

# ‘Looking at the Wider World’: Global Engagement, Political Activism and Polemical Storytelling in *Watchlist*, *Prima Facie* and *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*

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*This article focuses on Watchlist, a new play written by Alex Vickery-Howe, placing it in a context of contemporary Australian political writing for the stage which sees playwrights, such as Stephen Sewell and Suzie Miller, adopt an international outlook in order to tell stories of activism. By creating nuanced characters and engaging with the popular, these playwrights are inspiring activism in their audiences in engaging and challenging ways, arguing that what is deemed off-limits should not be left off-stage.*

## Introduction

Practitioners and theorists have long discussed the potential political impact of theatrical storytelling. Ibsen said that it is impossible to ‘escape the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which we belong’.<sup>1</sup> From Bertolt Brecht to Milo Rau, theatre, particularly in the European context, has been and remains an arena in which political ideas are challenged and embodied with the resultant battles ultimately *experienced* by audiences, fostering a sense of action and activism. Brecht stated that ‘a theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense’.<sup>2</sup> Rau, in his own Ghent manifesto regarding his theatre practice, has argued that this ‘contact’ must use its aesthetic, visceral nature to create a social and political impact: ‘It’s not just about portraying the world anymore. It’s about changing it. The aim is not to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real.’<sup>3</sup> Even classic practitioners who purposely distanced themselves from the ‘political’ still aimed to challenge their audiences. Eugène Ionesco’s aversion to the political was a conscious choice made about politics; a political choice. Although the theatre of the absurd/*l’avant-garde* was not as pedagogically driven as Brecht’s epic theatre, its writers did ...

... ask their readers and audiences to try to respond, to try and find explanations within themselves or at least some clarification on how to deal with certain problems. A poet is neither a prophet nor omniscient. A poet is one who knows how to identify a problem when others do not see one; a poet simply shines a light on these issues.<sup>4</sup>

Through this process of exposure, both overt and subtle, theatre audiences are therefore educated about social and political issues in an artistic, aesthetic medium. 'Art expands the sympathetic imagination while teaching us about the limits of sympathy. Such teaching hopes to bring the cognitive and the emotional into alignment.'<sup>5</sup> Considering audiences as a diverse collective, it is near impossible to definitively describe the visceral response felt by spectators and the political impact which may flow on as a result; however, Grehan, describing modern audiences as members of a globalized society, argues that '[live] performance offers an alternative space in which to act, to confront ethical questions and to get beyond the potential paralysis of the contemporary moment'.<sup>6</sup> This contemporary moment is an opportunity to confront the major issues of our age and stimulate conversation with a global audience. In this paper, we will discuss a theatrical response to the climate emergency as an attempt to dramatize the dilemmas facing globally responsible citizens and to explore the ascendant genre of climate fiction (cli-fi). At the centre of this study, we will place our experiment in writing and staging political polemic: *Watchlist* by Alex Vickery-Howe.<sup>7</sup>

*Watchlist* is a new Australian work, which premiered in June 2021 (delayed twelve months due to the outbreak of COVID-19), directed by Lisa Harper Campbell, after selling out its print run at Currency Press.<sup>8</sup> The play focuses on a young, directionless man who is kicked into gear while his lover and best friend butt heads as to how best to play the role of progressive activist. Basil Pepper's journey fits within the genre of cli-fi, which, as Andersen asserts, 'takes its point of departure from what is arguably the greatest challenge facing humanity today: anthropogenic global warming'.<sup>9</sup> Stylistically, *Watchlist* is a work of metatheatre – not quite a play, but a play that *knows* it's a play – mediated through the protagonist, Basil, as unreliable witness to events that shift from past to present tense across the course of the unfolding narrative. Caracciolo states: 'One of the signature moves of post-modernism is the leap to a meta-level from which culture and its conventions can be observed through an ironic lens' and that, in the context of cli-fi specifically, 'metafictional strategies evoke uncertainty of a markedly ecological nature and thus help readers negotiate a vast range of questions on the future of human–nonhuman relations in the Anthropocene'.<sup>10</sup> The choice to frame the play as firmly metatheatrical is reflected in the dialogue:

NORMAN: When I was young, I imagined I could put my hand through the television screen and touch a better world.<sup>11</sup>

This device of frames within frames – Basil recounting his story, which becomes a series of hyperreal flashbacks informed by Basil's own biases; his interrogator, Special Officer Norman Gould, stepping in and out of these flashbacks; agents under Norman's employ dressing the set; the exploration of the screen artifice within a theatrical presentation – all come together most affectingly in the play's recurrent image of an encaged Tasmanian Tiger pacing out his final days. It is this image that Norman, in what may be his silent act of contrition and redemption, seeks to touch, removing his black glove as he does so.

