

Divinations: Four Plays

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Divinations

FOUR PLAYS

JOHN KINSELLA

Edited by Stephen Chinna



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*For Tim Cribb who believes all the time,
even when he questions . . .*

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PREFACE

A Gesture Towards a Poetics of Theatre

Of these four plays, three were written to be performed, and the fourth was written in response to a performance happening around me. One of the plays is a collaboration, so that's an occasion of mutual response. They are all, to varying degrees, "verse" plays, though the amount of verse varies considerably. All are written from a poet's perspective, and with an ear to colloquialisms as drama. Dance and movement across the stage are pivotal, as is light. Even if the manner of lighting is not indicated, the mood of the piece is a fair indication. Most significantly, I think, each was intended as a template for those who make things happen on the stage. They are to be pulled apart, workshopped, rewritten, re-articulated. They might be performed exactly as is, or in variation.

Each has an ethical intent, and I would hope this is respected, but that ethical intent itself is under scrutiny, so who am I to say. . . ? In fact, the premier performance of *Crop Circles* in Cambridge engendered that kind of debate: the "surrealism" and abstraction of the play, the use of myth and archetypes, against the realism and seemingly overt moral messaging. I would suggest the boundaries are far more blurred than this. Take these plays where you will. Maybe a brief mention of places and circumstances of composition will help.

Crop Circles came together from notes and poems and an idea of a story – thus, I suppose, it lends itself to being the most narrative of the plays. I sewed it together while on a residency at Varuna Writers' Centre, making use of the office computer late at night and in the early hours of the morning, in a removed and slightly threatening mindset. The play was revised later in Cambridge, and then workshopped at the Playbox with an excellent group of Australian actors

under the direction of Aubrey Mellor. The dramaturgical assistance, and directorial input from the Playbox regulars, were eye-opening in terms of dramatic intent – of delaying a revelation to the last possible moment. Years of reading poetry aloud, and hearing others reading my poetry aloud, gave me a groundwork for projection of the colloquial and yet versified voice. I also had a map of relations and friends and people I had encountered in the Australian wheatbelt over the years to draw upon for tone and modulation.

The second play collected here, *Smith Street*, came about from living with my partner and co-writer Tracy Ryan on the notorious street of inner-city Perth frequented by prostitutes, and vilified by the government, police, and good citizens of the neighbourhood. As with the other plays, it is concerned with issues of bigotry and oppression, of hypocrisy and liberation. Heaven, Earth, and Hell are clearly delineated and the players are constantly struggling to preserve or dissolve these boundaries. It is a passion play. It's mystery, miracle, and morality rolled in together. Always elements of cabaret, melodrama and farce. In some senses, the closer to the "action", the more fantastical the "voicing" of the work. Steve Chinna, who directed the first production of this play at the University of Western Australia, also developed the script in a number of ways – primarily in the use of song. *Smith Street* was the realisation of the director using the script as template, and enhancing and giving a particular vision to the work.

The third play, *The Wasps*, was written specifically for the Cambridge Marlowe Society, though constructed in Ohio and Western Australia, as well as in Cambridge itself. I had enjoyed the Marlowe's interpretation of Australian spatiality in their production of *Crop Circles*, and sought to use what I'd learnt from this experience when writing Australian characters in a London setting in *The Wasps*. The centre cannot hold? And which centre, or centres? So the discourse goes . . . It is based on dance movement and light-play. Each of these plays works through a dramatic synaesthesia, with elements of sound and sight providing as much dramatic and "narrative" action as the storyline itself.

In writing *The Wasps*, with its obvious classical subtext (though ironised and displaced), I spent much time reading masques – Jonson (especially in the context of the dramatisations by Inigo Jones), Campion, Milton (textually) . . . The anti-masque as a form particularly

interested me, and the literal writing of masques is what interests me in theatre at present. The influence on *The Wasps* isn't direct, but it's there – minimalised, distracted, and honed down. It's an undoing of the form, as one might almost expect; in the same way that *Smith Street* plays with the conventions of Victorian melodrama.

