

Mixmasters and Lino: Iconic Australian modernity in Patrick White's *The Season at Sarsaparilla*

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ABSTRACT

This article considers Zygmunt Bauman's proposition that consumerism is the new form of social arrangement in liquid modernity. Drawing on the first performance of Patrick White's 'The Season at Sarsaparilla' in 1962, the article analyses the language, scenography and dramatic cosmos of White's suburbia. It finds that an atmosphere of repression, of unrequited desire and brief illicit sexual encounters take place behind the scenes of public behaviour which is increasingly concerned with the practice and display of consumption. The great Australian emptiness that White sees as an infection that stymies Australian culture is about to be filled with shopping.

Introduction

This article draws on two recent revivals of Patrick White's early plays to think about White's contribution to the discussion of modernism and modernity in the Australian context. In 2012, the Adelaide Festival and South Australian Theatre Company staged a new production of White's first notable play, *The Ham Funeral*, which was written in London in 1947 and first staged at the University of Adelaide in 1961 (White, 2012). In 2007, the Sydney Theatre Company staged *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, written in 1961-62.

The Ham Funeral, 'A Tragi-Farce in Two Acts', set in the East End of London in 1918, was originally rejected by the Adelaide Festival Board along with Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (1962). Where Seymour's play, in which a young man questions his father's participation in the annual Anzac Day parade, was considered unpatriotic, the Governors considered *The Ham Funeral* "unappetising fare" and "difficult and impossible to understand" (Harris, 1962: np). Of the scene in which two prostitutes discover a foetus in a rubbish bin, one Board member claimed: "words fail me" (cited in Marr, 1991: 390). On the other hand, supporters such as critic and academic Max Harris saw in White's rhythmic theatrical language an affinity with the great modernist playwright Harold Pinter (Harris, 1961: 14). Adelaide in the early 1960s would itself become a stage where theatrical modernism mounted challenges to the dominance of realism and popular theatre. As David Marr writes:

The Ham Funeral had become a rallying point for those who were unhappy with the boring, official culture of Australia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and hated the philistine power of the Establishment—the power, especially, to determine what was written and read in a country where books, films and plays continued to be censored and banned. (Marr, 1991: 394)

Whereas Alan Seymour departed for London where he spent the next 40 years, White wrote a new play, *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, a charade of suburbia, the first to be set in contemporary Australia.

Bypassing the Adelaide Festival Board, the play premiered at the Union Hall Theatre at the University of Adelaide in September 1962 in a semi-professional production directed by John Tasker, designed by Desmond Digby and with Zoe Caldwell in the lead role of Nola Boyle. The program included a drawing of a young girl and a dog from a painting by John Brack and an introductory essay by Max Harris in which he notes that with this play White turns to “the specific problems of embodying Australian life in Australian drama” (Harris, 1962). The production moved to the Union Theatre at the University of Melbourne later the same year and was first published in 1965. *The Season at Sarsaparilla* brings together aesthetic debates about the preferred form for a modern Australian theatre, the resistance of conservative managers, and the support of academics and artists willing the culture to embody itself in an imaginative, poetic and original way. What then does the play embody? And how does a trans-temporal perspective illuminate the play’s artistic achievements and its contribution to Australian drama?

Focusing on *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, this article analyses the modernist agenda of the play, its representation of the birth of the mid-century suburb, the enclosure of the nuclear family in the modern home, the rise of mass consumption and the moment when the family and the modern suburban home become the twin pillars of Australian society and culture. On this reading, *Season* marks White’s first theatrical treatment of the changing conditions in modern Australia. It provides indicative and prophetic images that illuminate the transformations in Australian society as the processes of modernisation and modernity overtake the predominantly conservative working class, masculinised, and Anglo-Saxon culture of the pre-war, post-colonial era.

That White’s plays were enmeshed in a series of minor scandals supports the view of White as a playwright who not only breaks new formal ground in Australian theatre but also challenges the conservative character of the mid-century nation. The modernist form and the contemporary urban themes signify a departure from Australian theatre of the day dominated by local productions of imported drama. *The Season at Sarsaparilla* became the first play in a 1960s trilogy that includes *A Cheery Soul* and *A Night on Bald Mountain* (White, 2012). Writing in the program, Max Harris hopes that “White’s powerful and febrile imagination, his poetic sensibility, and above all the magnificent originality of his language” will have an effect on dramatists and theatre-goers (Harris, 1962: np). How the literary approach to ordinary life in the boxes of suburbia would play out as a drama is set out in the next section.