In terms of its discourse, *Watchlist* takes a firm and unabashed ideological position, and holds to it. The play was dubbed an 'agit-prop piece' and 'a didacticism-enabler' during its premiere.<sup>12</sup> But all of these decisions around genre, style and discourse are situated within the intersection of the local and the global in the Australian cultural mindset, which Croggon characterizes as being fixated on what 'might be unAustralian, or not Australian enough', wherein 'a self-conscious scanning of Australianness – of what it means to be authentically *us* – is a constant and anxious theme through Australian art and literature'.<sup>13</sup> Croggon argues that this cultural fixation with the local is particularly acute in when it comes to writing for and around performance:

Turn to Australian theatre, and it sometimes seems that we have argued about little else *but* nationalism. The history of Australian theatre is almost impossible to discuss without referring to this debate: nationalism has been, at many crucial points, the very condition of our theatre's existence.<sup>14</sup>

As an experiment not only with theatrical conventions but with cultural modalities, *Watchlist* allies itself within an emergent movement among outspoken contemporary Australian playwrights to purposefully expand beyond the national to assert an explicitly global outlook in their storytelling. Central to this experiment is a study of, and response to, Stephen Sewell and Suzie Miller who engage with global issues in their works *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* (2003)<sup>15</sup> and *Prima Facie* (2019).<sup>16</sup> Taking these two works as the foundational bedrock, *Watchlist* is purposefully positioned within what Croggon calls 'profound cultural realignment' in Australian theatre.<sup>17</sup> Just as these earlier works respond to a high-stakes issue that threatens humanity's survival – the hatred fuelled by terrorism, the abuse of power in our personal relationships – *Watchlist* concerns itself with the man-made destruction of our planet. The aim of this study is to make a case for globalization in Australian theatre, not only as a necessity in an increasingly interconnected world but as a moral imperative. Ibsen was right to assert that one cannot escape the responsibility and the guilt of society; by leaning into that responsibility, playwrights can seize the contemporary moment and speak to the world.

### **The drama of our times: Stephen Sewell and the global conversation**

Meyrick cites Gough Whitlam's 1972 'It's Time!' election as the catalyst for unleashing seventy years' worth of pent-up Australian creativity; a deluge or 'wave' which would continue for the next fifty years. One important aim of this wave was to 'Australianise the Australian theatre'.<sup>18</sup> Croggon describes this process of 'Australianisation' as, in itself, a performance:

Being Australian is either an inescapable act of fate – and in that case we shall be so in all events – or it is a mere affectation, a mask. The best of our contemporary theatre has dropped the mask.<sup>19</sup>

Glow also suggests that within Australian theatre there was an 'anti-globalism movement in the face of the domination of neo-liberalism' as well as a 'critical nationalism in

Australian writers'.<sup>20</sup> According to Glow, Australian theatre [now] has a long history of staging the nation; of plays and productions which have explored Australian themes and highlighted the national politics of the day.

For [Reg] Cribb it is the relationship between the city and the country; for [Andrew] Bovell and [Wesley] Enoch it is race and cultural identity; for [Patricia] Cornelius it is class, and for [Hannie] Rayson and [Katherine] Thomson it is an examination of the big ideological shifts in Australia, from social liberalism to neo-conservatism which provides the basis for the critical cultural analysis offered by their plays.<sup>21</sup>

These playwrights' works, as well as those of David Williamson, Dorothy Hewett and Louis Nowra, tell stories dealing with ideology, class and interpersonal relationships within a steadfastly Australian socio-political context. Bovell has described his primary task as 'generating ideas' and to ask questions about 'culture and place'.<sup>22</sup> Williamson, lauded throughout his career as the voice of Australian baby boomers, stated in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that 'there is an awful Australian uniqueness' that has been central to Australian theatre since the 1980s.<sup>23</sup>

In the early 2000s, Australia's theatrical coming of age – or, at the very least, the major milestone marking a cultural transition from practitioners of locally focused drama to participants in the global conversation – came with the arrival of Stephen Sewell's influential work *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*. This was the realization, as acknowledged by McCallum, of attempts by Sewell and other writers in the 1990s to 'reset the agenda of the Australian theatre' through the interrogation of 'Australian nationalism and parochialism'.<sup>24</sup>