The last play here is described as “unperformable”. Its place of composition was the old Railway Hotel in the city of Perth, Western Australia (supposedly the most isolated capital city in the world). This hotel was knocked down about ten years ago, in the early hours of the morning, against a council preservation order. Its propped-up facade, all that remained, stood there for years with its boarded-off disembodied allotment of prime city development space behind. The irony was fitting. The Railway was one of the roughest pubs in Perth, and a central place for the scoring of narcotics. Users would score in the pub, climb the staircase, and hit up in one of the guest bathrooms upstairs, often nodding off on the floor or in an empty bathtub.

What was remarkable about the Railway was that it was a meeting place for blacks and whites. There was the usual racism, but somehow brothers and sisters could be discovered across the divide of the pool table. Problems were, in some ways at least, shared. This part of the play speaks for itself. It's a play about respect and disintegration, and the entanglement of these in a city where the oppression of marginal groups – especially of those who might claim primacy over the land the State exploits – led to communication between those outside the machine, taking place in zones of the condemned.

There is little narrative action in *Paydirt*; the drama is in the words being spoken at all, and suggestion of things that have already happened. There is a sense of the Odyssey about it, but this is inverted. People drink and die, the dance goes on. The dance of constraint and oppression, but also of vision and connection with a place overlaid by the city, by the invaders. It's the common space, the meeting place, where in loss something is gained. I like to think of *Paydirt* as a distracted Miracle Play. This is the only play not to have been performed, or to be in preparation for performance. Could it be performed? I suppose I'd like to think so, but maybe not.

My influences as a young writer were, profoundly, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Beckett, Brecht (especially his play *Baal*: I wrote a play called *Baal* which has been lost), Shakespeare, and,

indeed Marlowe and Goethe (textually), forgotten playwrights like Heywood (also my grandfather's surname), Indonesian shadow puppet theatre, anonymous Elizabethan plays in facsimile manuscript form (*The Wasps* actually gets its name from one of these), Dorothy Hewett, Jack Davis (a little later), and maybe Gertrude Stein. *Paydirt* is the inability to recognise the need to dramatise nothingness. The stage never stays still, and that's climax enough.

Strangely, *Paydirt* is filled with the most "real" of people, and yet they primarily act as ciphers in the play – static, people coming and going around a pool table, collecting drinks from the bar. Other than the main character Samuel, they come and go and become interchangeable. Samuel plays the prophet, but is not really up to the role fate and his own free will cast him in. He is a blind seer – but one whose blindness enhances seeing through sensitivity and an alternative sight. He stumbles through memories and glimpses of insight. His flaws overwhelm him. Samuel would have us think he alone is there, but so would each of the other characters if only we could see them as they would have us see them. But we can't, because we don't know how to look. Theatre is supposed to do this for us? I don't think so.

Dramatic action is built into language itself, and the compression and non sequiturs that vitalise poetry, that give it metaphoric resonance and metonymical links that become harder and harder to trace, are the rise and fall of movement for me. The actor takes us into the words themselves, as well as the meaning that comes from hearing the words spoken together. Maybe I am visualising a theatre in which we look and hear in a different way: we see something different because we want to. We are not passive, even when the players are apparently passive.

Paydirt was another lost play until a few years ago – it vanished for a decade and was found in my mother's shed. It was transcribed (with minor translation loss), and a small amount of additional material was added more recently. Its structure has not changed at all. Neither have the intentions and visualisations behind the piece, no matter how tempting this might be. I have decided not to collect my earliest plays – written almost twenty-two years ago – because, in some senses, they are a forerunner of these views of theatre. I think I became more amenable to the expectations of an audience to be entertained as I got older. I went to a great deal of theatre as a young man, and fed my

plays with this very direct experience. They were conversations with and against convention, that remained determinedly introverted, dramatically, because most of what I had seen tried so hard to give people a good time. If people find this volume of interest, I expect those early plays will be transcribed from manuscripts (mostly handwritten and in archives), and presented for the reader, and maybe, maybe in the “right” hands, performed.

JOHN KINSELLA
November 2002

FOREWORD

A Marlovian Note on Divinations

In 1998 Cambridge University Marlowe Dramatic Society was privileged to give John Kinsella's play, *Crop Circles*, its premiere.

