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Class and Political Theatre Revisited: MWT's *Who's Afraid of the Working Class*


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 goes on to claim that this is primarily a consequence of two things — globalisation and mediatisation. Globalisation has diminished the nation state's political autonomy and its legislative powers, and mediatisation 'disperses the theatrical by inserting performance into everyday life'.

Kershaw's use of the term 'mediatisation' refers to the way in which various communications and entertainment technologies such as film and television, mediate our experience and conception of reality.

Alan Filewod 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

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it possible to assume that contemporary political theatre necessarily connects with the interests and concerns of the trade union movement, or the working class.

These redefinitions of ‘political theatre’ and ‘class’ ‘presents 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 this photograph, taken in the Jolimont Train Maintenance Depot — the overalls, boots and hardhats signify the company’s close relationship with its clearly identified constituency: the working class.

This archival image suggests that MWT’s subscribed to the classic Marxist definition of class, which defines a person’s class according to the position they occupy in the cycle of economic production, and which, by extension,

reduces political and ideological affiliation to the singular logic of the economy. While the Company 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, the Company occupies premises in Arts House in North Melbourne and, despite using Trades Hall as a performance venue, have no formal links with the Trade Union movement. Nonetheless, the Company 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.5

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 Australia. In short, I want to examine the status of political theatre today, and 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.6 More specifically, I will argue that the celebrated MWT production, Who’s Afraid of the Working Class (1998) offers a sophisticated understanding of class as an important category of identity.7

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

5 http://www.melbourneworkerstheatre.com/about.html
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 — that are woven together to create a compelling portrait of the struggles facing people on the fringes of Victorian society. Part of the play's success stems from the fact the writers create 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 dramatises 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' *Suit*.

The play opens with a scene titled ‘Kennett Boy Monologue’, which is 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 his antipathy towards 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, calls him scum, says he's destroying unions and the working class. But I can tell that deep down inside 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, it'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 hippie 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. 7

Despite belonging to a traditional working class family, the Kennett Boy refuses to accept his place in society, and articulates a desire to align himself with the ideological values signified by Jeff Kennett. Tsiolkas’ character confounds simple categorisations of identity. He is working class, according to the traditional Marxist definition of the term, but he ideologically and politically committed to the values represented by Jeff Kennett. It is not possible to account for this ideological identification with Kennett with reference to ‘false consciousness’ (always a problematic concept) because he is very articulate about his family’s limitations: ‘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.’ 8 The boy’s sense of identity is complicated by the fact that he is gay, a migrant and aggressively macho. These characteristic 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, does not necessarily imply any specific form of political consciousness. In other words, there is no necessary connection between the character’s class position and his politics because the discourses, institutions

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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 escape the drudgery of the ‘Work, Grog, Sleep’ cycle, a point made as the narrative of Suit unfolds during the play. As Michael Sega wrote: “class position no longer


Tsiolkas pursues this theme further in the next scene, which gives his contribution to Who’s Afraid of the Working Class its title, 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. The first scene is set in a cheap rural motel room where 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 confronting and revealing moments in the play. Jamie has hired Claire for more than sex — he 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.

[Groaning] You are an old whore, aren’t you? How long you been doing this?

CLAIRE: I told you, you won’t be disappointed.

JAMIE: You Clean?

CLAIRE: I’m Clean.

JAMIE: You better wash, white cunt smells, you know?

You know that? You know what white cunt smells of?

CLAIRE: Whatever you say, Sugar.

JAMIE: It smells like death.
He grabs her and sniffs her crotch.
Yeah, you smell of it. You stink of it.⁹

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.¹⁰

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 dramatised in the following scenes that reveal, alternately, Jamie as a victim of racial prejudice during the course of his job, and as an empathetic humanitarian. Suffice it say that Tsiolkas' characters are defined contradictory identifications that are 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

⁹ Ibid, p. 23.
¹⁰ Ibid, p. 27.
favour of stratification theory, which focuses on quantitative differences in a population’s occupation, income, education, and patterns of consumption.\textsuperscript{11}

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* lies in the fact that it actually dramatises the process and interrelations that shape the contradictory identities of its characters. In many ways it resonates with some of the more sophisticated attempts to resurrect class analysis by academics such as John Frow.

In his paper, 'Knowledge and Class' Frow 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.\textsuperscript{12} His paper explores the implications of this increase for class theory. He also makes an extremely compelling case for the retention of a non-totalising concept of class as a useful theoretical tool. In short, Frow argues that class emerges from 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.\textsuperscript{13} More importantly, Classes are formed by ‘the outcome, never given in advance, of struggles which take place at all three structural levels.’\textsuperscript{14}

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\item[13] Frow, p.249.
\item[14] Frow, p. 240.
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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 David Edgar's assertion that successful political theatre must avoid the 'quickly dated particularities of politics'. Jeff Kennett is no longer premier of Victoria, but the specific political conditions that 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 six years after its first production.

In summary, the play demonstrates 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 globalisation and mediatisation 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.

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15 Edgar, Op Cit.