First staged as a co-production between Playbox Theatre and the State Theatre Company of South Australia, under the direction of Aubrey Mellor in 2003, the play follows Talbot Finch, an Australian academic in an American university, and takes a heavy-handed approach to the politics of the Bush era. Many individual scenes remain powerful, even when the overall thesis borders on the didactic (see Fig. 1). Sewell himself wryly acknowledges this didacticism through the overwrought title of the play, which takes its name from Finch's own writing, within the drama, and which is now something of an internet cliché: everyone compares contemporary America to Nazi Germany. Godwin's Law exists for precisely this reason.<sup>25</sup>

Citing Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) – from whose pages Finch draws his moniker – Sewell frames this play as a clash between liberal freethinkers and an increasingly oppressive, proudly right-wing, groupthink culture exemplified by the murky politics, secretiveness, phony wars and weasel worlds of the Bush administration. The playwright is explicit in his objectives:

Theatre has nearly always been on the side of the oppressed and the vulnerable because theatre, even in its most ancient forms, has used as its material human lives and dilemmas, and presented these in a communal setting.<sup>26</sup>

The text plays a clever game, never quite confirming whether hapless Finch is being stalked by his political enemies, or if he is simply degenerating into paranoia and madness. Throughout, he is hounded and eventually tortured by a shadowy figure



FIG. 1 In the 2003 production of *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster*, protagonist and beleaguered academic Talbot Finch is brought to his knees. Nicholas Eadie as Talbot Finch in the 2003 Tangent Productions production of *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* by Stephen Sewell, directed by Christopher Hurrell. Photograph by Will Sheehan.

known only as 'The Man', who could be a figment of his imagination, never appearing on any CCTV footage, but is most likely attached to a government agency (see Fig. 2).

While its dissection of the War on Terror now reads as quaint, and a post-2016 audience may be tempted to get a little misty-eyed over a time before Trump – a time when comparisons with Nazi Germany were daring, rather than plain – the impact of Sewell's work is not to be underestimated. Sewell asserts that 'theatre is politics, and politics is theatre', a mantra that he explored in conversation with May-Brit Akerholt:

'Many artists deny their social responsibility and embrace a purely individual art for art's sake position,' Sewell says. 'But when we look to understand ancient or foreign civilisations, the key we grasp for is their drama, literature, painting. Visitors to Australia usually dismiss the art of the whites and go for Indigenous art, because they do say their art is absolutely about their society.' Sewell's latest play *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster* is fiercely about us, now.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Akerholt, the play struggled to find its voice in Sydney, despite its warm reception in Melbourne and Adelaide, until David Berthold of Griffin Theatre Company and then emerging director Christopher Hurrell took a chance.

The play resonates because it marks an eloquent and confident Australian contribution to a global debate. It is largely for this reason that it is revived, even when its polemical politics are dated, and rightfully held in high esteem. Reflecting in 2014, Sewell said:



FIG. 2 *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster's* 'The Man' hastens Finch's downfall, emerging from the shadows and remaining a threatening presence throughout the play. William Gluth as The Man in the 2003 Tangent Productions production of *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* by Stephen Sewell, directed by Christopher Hurrell. Photograph by Will Sheehan.

The stakes have never been higher, nor the challenges more frightening, and if we are to be faithful to the light shone by Shakespeare and Confucius, by Chekov, by Euripides, by the poets of China, Japan and India, if we are to join them in saying human beings are worthy of our attention and civilization a worthy project, then we must engage with the drama of our times and make an art that matters. And I have no doubt we will.<sup>28</sup>

The enduring success of *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster* exposes what Sewell calls the 'fallacy' of Australian drama; that audiences merely wish for light entertainment, distraction and amusement, devoid of deeper thematic meaning or political content. The commercial success of this play, and of Sewell's work in general, makes it clear that this is far from the case. Akerholt links this falsehood, disparagingly, with the 'pedestrian drama' of television and a sense of the arts becoming 'familiar and comfortable'<sup>29</sup>; this may be a reductive misreading, or a reflection of a particular cultural moment. Certainly now, in the Age of Netflix, television is rich and nourishing, with intricately woven layers of deeper meaning, and enough contentious, engaging, ideologically engendered material to start a water cooler riot, as Kackman describes: 'Both television and the academic discipline that has developed around it have steadily gained legitimacy and accrued cultural capital over the past two decades.'<sup>30</sup> Theatre needs to stay on its toes in this contemporary moment. On the small screen, according to Kackman, 'auteurism and formalist narrative analysis are resurgent, finding their preferred object in the "mature" complexity of the contemporary serialized prime-time drama'.<sup>31</sup> Rather than discredit Sewell, the global

rise of streaming content serves to bolster his central proposition: the 'light shone' by Euripides and others is a light focused on the pressing socio-political dilemmas of a writer's given period in history, and to restrict this light within national borders – turned toward the parochial, the palatable, or to bland, non-combative 'fast-food theatre' – is to risk the social relevance of the artform itself.