That conjuncture calls for comment. Why on earth should a British student drama society be chosen as vehicle for a play so profoundly rooted not just in Australia but in South Western Australia and in the Wheat Belt at that? The experiences it drew on and referred to, its fauna and flora, its idioms were way outside the ken of most of the company we assembled to tackle the project. I've given an account of the solutions we came up with in "Mind the Gap", a contribution to *Fairly Obsessive: Essays on the Works of John Kinsella*. Reading the four plays that together make up the present volume suggests some further reasons for this odd-couple marriage.

They derive partly from the character of one of the partners, the Marlowe (as it is known). It was founded in 1907 in reaction against the actor manager grand style in acting and overblown realist style in staging then dominant and specifically to tackle plays in verse by Shakespeare's contemporaries, at that time almost completely forgotten by the British stage. It was thus an experimental society which had to find out how to tackle the project it had set itself by what is, as Steve Chinna emphasises, ultimately the only way in theatre: simply by doing it – and finding out how to do poetry was a major part of doing it. That phase of the Society ran from 1907 to 1928 and the presiding spirit was Rupert Brooke's, although his dream of building a small experimental theatre in which the Marlowe could explore the contemporary German drama of Wedekind and others was never realised. From 1929 Dadie Rylands took over for a generation of productions until 1960. He redirected the Society's efforts towards

Shakespeare and these culminated in the recording of the complete works, the first ever, for Argo Records between 1957 to 1964. This was the school that nurtured the talents of John Barton, Peter Hall, who founded the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Trevor Nunn in directing, Ian McKellen and Derek Jacobi in acting. The emphasis on Shakespeare continued after Dadie's retirement until Sam Mendes's production of *Cyrano* in 1988, which inaugurated a return to the Society's founding principles, now extended to verse drama such as that of the Spanish Golden Age in addition to the Elizabethans. Since John Maynard Keynes had built the Arts Theatre in Cambridge in 1936 all the Marlowe's main productions had taken place there, that is, they were student productions but in a fully professional theatre. Alas, the return to experimental productions proved unviable at the box office and was abandoned in 1999, since which year the Society has returned to Shakespeare, working extensively with schools.

This is where John Kinsella comes in again. In 1998 he had founded an annual prize for students and followed this in 1999 with *The Other Prize*, to be awarded for a new play written by a student, and adjudicated by the Literary Manager of the RSC. (John is currently founding yet a third prize, *The Komus*, for musical composition setting text for theatre.) Part of the prize was to be a production of the winning text by the Marlowe in a small student theatre. Thus the Society is now committed to two productions a year, a main house production of Shakespeare at the Arts Theatre, and a small house production of new writing, and in the latter returns to its origins in finding out how to tackle the untried and the unknown. John's own play, *Crop Circles*, can be seen as inaugurating this new departure.

At the time the Marlowe was working on *Crop Circles*, *Paydirt* had been lost, forgotten, and was only discovered by John's mum in an outbuilding while we were in production. Furthermore, drafts of earlier plays are held in library collections as pointed out in the Notes to the Preface.

Reading it now in series with the plays that followed is illuminating. John's "Preface" mentions the influence of *Baal*, which is plain to see. Brecht's own introductory prologue to the 1918 version says that "The subject of this play is a very ordinary story of a man who sings a hymn to summer in a grog-shop without selecting his audience". To jump to a much later Brecht – of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* –

Samuel in *Paydirt* is also an Azdak, a working-class and dissident intellectual in a downtrodden sector of Perth. The scenography is that of the cabaret, the poetics that of social epiphanies. But unlike *Baal* the play never moves into Nature; its space is confined to the bar and the alleyway just outside. That is what changes so strikingly in *Crop Circles*, where the spaces expand and natural forces, working through the varying resistances of the characters, become the main agents of the play. Hence the return to the urban in *Smith Street* is on terms different from *Paydirt*. Not only space but form is opened out by the brilliant device of incorporating a Medieval Morality scenography with the stereotypes of nineteenth-century melodrama. Relieved of the ambivalence and atmospherics that haunt *Paydirt*, the verse is released into wit and the tone lifts into comedy – indeed, at the beginning of Act 3 Angel anticipates the modality of *The Wasps* and begins to dance. With *The Wasps* we enter Pinterland (though further down river) where the banalities of urban living are invested with a dimension of fear and violence that cannot be identified but wells up in the pauses. When Dadie Rylands saw his first play by Pinter he recognised him as a poet of the theatre. John has taken that subtext and precipitated it into the music and dances that periodically take over and possess the characters. Act 3 may move into the de-historicised warehouse conversions and penthouses of Thatcher’s Docklands, but the Thames, Conrad’s river of darkness, still flows outside and early in the scene the lights reflected onto the ceiling from its waters begin to swirl. It is a comedic *danse macabre*.