The Season at Sarsaparilla: a charade of suburbia

The Season at Sarsaparilla is a two-act play set in the summer of 1961 in Mildred Street, Sarsaparilla, a location that White delineated as “a fictitious outer suburb of Sydney” (White, 2012: 78). Sarsaparilla is usually taken to refer to Castle Hill on the western outskirts of Sydney where White and his partner Manoly Lascaris lived until their property was “surrounded by little boxes”, whereupon they moved close to Centennial Park in the city (White, 1990: 23). The play features three families who live side by side in three similarly sized and shaped iconic representations of the homes of the era. The 2007 Sydney Theatre production of the play expands on the iconic status of the suburban home in a hyper-realist set in which a cream brick veneer exterior dominates the stage. The reference is to the paintings of Howard Arkley (1951-1999) whose *Family home: Suburban exterior* series (1993) captures the popular design of the postwar suburban home.

Developing an innovative modernist form for Australian theatre, the play stages the lifestyles of three families: the Knotts, the Pogsons and the Boyles. Other locals include a post-office clerk, an ambitious young beauty called Julia Sheen and the local city councillor, Mr Erbage. There is some suggestion of minor corruption and scandal at the Town Hall and a fatal accident, which is possibly suicide, involving the pregnant Ms Sheen, but these events are peripheral to Mildred Street where people go about their daily life in an insular, parochial way. There is little by way of conventional narrative and plot. The main dramatic event that takes place on the street involves the incessant

barking of the neighbourhood dogs and their pursuit of a bitch in season, given ironic prominence in the play's title. As the play begins, "an outburst of BARKING as from a pack of dogs somewhere in the distance" draws young Pippy Pogson out of her house while her mother, Girlie Pogson, calls her back (White, 2012: 79). Girlie Pogson is according to White's description:

A small spruce woman in her forties. Not a hair out of place, and never will be. Everything must be nice, even if you pay the price. MRS POGSON wears all the marks of anxiety and a respectable social level. (White, 2012: 79)

A performative caricature of the post-war suburban housewife, Girlie attributes the unsettled atmosphere to the "holidays", when dogs bark into the night and "the lino" is marked by children running in and out of doors (White, 2012: 79). Pippy and her friend Deedree like to hide and observe the adults and together with Roy Childs, a young teacher and aspiring poet, who lives with his pregnant sister Mavis Knott and her husband, learn things about life, desire, aspiration and the compromises and lies of adult life. The barking of the pack of dogs interrupts conversations, keeps people awake at night and is an unwelcome reminder of a not-so-distant past when rural life was subject to the rhythms of seasons and cycles. Suburban life in 1960s Sarsaparilla is located on the borderline between regulated streetscape and the unregulated spaces of new housing developments, where dogs still roam in packs. The social life of the inhabitants of Mildred Street is satirically centred on family, work and home. Culture in the form of music, literature, art, and even religious observations are decidedly absent.

A birth, a fatal accident, an infidelity and a flirtation break the routine of meals and work enacted across the three homes with comic repetition. *Season at Sarsaparilla* is less narrative drama than suburban soap opera of banal proportions, minor catastrophes and neighbourhood intrigue; yet the routine of the everyday is interspersed with minor transcendences of material life. These minor moments indicate that the imagination, the physical senses, perception and self-reflexivity have not been extinguished in subjects whose actions reflect on their more prissy neighbours. Nola Boyle, for instance, likes the end of the day:

NOLA ... Even in the summer, at the end of the day, when you feel you could have been spat out, when the hair is stuck to your forehead, it is best, best. A time to loiter. The flowers are lolling. The roses are biggest. (*Stoops to smell.*) The big, lovely roses, falling with one touch... (*Laughs.*) I could eat the roses! Dawdling in the back yard. If there was none of these busybodies around (*glancing at the Pogson home*)—thin, prissy, woman—I'd take off me clothes, and sit amongst the falling roses. I've never felt the touch of roses on my body. (White, 2012: 125)

The threat to interiority and self-reflexivity in White's 1960s plays comes in the form of the materialism and mass culture which is spreading to the outer suburbs of Sydney, transforming rural properties into modern streetscapes and interior spaces into surfaces on which branded consumer objects are displayed. White constructs new subjects for the modern era who appear docile and highly attuned to the arbitrary routines of daily life. Harry Knott is in retail:

