore, aren't you? How long you been doing this?
CLAIRES: I told you, you won't be disappointed.
JAMIES: You clean?
CLAIRES: I'm clean.
JAMIES: You better wash, white cunt smells, you know? You know that? You know what white cunt smells of?
CLAIRES: Whatever you say, Sugar.
JAMIES: It smells like death.
*He grabs her and sniffs her crotch.*
Yeah, you smell of it. You stink of it.¹⁷

Jamie becomes increasingly abusive, pushing Claire to respond to her degradation with a torrent of racial abuse. Jamie masturbates while Claire delivers the following speech:

> Boong, Boong, Boong. *(Her voice gets louder and louder.* ) Fucking good-for-nothing black bastard. You filthy, drunk, abo pig. Nigger! Nigger! Fucking, filthy, dirty, lazy nigger.¹⁸

Claire becomes the object of Jamie's rage, which has not been tempered by his material
success. Jamie’s suit functions as a signifier of wealth, power, and success, but it does not guarantee respect, nor does it conceal Jamie’s racial identity, which makes his class affiliations problematic: his superior position in the production cycle does not necessarily make him accepted as a figure of authority.

This contradiction is dramatized in the following scenes, which reveal, alternately, Jamie as a victim of racial prejudice during the course of his job, and as an empathetic humanitarian. Suffice it to say that Tsiolkas’s characters are contradictory identifications defined as much by race and gender as they are by class. Of course, academics have commented exhaustively on the ‘overdetermining’ role of race and gender in the formation of subjectivity over the last twenty-five years. Consequently, class has been, more or less, dismissed as a useful category of identity, and most social scientists since the early nineteen eighties have abandoned class analysis in favour of stratification theory, focusing on quantitative differences in a population’s occupation, income, education, and patterns of consumption.19

A New Account of Class Formation
Perhaps the greatest strength of Who’s Afraid of the Working Class? lies in the fact that it actually dramatizes the process and inter-
Eugenia Fragos as Claire in the 1998 MWT production of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*
Photo: Vic Méhes.
relations that shape the contradictory identities of its characters, in many ways resonating with the more sophisticated attempts to resurrect class analysis by academics such as John Frow, who, in his paper 'Knowledge and Class' observes that occupations concerned with knowledge production (that is, work that involves 'the possession and exercise of knowledge, whether that knowledge be prestigious or routine, technical or speculative') have increased significantly relative to manual labour.20

Frow's paper explores the implications of the growth of the knowledge economy for class theory. He also makes a compelling case for the retention of a non-totalizing concept of class as a useful theoretical tool. In short, Frow argues that class emerges on three structural levels: the economic, the political, and the ideological. Put differently, class identity is an effect of struggles that are structured by specific material conditions that are simultaneously economic, political, and ideological.21 More importantly, classes are formed by 'the outcome, never given in advance, of struggles which take place at all three structural levels'.22

This account of class formation, which I have sketched somewhat reductively in the present context, explains the contradictory affiliations of the Kennett Boy and Jamie. Both characters possess aspirations and identities that are formed from material interests that are played out in the economic sphere, and their common lived experiences shape their contradictory political allegiances. Finally, their capacity (or incapacity) for resisting or struggling against the 'Kennett regime' occurs on the level of ideology. The play is all the more impressive because it challenges the veracity of Edgar's assertion that successful political theatre must avoid the 'quickly dated particularities of politics'.23 Jeff Kennett is no longer premier of Victoria, but the specific political conditions which inspired the writers of Who's Afraid of the Working Class? and that provide a constant point of reference throughout the play do not diminish its power seven years after its first production.

Melbourne Workers Theatre continues to produce political plays. However, while Who's Afraid of the Working Class? went a long way towards resurrecting class as an important category of identity, the company recognize that there are forms of political oppression that transcend the form of class analysis I have been concerned with thus far.

The Waiting Room
In 2002 MWT produced The Waiting Room in conjunction with Platform 27, a relatively new theatre company based in Sydney. This was an important production for MWT for a number of reasons. First, it marked a significant departure from the company's usual working methods, since MWT is predominantly a writers' theatre and over the course of its fifteen-year history has mainly commissioned playwrights and composers to research and write scripts, whereas The Waiting Room was a group-devised project, which was put together in a very short period of time with the aim of addressing the plight of refugees in Australian detention centres.

Second, the play dealt with a group of marginalized people who, on the face of things at least, have nothing to do with Australia's working class. The play thus exemplified the ways in which contemporary 'political theatre' is not necessarily linked to class struggle, a fact acknowledged in MWT's latest mission statement, which reads: 'MWT creates provocative and inspiring new works that celebrate cultural diversity and engage the political and social complexities that shape our lives.'24

The Waiting Room's creative team, under the direction of Richard Legarto, produced a performance comprising textual fragments, selected and adapted from several Franz Kafka stories, multimedia which incorporated live video, a sound design performed in the theatre space, physical theatre, and a healthy dose of audience participation. Keith Gallasch described the play in the following terms:

A large projection screen, a clutter of video monitors (multimedia by Rolando Ramos) at floor level, and a large, ominous mobile, transformable frame (set design Sam Hawker) collectively evoke a concentration camp in the Australian outback,
An edgy piece of postmodern theatre, and a massive stylistic departure from the gritty realism of Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?, the play received mixed reviews from members of the company and the press. This reception is worth analyzing in some detail because it reveals a lot about various preconceptions of ‘political theatre’ and the relationship between aesthetics and politics today.

A number of reviewers made the point that the production lacked political impact because it ‘preached to the converted’. For example, Helen Thomson observed that The Waiting Room was ‘intensely committed theatre that will, alas, probably be performed only to the converted’.