This is the play that the Marlowe will explore, under the guidance of Steve Chinna, in some workshops early in 2003. With *Crop Circles* we could see the difficulty of exploring what seemed an alien landscape; *The Wasps* seems closer to home: beware!

TIM CRIBB
January 2003

INTRODUCTION

Rough Guides and Mutations: The “Difficult” Plays of John Kinsella

John Kinsella is, among many other manifestations, a poet, a novelist, an autobiographer, an academic, and a playwright. While not attempting to collapse, nor separate these roles, it is his plays – understandably, given the content of this volume – that will be my area of focus.

What is a play? It is not these words on the pages you will soon read – if you haven’t already skipped this introduction and got to the real reason you have picked up this book. A play takes place in space and time, as does reading, but plays are collaborative hybrids of whatever intentions the participants may have, and whatever accidents may occur in their making. The play scripts you read here, are parts of plays. In his “Preface”, John Kinsella says each play is a template – or, a pattern, a gauge, a guide – “for those who make things happen on the stage”. Amongst multiple definitions, in the biological version a template is the molecular pattern governing the assembly of a protein – that is – an organic compound. If we leave aside poststructuralist quakings about the notion of the organic society – and the “Greenie” version of the “natural” or the “biodynamic” – and think of the organic as relating to a bodily organ or structure – then we may think of the accidental and the arbitrary, the fluctuations that disturb the smooth running of the whole. And if we continue with this organic metaphor – this molecular pattern is always potentially chaotic, and liable to mutation. Such mutation is instrumental in theatre work, where re-articulation through repetition drives the metaphoric engine of a play’s workshopping, rehearsing, and production.

Kinsella’s plays disturb the complacency of static positions

concerning play structure, content, and form. Like all good plays, they present challenges. They challenge the actor or director who might wish for a smooth generic style. They challenge the actor who may want more information to help their psychologically motivated character evolve through a process of learning the great lessons of life – from the bottom to the top – or from triumph, descending through hubris in a tragic spiral downwards towards oblivion. They will challenge the actor or director who finds the shifts between prose and verse difficult to justify in terms of “realism” – whatever that may mean. The actor who can “sing” the poetry of the lines – whether prose or poetry – will fare better than the actor who must find a justification for those shifts. They will challenge those spectators who like their theatre palatable in the linearity of its form, and the familiarity of its narrative. They also will challenge those who shy away from the overtly political, or even polemical – believing that post-modern means post-Brechtian – and the declamatory wearing of one’s ecological or anarchist heart on one’s sleeve bespeaks a certain “uncool” approach to a politics of the cynical snigger and the shoulder shrug. While “social conscience” has a hernia-like ring to it – Kinsella’s “social conscience” is informed by his position as a self-proclaimed anarchist. Not the anarchist of popular perception – who mutters that “the system’s fucked, mate” or else throws bombs at Archdukes, but the anarchism of the self-reflective, self-motivated political practitioner who believes that a situational, contextual, small-group politics of protest can have a small “p” – and manifest itself in performance without regard for generic and/or generational fashions in acceptable activism.

These plays are unabashed in their use of “local” knowledges. Kinsella writes of his environment in his poetry, and his plays. It is the environment of the wheatlands, the “scrub”, the bush, and the small towns of rural Western Australia. It is also the environment of inner-city Perth – where prostitutes and their clients, cops and politicians, journalists and vigilantes can make mileage and more from what may be designated as crime; where the junkies and boozers and the people off the mainstream road trade in love, drugs, dreams, and aspirations on the bitumen and paving slabs, and in the dark, cool front-bars of the “seedier” parts of the city. This is Australian theatre – but that term is as nebulous as “British”, or “American” theatre. It is not

universal – the events are circumscribed by local knowledges, local politics, local lifestyles, and local authority. But, this is not a defiantly Australian theatre – there is no axe to grind to find an “Australian voice”. That battle was fought in the 1960s and 1970s. Whether it was won or lost is, in some ways, immaterial. While these plays, in the main, are assertively “local”, they are – assertively – plays that can and will travel.