He is a young man, probably younger than he looks, but responsibilities have been thrust upon him early. He is wearing his business pants, well-pressed, and beautifully-laundered white shirt. Arm-bands. There is nothing distinctive about him. (White, 2012: 81)

A devoted husband, he is soon to be a father. An older version of Harry is to be found in Clive Pogson, a business executive:

Round fifty. A rather thick-set business bull—a minor one, but he will probably never know that. Takes the paper, sits at the table, ready for breakfast. (White, 2012: 82)

Clive reads the newspapers over breakfast and recalls how his wife has changed from the young Girlie Twemlow, who played tennis, had neat calves, tickling prickly skin and a dimple on her chin into Girlie Pogson who "closed it up" (White, 2012: 85). Yet even Clive is touched by hints of greater events. In his newspaper he reads about the credit squeeze, the Government and that "something

is happening in Laos, but you can never make out what ...” (White, 2012: 83). “Laos” floats in the air like a place so out of this world that is hard to grasp its meaning.

Meanwhile the third husband, Ern Boyle, enters in a more relaxed manner:

He is in his forties, but very active. An obviously good-natured, innocent and generous male, who respects and depends on the ‘women folk’. He is carrying his coat over his shoulder. He is happy to be free. (White, 2012: 95)

Ernie describes the procession of the bitch and the pack of barking dogs as in “the messenger’s speech from a Greek tragedy”:

ERN. There she was. A little bit of a blessed thing. ‘Er tongue almost hangin’ on the ground. Lickin’ the dust she was. And gunna get a whole lot drier. ‘Er eyes ‘uv turned glassy. You can count ‘er ribs. You can count the dawgs. The big, scrawny yeller fellers. The mangy reds. The woolly mysteries. That poor bitch soon won’t be fit for much else but stiffin’, and standin’ on a bloomin’ varnished board... (White, 2012: 96)

White’s evocation of the sacred and profane around the figure of the bitch in season in a trance-like state powerfully evokes the other of modern life as that which is abject and bestial but also endowed with a certain ‘blessed’ and wretched quality. Ernie’s messenger speech not only evokes the classical heritage of modern drama but also its anthropological heritage in ancient ritual and animism. The theatricalisation of the lowly working class sanitary man and his promotion to dramatic importance is similarly visceral and earthy, but also poetic. This poetic sensibility gives him linguistic power over the mildly ambitious middle class men who become comic subjects and is an inversion that challenges the social relations of bourgeois drama. The elevated status of the working man also modernises the rural figure found in the bush ballads and dramas of colonial Australia.

White, modernism and modernity

White retained a critical distance from Australian culture through his involvement with literary and theatrical developments in England and America. Simon During (1996) writes that White’s early theatrical work shows signs of “the new non-colonialist Australian culture” that was emerging throughout the 1950s and also demonstrates that he is influenced by the international “shifts and innovations” that would be associated with “the Sixties”. During accords to theatre a degree of public immediacy and collaboration that makes it “more quickly readable” in terms of the “shifts of direction and cultural alignments” than the novel (1996: 13). *Season at Sarsaparilla* is written quickly and is staged and reviewed within a year of its inception. It articulates a contemporary Australian experience of modernity and the divisions it engenders almost as quickly as the houses are built on the new estates. White not only broke new ground in Australian theatre, but also upset the “undramatic” character of the mid-century nation, that is to say, its reticence on confronting intellectual issues, and the conflicts and dramas of modernity (Marr, 1991: 385). He was notably an Australian with a disregard for the un-examined life. He wrote in the famous essay ‘The Prodigal Son’:

In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual life there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves. (White, 1990: 15)

White recognised that his generation was born with an ambivalence for the nation. His self-reflections articulate an awareness of a fluid colonial and not quite postcolonial position: “It is not that I am not Australian, I am an anachronism, something left over from that period when people were no longer English and not yet indigenous” (Marr, 1991: 385). This in-between identity, not one but not-the-other, contributes to a recent assessment of White as an Australian writer who opened up “the possibility ... for self-reflection and criticism, and for an aesthetic attention that challenges

dominant views of the culture and its populace” (McMahon & Olubus, 2010: ix). Guy Davidson notes that White “evinces the dialectical relation between modernism and mass culture” (Davidson, 2010: 2).