Sian Prior was more critical and forthright in her assessment of the play’s political efficacy, noting that ‘even the converted will struggle to find inspiration in this confused, didactic show’. And Keith Gallasch makes the important observation that the so-called ‘converted’ might have something to learn from a play like The Waiting Room:

For the converted, who know these issues only too well, the work is a theatre experience that confirms convictions but, given the distance the government has calculatedly put between us and refugees, also puts emotional flesh on the bones of abstraction.

Many of the reviews remarked that the play lacked cohesion, an observation that was echoed by many members of MWT’s artistic advisory group. Thomson argued that The Waiting Room was ‘a vivid, committed work,
but also comes together like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. Prior agreed, noting that: 'It is as if the writers have thrown a huge number of ideas into the ring, but no one has taken responsibility for shaping them into a coherent whole'.

**Combining Performance Vocabularies**

I cite these reviews to contrast with my own view that the play's combination of performance vocabularies (naturalism, physical theatre, and multimedia) produced a complex, multi-layered work which refused to offer simple solutions to the refugee crisis, but did confirm the audience's faith in its own sense of humanity.

While *The Waiting Room* was a flawed production in many ways – it could have done with a good script editor, and there is no question that a number of scenes were very weak – it did bring into focus two key issues. First, it is sometimes necessary to speak on behalf of those who lack a public voice. While the creative team responsible for the play had no direct experience of life in a detention centre, they did spend a lot of time interviewing refugees. As Andrew Shaw, who reviewed the play for the *Melbourne Community Voice*, noted: 'Yes it's a message play, but it's a message the detainees can't deliver in person yet.' The observation functions as a timely rejoinder to Pam Gems's comments about the scandal of the so-called 'well-heeled' representing the disadvantaged. Sometimes the disadvantaged cannot speak for themselves.

Second, the play, in my view, did a great job of shocking me out of my complacency about the detainees. Two scenes were particularly noteworthy in this respect. The first provided a brief genealogy of Australian attitudes towards immigrants in general by depicting the predicament of an Asian maths teacher, played by Valerie Berry, who works at the detention centre as a cleaner (female actors play male characters throughout the play). His boss, a crude 'Ocker', gives him a Christmas bonus, and tells him to have a 'piss-up'. Confused by this colloquialism, Berry's character delivers a monologue to the audience, which explains his situation. He also asks the audience to clarify the meaning of phrases like 'piss-up'.

Another character, a Greek worker played by Steve Mouzakis, joins Berry on stage, sits on one of the television monitors, and consumes pistachio nuts while delivering a pompous speech about how he came to the 'lucky country' and had to cope with similar linguistic ambiguities. Mouzakis's character asserts his authority over his co-worker by discarding the pistachio shells throughout his speech, clearly aware that his colleague is sweeping the floor and that he is making his job more difficult than it need be.

The scene reinforces the strict hierarchy that operates amongst the detention centre workers, many of whom are migrants with experiences not dissimilar to those of the people they imprison. The scene conveys the point that Mouzakis's character has paid his dues, and is no longer on the bottom of the social hierarchy; his position is a rank higher than his Asian friend, and several ranks above the detainees.

The last scene of the play finds its protagonist, Hhada, played by Wahib Moussa, locked in a cage. A 'Big Brother' style voice delivers the following speech:

You must find two people to take your place in the cage. One to replace you and the other for interest to balance out this procedure. Should you be successful your appeal will be granted and you are free to go. At which time you will be billed for all costs incurred to the fortress during your stay in the cage. GST inclusive.

Hhada is forced to accept the terms of the proposition put to her by the disembodied voice of authority. The key to Hhada's cage is attached to a wire that descends from the lighting rig. Another actor enters the space, takes the key, locks the cage, and leaves the performance space. Hhada paces around the cage to the strains of Liberty Kerr's haunting sound design, parts of which are played live. Kerr's music stops after a minute or so. Hhada approaches, pushes her face close to the bars of her cage, and looks straight ahead at the audience. After a significant pause, which generates a palpable sense of unease.
amongst the audience, she speaks: ‘Is anyone here willing to help me?’

At this point the play took a different turn each time it was performed. The first performance I witnessed ended when a woman, after a prolonged pause, yelled, ‘I’ll do it,’ ran onto the stage, and released Moussa from her confinement. If the audience on this occasion consisted of the so-called ‘converted’ it was clear that they still had something to learn about the plight of detainees. The pause between Hhada’s request for help and her release was much shorter the second time I saw the performance. This time three members of the audience approached the cage, and released the actor. One member of this group turned towards the rest of the audience and said: ‘You should all get up, the whole audience should get up.’

Of course, many members of the audience may have been reluctant to release Moussa’s character because the conventions of most forms of western theatre forbid audience intervention in theatrical performances (The Waiting Room) used members of the audience as both willing and reluctant participants at several points during the performance. Even with this caveat, the play’s final scene went a long way towards extracting an ethical response from the audience. If, like me, you failed to respond to Hhada’s request, you were compelled to account for your inaction, and perhaps also confront your complicity, as a citizen of Australia, with your country’s policies on the treatment of asylum seekers.

Both MWT plays referred to in this article, while stylistically and thematically different from each other, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of contemporary mechanisms of social and political stratification. More importantly, they remind us that class analysis in the era of globalization and mediatization must operate on at least three structural levels – the economic, the political, and the ideological. They also remind us that ‘political theatre’, however unfashionable the term might be, is not a spent force.

Notes and References

4. Ibid., p. 1.
5. Ibid., p. 128.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. David Hare, http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/politicaltheatre/story/0,13299,9962373,00.html.
17. Ibid., p. 23.
18. Ibid., p. 27.
21. Ibid., p. 249.
22. Ibid., p. 240.
23. Edgar, op. cit.
30. Prior, op. cit.