Kinsella sees theatre as “a poetic space”. He asks rhetorically, in an interview with Rod Mengham in *Fairly Obsessive*: “which IS closer to thought . . . speech or writing? Or the space of the theatre?” (Mengham and Phillips, 286). While it appears no clear answer is forthcoming, there is an answer – theatre allows the opportunity for spaces, lacunae, in the spoken words – visible and visceral punctuations in the flow of language, where stasis is foresworn, and the poetics of human motion can work in harmony, or counterpoint, to the declamation of the voice. But, these plays do not “flow” – if flow implies a seamless rhythm based on a classical form. The flow here is more atonal – more Stockhausen than Strauss. It is the sound of the true discord of the “real” – rather than of the wishful desire for the eventual accord of Naturalism and the well-made play. There is an element of the “musical” in all of these plays – that sometimes seemingly awkward bursting into verse, or song, that Naturalism killed with its attention to “reality”. Of course, in “real life” we are never poetic, and we never sing.

The title of the collection is *Divinations*. Here we have invocations of a sublime – the unrepresentable of the supernatural (where the “natural” – ever unnatural – looms large in its own invocations). Through an ever unnatural/natural foreseeing, or foretelling, which is not programmatic, these plays sort through the entrails of societies to divine the future through the present.

Crop Circles was first performed at Cambridge in 1998, in a Marlowe Society production directed by Tim Cribb. The play is dedicated to Dorothy Hewett, an inspirational Western Australian writer, poet, playwright, and political activist. Like John Kinsella, she is a poet who “speaks” from the wheatlands. Her plays have invariably been seen as problematic, for their politics in part, but especially for their style. Hewett mixes genres – she is not concerned with stylistic purity, and like Kinsella, happily mixes the naturalistic with the surrealist, the

prosaic with the poetical, and moves into song and dance with a specific and entertaining political value.

This play deals with a central issue in much of rural Australia – salinity – where due to over-zealous land clearing, and poor land management, the water table has risen, pushing up the underlying salt (deposited when much of the Australian land mass lay under the oceans). This has rendered much of the always marginal arable land unfit for crops or grazing, and belated efforts are now being made to revegetate the farmlands, and educate people in more responsible land management. This ecological disaster may be put down to greed, ignorance, or – perhaps – even a baleful chthonic vengeance against the usurpation and degradation of the landscape. But, while the “underworld” may be seeking revenge, or justice, a pragmatic and emblematic sign is also scarring the landscape. Crop circles – even fake – have an air of the theatrical about them. Whether their making is performed by tractor, “round up”, or carnivalesque bodies under the harvest moon – or by extraterrestrial landing craft – they have a certain ludicrous (from *ludicum* – stage play) quality – as playful as the debate that is generated by their appearances throughout “civilized” nations. Here, they have a commercial quality – as potential tourist attraction – as well as being a catalyst for social action by the marginalised against yet another manifestation of a long line of robber barons – in the character of Sayers. Spatially, the division of the stage into the white, salt-blasted lands of the “wheatbelt”, and the green, over-fertilized fields of Sayers, sets up a binary which is mediated by a place from which to speak – whether it be the Town Hall, the raised lookout, or a farmhouse. For a very pertinent director’s point-of-view on this play, see Tim Cribb’s essay “Mind the Gap: John Kinsella’s Verse Drama,” in *Fairly Obsessive* (Mengham and Phillips, 221–34).

Smith Street had its first production at the Dolphin Theatre, the University of Western Australia, in May 2001. This play grew – or mutated – from a collaboratively written script by John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan. It was sent to me with a generous open invitation to do what I would with it: to add material, and to workshop it for performance. The performers helped shape the play, as did the crew. As does the set, the venue, the lighting, the available technology, the music choices . . . and not least – the spectators. So too did Anna Brockway, a theatre practitioner, who helped teach the student actors much

about the possibilities of stage movement, and stage pictures. John attended one rehearsal, sitting still and silent in the background – freely giving over his “rights” to interruption or intervention. Indeed, when student participants asked him what he thought, his response was to decline comment – other than being encouraging about their performances. Not “his” play – as an entity – but his play in part, as a collaboration between writers, practitioners, and – importantly – the process.