The satirical treatment of three Anglo-Saxon families, who live next door to each other in Sarsaparilla, is not without sympathy for the longing to escape the confines of parochial life, particularly in the case of Nola Boyle, Ernie’s classically flawed wife. It is however sharply critical of the mediocre aspirations of the middle class characters.

The play foregrounds iconic Australian modernity, monocultural for now, but with an already present social mobility that sees blue and white collar workers living side by side in the expanding outer suburbs of Sydney in the summer of 1961. The blending of the two classes in new housing developments gives rise to values debates and competitive consumption that begin indoors, but seep through the walls of the houses in the street. The play captures the moment before the great waves of European migration change “the Good Life” from an Anglo-Celtic to a cosmopolitan society (White, 2012: 173). Nola Boyle finds it interesting that “some of those Eytalians ... they’re all shoulders and no hips ...” are about to buy a block of land in the street (White, 2012: 97). These new “liquid” modern Australians, whose bodily shape is suggestive of light rapid movement, as opposed to the slow moving, languid farmer, will soon bring rapid change. Espresso coffee and pasta will break up the solidity of having “cake and steak”. White’s view of 1960s modernity is critical of the over-regulation of daily life, which is shown to leave little room for the imagination, philosophy or the richness or sufferings of an inner life.

Mixmasters and the society of consumers: “everything now”

Amidst the fixity of the boxes in which people lived, was a growing sense of change: young girls like Pippy forego the breakfast ritual to rush out onto the street; and there are surplus wages to shop with at Woolworths and Cash and Carry. There are white goods and brands such as Mixmasters, washing machines and televisions to display in the home. Surplus wages support Hire Purchase, so that needs need not be denied. While the haughty Girlie Pogson recalls a past when “nobody was in business ... everybody was on the land ...” (White, 2012 84); for the rest of the working class neighbourhood becoming a consumer is to embrace the possibility of having “everything now” (White, 2012: 111). Even Girlie concedes that “the big verandas” and “willows” of her girlhood “property” are fair exchange for “a man and a washing-machine” (White, 2012; 87). Girlie’s snobbery, nostalgia and materialism sees her adaptable to what Zygmunt Bauman describes as the “society of consumers” while her sense of its “newness” reminds spectators that there were once alternative options (Bauman, 2007: 52).

Bauman characterises the society of consumers in ways that resonate with Patrick White’s claim that in “the Great Australian Emptiness ... the mind is the least of possessions” (White, 1990: 15). Bauman writes:

If consumerist *culture* is the peculiar fashion in which the members of a society of consumers think of behaving or in which they behave ‘unreflexively’—or in other words *without* thinking about what they consider to be their life purpose and what they believe to be right means of reaching it ... then the *society* of consumers stands for a peculiar set of existential conditions under which the probability is high that most men and women will embrace the consumerist rather than any other culture, and that most of the time they will obey its precepts to the best of their ability. (2007: 52)

Drawing on Bauman’s discussion of the society of consumers, the play marks the emergence of “sovereign subjects” who are masters of mortgages and kitchens in which neat rows of objects are “docile, obedient stuff for the omnipotent subject to handle” (2007: 16). Girlie Pogson is elevated, flattered and raised to the “ego-boosting rank of the sovereign subject” (Bauman, 2007: 17) in her clean and gleaming kitchen. Her home displays the truth of Bauman’s, revised version of Descartes’ Cogito, “I shop therefore I am ... a subject” (2007: 17). Moments of doubt, feelings of loss, and

submission to a deadeningly uninteresting daily routine are sublimated by Medical Benefits and Insurance and the imperative to be happy, even if it is a deeply unconvincing happiness.

Historicising the concept of the consumer, Bauman (2007: 53) cites Frank Trentmann who found that “the consumer was virtually absent from eighteenth-century discourse” and despite the advent of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century arcades, it is in the mid-twentieth century that consumption gradually becomes the dominant mode of human behaviour. Prior to the emergence of modern consumer culture in late capitalist economies, “society ‘interpellated’ most of the male half of its members as primarily producers and soldiers”, while women were “first and foremost their by-appointment purveyors of services” or housewives and mothers (Bauman, 2007, 53-54). The social imperatives that today persuade men and women to choose a consumerist lifestyle “focuses its training and coercing pressures” not on the acquisition of the discipline needed for the drudgery of manufacturing work, soldiering, and service, but on “the management of the *spirit*” (54). In Bauman’s historical narrative, the society of producers/ soldiers/service gives way to the society of consumers; the control of bodies gives way to the control of the spirit; and the health of the spirit is measured by acceptance into consumer culture, finally, as a commodity: “Members of the society of consumers are themselves consumer commodities” (57).