If Sewell's polemical, even combative, approach to his work seems overblown, consider American playwright and essayist Robert Brustein's response to the events of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Initially turned away from the theatre – 'Writing drama criticism seems like very trivial labor after you've been watching the herculean efforts of police, firemen, and city workers to retrieve the remains of victims buried under the World Trade Center and the Pentagon' – Brustein was, nevertheless, inspired by his students to refocus on the medium's potential.<sup>32</sup>

I was grateful for being reminded, in my current state of anger and confusion, of the obligations of art in a bad time, of why literature and drama continued to remain relevant despite our horrifying glimpses into the darkness of the human heart.<sup>33</sup>

He amended that thought immediately: 'Or maybe the arts remain relevant because of those glimpses.'<sup>34</sup> The challenge of capturing these 'horrifying glimpses', whether it be a devastating act of mass murder or the climate disaster and all those who refuse to see it, requires a wide focus, a global focus, that discards the fixation with nationalism Croggon identifies as a formative discourse in the history of Australian theatre. It also requires an understanding of Kackman's 'cultural capital', wherein theatre is constantly compared to – and challenged by – alternative artforms. In this environment, in this moment, Sewell is calling for emergent Australian playwrights to be loud and difficult.

### **Love or pain: dismantling the big systems with Suzie Miller**

One artist who has embraced Sewell's rallying cry is Suzie Miller, an Australian writer committed to international engagement. The ascendant playwright made a strong impact – at a local *and* a global level – with *Prima Facie*, winner of the 2018 Griffin Award. A young, openly cutthroat lawyer finds her career and self-esteem splintered when she is sexually assaulted by a colleague. This personal and private story for the character, framed as a continuous monologue, becomes a reckoning for the legal system, not only in Australia but in 'Western' democracies throughout the world:

*Prima Facie* was a play I wrote that was highly political, and was received all about the globe because it was an international concern. The idea that the system of law was profoundly gendered was a focus in that play. I like to dismantle systems that we take for granted and interrogate the foundations of those systems to question whether we should indeed just accept them the way they are. Often, they are big systems that lack transparency, or claim transparency only to be revealed not to be.<sup>35</sup>

A theatrical cliché is the 'call to arms' but Miller's prose with its stinging wit, palpable anger and undiluted passion for her subject convincingly earns such a by-line. Critical comparisons with Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) are, likewise, well-earned as

this play has resonated with audiences, and travelled quickly to international stages, with a screen production currently in development. Miller makes no apology for her commitment to social justice and her desire – now arguably manifest – to change the world. She asserts that 'it is not about preaching to an audience but about shifting perspective, or inviting commentary, rage, affirmation, rejection, and love or pain'.<sup>36</sup>

*Prima Facie* is a play that demands to be passed on, confronting its audience with a direct address that not only delivers emotion but concrete facts, from Miller's own legal training and continued advocacy in the criminal justice system. Like *A Doll's House*, it is a play with a firm *position* – instead of a confected resolution – and it dares the audience to make the next move, to carry the issue further, and to make others aware. Miller wants her words to go viral. She is looking outward:

Moving to London and engaging with the UK, Ireland, US and Canada, was how I explored my craft. I felt I didn't have time to wait for Australia to catch up. It had a profound effect on me.<sup>37</sup>

As a playwright with international links, Miller is able to reflect on some of the limitations and culturally embedded biases present in her local Australian arts scene, as well the wider biases of the society in which it is placed:

I feel strongly that Australia does not take advantage of its theatre people enough. In the UK, playwrights and directors are invited into public debate to add their ideas and perspective into the mix. In Australia, there is a lost opportunity to engage with those whose job it is to think deeply about the human cost of political and social issues, to question not only the politicians' policies but the legitimacy of anyone in power. It is about rethinking and 'wrighting' ideas into some sort of shape. And a playwright must be prepared to be controversial. In order to do that they must be brave or crazy, or a little of both.<sup>38</sup>

What Miller has demonstrated through her own bravery – and, perhaps, a dash of craziness – is that a writer *can* live locally but become part of a global public debate. Much like Sewell diving into the fray of American political discourse, Miller has confronted the inequities of the legal system in her own country and abroad. Both playwrights assert, and demonstrate, that audiences can respond to statistical facts and strong ideological perspectives if they are framed within a compelling story, and those stories, if well-told, have the power to travel. And travel it has with the West End production of the Australian work (starring *Killing Eve*'s Jodie Comer as Miller's polemic vehicle Tessa) receiving critical acclaim in 2022 with plans to tour globally starting with a 2023 season on Broadway.