Smith Street might be seen as a simple clash – a classical conflict between the forces of law and order – the politicians, the police, the “wowsers” who seek out deviation, but manage to be spies, voyeurs, as well as thieves of pleasure – versus those who live outside the law. But, it is not that simple – thankfully – and there is more than enough ambiguity here to satisfy those who like their folktales to be less than specific in terms of judicially ordained “right” and “wrong”. This “melodrama” – perhaps – plays type against type, interweaving a hybridity of inner-suburban street-life, with elements of farce and the nativity play – among other things. Is it a difficult play? It would appear so, judging on responses from participants and spectators alike. But, for those who enjoy difficulty, and do not aspire to an imagined generic, stylistic, thematic purity, then “difficulty” has a positive tone. Furthermore, the quarrel between the transparent and the opaque is no longer such an issue in academic discourses, with the understanding that these are reliant on subjective and contextual positionings – and we may all move at different times between our reception and interpretation of one or the other. For example, in the Dolphin production, slides of Mrs Walpurgis dressed as a prostitute were shown on the wall of the “Tuscan Splendour” at certain points – a not so subtle exposure of a potential secret life – but perhaps too subtle, in that spectators did not appear to connect the corporeality of the actor as Mrs Walpurgis on stage, with the image of the same actor as “prostitute”.

Actors as well as spectators had difficulty deciphering some of the verbal imagery – as did this director at times. But, so what? It is not the business of the playwright/s to be transparent, and how can there ever be transparency for all? Is it necessary to know that certain prisons around Perth are named for local flora – Casuarina, Hakea, etc.? Perhaps . . . Towards the end of the play, Jack disappears, muttering

mysteriously about “rehabilitation” and “parole”. But, as Jack has earlier warned – “I’ll be back” – and there is something of Jack and other protagonists from *Smith Street* in the characters of an earlier play – *Paydirt* – but more on that soon.

But, perhaps *The Wasps*, could be “read” as almost too transparent – starting as a seemingly naturalistic domestic scene of Shirley and Bill, inhabiting the “real” olde England, as colonials in search of magical answers, and job satisfaction. Beware. Kinsella doesn’t write like this – and the marked banality of the dialogue between Shirley and Bill quickly shifts to other modes. And, in performance this seeming banality can be even more quickly destabilized through the actors’ voices and movement. I reiterate – what you see on the page is not a performance. Get past the play as prose – envision its potentials as performance. This is how Kinsella writes – with a visual feeling, an aural sensitivity, and the rhythmic consciousness of a poet.

Intertextuality – as another academic discourse – is a given. If this play raises resonances of other plays – even through its title alone – these are necessary borrowings. We are indeed informed by what we are exposed to, and if Kinsella says elsewhere that Beckett is a “favourite” (*Fairly Obsessive*, 286), then we may well include as inspirations – among many – Ionesco, and Burroughs – especially in the figure of Stan the Exterminator. It is not my brief, nor desire, to supply “readymades” for interpretative analysis. As I have stated – perhaps interminably – to decipher plays from the page is a pointless exercise. How they pan out in rehearsal and performance, and how individual spectators interpret them, is where any interpretative value resides. This play will be yet another collaboration – between writer, director, choreographer, musical director, lighting, sound, actor and spectator. In a sense, how can we label any play writing as a solo effort – except that with copyright, and ascribed authorship, we must necessarily do so? And besides, how willing are any of us to relinquish our autonomous authority over our texts? It takes a generosity of spirit to do so – and Kinsella proves time and again that this is how he is prepared to work.

The playwright labels *Paydirt* as “unperformable”. Is that a challenge? Most certainly. *Pace* the playwright, but this play is eminently performable. Here, in the earliest composed of these plays, the interweaving elements of voice, music, dance, and movement are evident.