In White’s play, key markers of the transition from the society of farmers and soldiers to consumers are made visible. Our classical messenger, Ernie Boyle, for instance, is a returned serviceman, whose nightshift work as a sanitary man enables him to fill a home with a wife and goods. Nola Boyle need not work and fills the long hours of the day sleeping, dreaming, shopping and loitering. Her shopping is not so much related to the purchase of household necessities as an escape from the quiet of home. When Rowley Masson, Ern’s World War Two digger friend, arrives for a visit, he compares the war favourably to post-war consuming life:

MASSON (*sitting forward, intent, glass between his hands*) Remember those bloody fox-holes in the old Des? Remember ‘ow we lay there waitin’? An’ the snipers up on the bloody escarpment? We used to lie and talk about what we was goin’ ter eat. An’ the sheilas we was goin’ ter do. An’ the sky, Ern. I never seen such an open sky. As we layed there talkin’ into each other’s ears. Blokes were close to each other then.

An’ you’d wake up with your hair full of dew and spiders ... (There is silence.)

(*Looks straight at ERN*) I reckon you forgot all that. You got sold on the bloody Mixmasters.

ERN (*unhappy*) Nao! I didn’t forget none of that. But ‘oo wants to go on harpin’? I’ve had a crook back ever since. Lyin’ in bloody fox-’oles in the dew! (White, 2012: 111-112)

Masson adheres to, and fights a losing battle against, the rapidly dissolving code of masculinity based in the values of war, danger and physical endurance. From his perspective, Ernie’s suburban life is not only a sign of his submission to the domestic realm, traditionally a female space, but a betrayal of masculine values. Masson views the Mixmaster as a sign that peacetime, marriage and domesticity conspire to make a man go soft. Ernie’s rejoinder is that his position as husband, homeowner and provider is preferable to “lyin in bloody fox-’oles”. With that response, he gestures towards the emergence of a new code of masculinity based in property ownership and assets. If we recall his first appearance in the play, when he enters his “own yard”, Ernie can be seen to embody the pride of home ownership. In the yard that he has paid for, he acquires eloquence and a certain classical gravitas that attest to the fact that “He is happy to be free” of landlords and army officers (95). We can also note that where Masson refers to “fox-holes”, Ernie says “fox-’oles”, suggesting the greater appeal for the latter of a rise up the social ladder. The dialogic exchange with Masson brings to the surface a previously unseen degree of self-reflexivity in Ernie who shows he is well aware of emerging codes of postwar masculinity vested in the possession and consumption of consumer goods. White’s affectionate shaping of Ernie shows he is neither a man for whom “the mind is the least of possessions” (White, 1990: 15) or a man who behaves “without thinking about what they consider to be their life purpose” (Bauman, 2007: 52). What we see in Ernie is the dialectical power and appeal of consuming life.

White's construction of the scene between the two former diggers sees each of the characters negotiate a much larger reality than the short visit that reunites and then separates them. They stumble through the new conditions of consuming life in which the mind and not the body is called to account. It is not simply that a "consuming life" is an inauthentic life, as Masson implies; nor does Digger Masson's scorn seriously dent Ernie's self-regard. As Bauman observes, "the 'society of consumers' ... stands for the kind of society that promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative cultural options" (Bauman, 2007: 53). On this view, the two men represent alternative cultural options in which Ernie stands for the emerging consumerist lifestyle and Masson a kind of idealised other in which men are "close", women are available, and danger provides an existential experience. Masson will further assert an itinerant, promiscuous cultural option by turning Nola into one of the "sheilas we was goin' ter do", sleeping with her while Ernie empties the town's sanitary bins. At the same time, making love to his mate's wife severs the code of mateship and enacts his view of Ernie's emasculated domestic status. That Nola is so willingly seduced and follows up with a melodramatic performance full of self-loathing and self-pity turns the focus away from Masson and back onto the Mildred Street couple. In this sense, Masson becomes a non-subject, a mere catalyst, and a consumer object used and discarded by Nola. Despite his scepticism towards modern suburban life, he is a character who represents an unexamined life that fails to see that his position is also a "life strategy" in the new social formation of post-war modernity. His discrediting repositions Ernie as the man of his times.