As is that proclivity to generic hybridity – where cops can do dance routines, music can be “heard”, but not heard, and where the spiritual can intertwine with the corporeal. For some, these will be vignettes of a recognizable life. Here, there is neither the space nor the need to give a history of the puritan constraints within Australian society – on the way that pleasure is defined, measured and controlled by a vocal minority of censors and vigilantes – the Clipboards and Walpurgis’s of the suburban verges. Even more tellingly, behind the larrikin insouciance of the popular construct of the Australian (white, male, working class) lies an abiding conservatism that reacts swiftly and defensively to difference – in accent, dress, politics, sexual choices, etc. The Australian challenge – “What are ya?” – has always had a threatening subtext which signals fear, and a repression of deviance from the norm – the Anglo-Celtic masculinised Australian, of whatever gender.

But, contextually, for *Paydirt*, it is enough to say that licensing laws have only relatively recently loosened up – and it is not unusual a requirement to have to order a meal in order to obtain an alcoholic drink at many cafes. But, while a certain bohemian decadence might be the fiction of sitting about at 7am drinking cold beer – or tequila sunrises – the reality is more as *Paydirt* suggests – a bone-cold time of day with the smell of cigarette smoke and beer-filled carpets – and for some, sausage and egg and a cold beer at 6.30 in the morning, after having been up all night – spaced out, wasted – and somewhat hysterical.

Some years ago: “Where is the reality?” called a passing motorist to a companion and I as we roamed the streets of suburbia later one morning after a night of increasing dementia – and breakfast and drinks at an “early opener”. I can’t recall how we responded – other than with equally existential calls. But, they wanted the realty office – it was a mispronounced real estate quest. A surrealistic call and response on a hot summer morning, and the prosaic and the poetic are likewise entwined in *Paydirt*. This is not glamorous – it’s hard and spacey in its “reality” – as the play moves skilfully between the arcane and the everyday.

But, to return to the label of the “unperformable”. Perhaps that lies in the casting. Kinsella states that the play was written with the Nyungar actor, David Ngoombujarra in mind. Furthermore, that the

ethnicity, or race/colour of the performers is non-specific, and that rather these are labels, or epithets, which may be ascribed to them, or directed at them. This is where the sensitivity lies – in who may perform an embodied “Aboriginality” in the visceral space of the theatre – but the “experiment” would be well worthwhile. However, while the boundaries of staging are “fluid”, the reception may be less so. Nonetheless, to paraphrase Brecht: Let’s see how it works in practice.

These are plays for performance. I won’t stop returning to this. Some may think: “Oh no! He’s not going to go on again about page to stage; text as performance, and so on”. But yes – I will – even if not in so many words. The playwright has spoken of these plays in his author’s preface; I have written briefly of them here. But whatever the author says, and whatever I say, will be of peripheral import to those who take these words and dis-place them to real space and time, with the breathing, moving bodies of performers, and crew, and spectators. There they will find their own particular forms, shifting through the process of rehearsal and workshopping to a process of performance, a performance in front of – or perhaps among – particular spectators, in a specific venue. *Crop Circles* will never be the same play/s as performed at the Wolfson Theatre, Churchill College, Cambridge; *Smith Street* will never be the play/s that were performed at the University of Western Australia; and when *The Wasps*, and *Paydirt*, are performed, their manifestations – mutations – in specific spaces and times, with specific participants, will continue to shift and change. Evolve is not a word to use here.

Read them for their poetry, read them for their explorations of form; read them for their occasional lapses as well as triumphs – why should John Kinsella be different to any other mortal? But above all (you knew I was coming to this) read them as performance potentials – as templates, recipes, star maps – rough guides scattered across the page/stage for your divination.

STEVE CHINNA
December 2002

Crop Circles

for Dorothy Hewett

A play in five acts

Crop Circles was first performed by the Marlowe Society at the Wolfson Theatre, Churchill College, Cambridge, on October 20, 1998 with the following cast

LEN	Nick Harrop
JO	Anna Mackenzie
GARY	Dave Allen
CLEM WRIGHT	Kevin Trainor
MARY WRIGHT	Tania King
SAYERS	Charlie Beall
LUCY	Annalisa D'Inella
DR CINDY EVANS	Sophie Levy
THE DIVINER	Steve Watts
MINISTER	John Finnemore
THE GREENIE	Douglas McCabe

Directed by Tim Cribb.

Workshop and Mask Consultant by Roddy Maude-Roxby.

Produced by Alex Godden and Hattie Truscott.

Music composed by Jeremy Thurlow.

Set designed by Philip Clarke.

Lighting designed by Edward Ratzer.

Props and costumes by Catherine Firth.
Set built by Castle Associates.
Publicity by Rachel Flowerday.
Programme arranged by Stephanie Jones.
Photography by Dan Chastney.

Characters

LEN, *journalist with a city newspaper. Early thirties. Reasonably successful, regarded as reliable. Slightly refined accent, though obviously Australian. A slight “rural” twang. But travelled and “worldly-wise”. His family on his father’s side is from Green Springs, but he hasn’t seen them in over two decades.*

JO, *freelance photographer. Highly regarded landscape photographer. Late thirties. Part Nyungar. Fostered at a young age in suspicious circumstances. Apparently indifferent, but when roused capable of great passion. Informed, particular in her craft.*

GARY, *Gazzer to his mates. Mid twenties. Well-built shearer. Heavy drinker, shooter, party boy. But smart. And when not acting the clown, capable of penetrating insight. The local wit.*

[UNCLE] CLEM WRIGHT, *farmer. Stalwart in his 60s. Tries to follow the new ways. A mixture of old and new values. Gnarled and large.*

MARY WRIGHT, *conservationist, ex-schoolteacher.*

[ANDY] SAYERS, *Green Springs’s largest landowner. Drives a Statesman. Power-hungry bigot, and misogynist.*

LUCY, *hobby farmer.*

DR CINDY EVANS, *local Doctor and first woman town mayor. “Conservationist”, elected out of desperation. The town is dying from rising salinity.*

THE DIVINER, *figure of the Apocalypse.*

MINISTER, *Old England, dark and foreboding.*

GREENIE, *narrator.*

The set

The set should be projected onto a diorama if possible. The primary effect will be one of contrasts. The sky will be incredibly blue, the wheat fields, florescent green, the ready-to-harvest crops golden. The salt will be stark white. The central façade will vary from scene to scene. It will start as the façade to the Town Hall. The left side of the Town Hall will be stark white and blue, representing salinity and endless sky. The right side of the Town Hall will be green and blue, representing lush crops and sky. These will vary according to the stage directions.

Lighting should be such that it plays against the hues of the set. It should reflect the subtle moods of the day. In those scenes where environmental or moral equivocation is being focussed on, the light will be harsh, unforgiving.

Costumes should reflect the employment of the wearer. CINDY will be smart but casual, the shearer in a red checked shirt and/or a blue singlet, always wearing a pair of greasies. LUCY will be dressed butch, though with a touch of the “femme” about her.

It is essential for the actors to speak their “straight” lines in the same way they speak the poetry. And vice versa. In a sense this is one long poem in which they are manifestations of the spoken word. The distinction between character and language should be blurred. They are what they speak. The poetry and dialogue should be treated as one.

Act 1

Scene 1

Folk are emerging from double doors. These are the doors of the hundred-year-old Town Hall. In fact it is Green Springs's Centenary year and there are insipid reminders of this posted on the walls of the Town Hall's façade. As they make their way onto the street the GREENIE's opening "speech" is heard. He speaks from the "green side", but is lost in the half-light of the stage's periphery. Eventually CINDY and the WRIGHTS emerge, deep in conversation. They stand to one side, behind them the stark salt wastes spread into nothingness, cut only by the agonizingly blue sky. On the other side of the Town Hall it is lush and green. These are the lands of ANDY SAYERS. The MINISTER emerges and stays with his back to the brilliant greens. Black shoes, trousers, jacket, white shirt with cleric's collar. He has his hands crossed in front of him and is glowering in the direction of CINDY and her companions; it is obvious he despises them. As if sensing his animosity they simultaneously turn and glance at him before returning to their conversation. The crowd vanishes, and the MINISTER slowly walks into the wings.

GREENIE

Down off the shoulder of the pink granite scarp
down in the rich soil where the roots run deep

crop circles appear with mathematical precision –
archetypal patterns that keep us wondering.

It's said they followed the people
from the Old Country – even after

the first clearing there was talk
of them, recurring every now and again