So analysed, the scene articulates a transition from the society of producers and soldiers to the society of consumers. If, as Bauman suggests, members of the society of consumers behave "unreflexively"—or in other words *without* thinking about what they consider to be their life purpose and what they believe to be right means of reaching it" (Bauman, 2007: 52), then Ernie Boyle is endowed with a degree of heroic resistance. White's valorisation of the modest reflections of the ordinary man suggests that resistance to modern life can come from unexpected quarters.

Sovereign subjects and disposable objects

White inflects the transition to consumer modernity with characteristic irony as his characters variously embrace and recoil from changing circumstances in the neighbourhood. Together they form a composite image of 1960s modernity as it works to rationalise desire and transform it into consumption. Social relationships are complicated by the desire for more things; there are new kinds of relations between subjects and objects, especially the shining household commodities on the mass market. Upstanding moral virtue teeters on the brink of sexual freedom. White's literary manufacture of an atmospherics of repression, of unrequited desire and brief sexual encounters takes place behind the scenes of public behaviour which is increasingly concerned with the performative practice and display of consumption. The characters grapple with the elemental forces of desire and morality while skirting the precipice of the consumerism that fills their longings with material objects of desire. The great Australian Emptiness that White sees as an infection that stymies Australian culture is ready to be filled with shopping.

White's sharp satiric view of suburban modernity takes a harsh view of the romantic figure, Roy Child, the boy-child as man who boards with his sister and her husband, the Knotts, and dreams of becoming a writer. He fits the "ideal type" found in the mid-century American drama of Tennessee Williams (*The Glass Menagerie*) and in the bookish Toby Raven in Nick Enright and Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (2009) which is set in the 1940s and 50s Perth. In Max Weber's social theory on which Bauman draws, "ideal types" or "stereotypes" are "abstractions" that "try to grasp the uniqueness of a configuration composed of ingredients that are by no means unique" (Bauman, 2007: 27). As "ideal types", White's characters are "cognitive tools" that "throw light on certain aspects of described social reality while leaving in the shade some other aspects considered to be of lesser or only random relevance" (2007: 27). Roy Child's ambivalent relationship to place, to family and to the ties that bind a social community hints at a social reality that is stretching further afield, causing the skin

to itch in a way that is both irritating and exciting. He understands he must be reconciled with a sentimental love of place because you “can’t shed your skin ... even if it itches like hell” (White, 2012: 177). What Girlie Pogson cannot foresee is that the sovereignty she asserts and enjoys over the objects in her house will soon “lose their lustre and attraction” as liquid modernity consigns them to the rubbish tip (2007: 31). As the subject of a consuming life, portrayed critically as an ideal figure of the capitalist patriarchal state, Girlie is about to collapse into the “instability of desire and insatiability of needs, and the resulting proclivity of instant consumption and disposal of objects” (2007: 31). Daughter Judy abandons years of violin lessons and looks for the next thing. The “razzle-dazzle” shade that spreads further across the central action causes characters to remember, dream, experience longing, stop in their tracks, look ahead (White 2012: 174). These moments that are often prompted by the barking of the pack of dogs that pursue a bitch in season are constructed as dangerous, destabilising forces that are to be repressed or repented.

Conclusion

The transformation of Australia from a society of producers to a society of consumers is part of the global transformation of which Bauman speaks, but my hope is that the article helps to position the Australian situation in relation to the Asia Pacific. My questioning of Australian theatre is about how it articulates, imagines or contests local variations of modernity, especially the tensions and contradictions that have a geopolitical element—that is to say, a regional and ecological inflection to do with history and place. Patrick White’s plays, for instance, suggest that the society of consumers will sublimate an inarticulate Australian version of the Great Australian Emptiness, that it will compensate for the spiritual and imaginative void at the heart of an anxious settler culture, but will allow it to remain predominantly inward-looking and parochial. Recent Australian theatre, including a restaging of White’s drama, readily displaces its anxieties onto consumption but also offers the possibility of resistance. Raymondo Cortese’s *Intimacy*, first performed at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne in 2010 is one example of that tendency. My sense is that with the notable exception of John Romeril’s plays such as *Love Suicides* (1997), mainstage Australian drama remains attached to the idea of the national, and as a consequence remains parochial. The more cosmopolitan, globally oriented theatre is vibrant but less visible. The onus is therefore on theatre criticism to make the regional and global connections more visible. Maybe the common experience of consumer culture is a means to this end.

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