There is no escaping that both *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster* and *Prima Facie* are works written from the position of a comparatively small, comparatively isolated, nation that seeks to participate in the heaviest of global debates. This makes them inspirational precursors for internationally minded writers telling stories for a world, not just a country, in crisis. *Prima Facie* finished its premier production in June 2019, as the final draft of *Watchlist* was completed. The two plays are separated by a sudden shift in the historical moment; a global pandemic that has cut through notions of the local



and brought our connected world into sharper critical focus. While *Prima Facie* is a play marked by its strong desire for positive change, *Watchlist* is a play intended as a warning of negative changes to come, but now marked by its uncanny prescience; even so, the thematic links are embedded in the latter play's DNA, as part of a phenomenon that Kaplan articulates: 'Having been preoccupied with trauma in terms of its classic description as related to past events, I realized that future catastrophic events could also be traumatic.'<sup>39</sup> Cli-fi as a genre is an exploration of this impending trauma and *Watchlist* adopts Sewell and Miller's explicit and caustic approach to its subject. The traumatic aspect to the narrative that was less plausible, at the time of writing, was the virus that features in the play's climax. What might have been framed as fanciful and cynical – a zoonotic pathogen that threatens mankind – has, eerily, now occurred. Wickett and Lenny each highlight the prophetic nature of the piece in their respective reviews:

Alex Vickery-Howe wrote this dark comedic tale after yet another year of terrible bushfires, but before the pandemic – which is prophetic, given where the narrative goes. And its invitation, nay, demand, to do something, is more powerful for being played once the theatres have re-opened.<sup>40</sup>

It was to have been performed a year ago but, ironically, it was delayed by COVID-19. You'll understand the irony when you see the final moments in the play.<sup>41</sup>

COVID-19 hangs over *Watchlist*. The global outlook of the play, the facts it wanted to share and the upheaval it anticipated are somewhat overshadowed by the timing of that event. But the play is building from Sewell and Miller by contributing to the global conversation in other ways, and adopting a strong ideological perspective that honours Sewell's call to 'engage with the drama of our times' and 'make an art that matters', peppered with 'commentary, rage, affirmation' and 'rejection', as suggested by Miller, with 'love' and 'pain' central to the protagonist's awakening over the course of the narrative.

The power to transcend national interests and tell global stories is central to *Watchlist* as a theatrical experiment engaging with the overtly political. Unashamedly diving in to explicit activism, in this way, runs the risk of being labelled didactic ... but is that a risk worth taking? Is being didactic really a problem when the aim is to engage meaningfully with audiences on an urgent, time-sensitive political issue?

This is a brave, bold, agit-prop piece. It is a didacticism-enabler ... It all sounds rather over-earnest and evangelistic, but Vickery-Howe allows all sides to have their say and, most importantly, polishes them with satire.<sup>42</sup>

The same can be, and has been, said of Sewell and Miller's work. These three Australian playwrights weaponize their ideologies in different ways, in terms of structure and style. Miller is direct, confrontational and unapologetic; Sewell, polemical and persuasive, writes for impact; Vickery-Howe frames his ideology in a pop cultural pastiche mode. Rogers highlights cli-fi's ability to 'play with and overturn established memes and tropes, expose the weaknesses of seemingly impermeable capitalist structures, and jolt us into realising that climate change constitutes more than an external phenomenon: it is, and will increasingly become, embodied and lived experience'.<sup>43</sup> She further

refers to 'trickster strategies, which undo, surprise and propose alternative ways of thinking' wherein 'existing rules are ephemeral, and long-held certainties are open to debate'.<sup>44</sup> These 'trickster strategies' – music, both retro and contemporary; unreliable narration; mystery; romance; sexuality; black humour; metatheatricality – have deep roots both in classic television drama and in a theatrical legacy which, viewed through a local Australian lens, is non-naturalistic and countercultural.

### **British influences – Potter and Orton**

It is here that *Watchlist* becomes explicitly global stylistically as well as thematically. Outside of Sewell and Miller, the literary antecedents and dramaturgical forebearers of this work are not Australian at all, but part of an intersecting British tradition that runs counter to Australian nationalism and Australian naturalism. *Watchlist* is constructed chiefly as a series of tragicomic double acts (Basil and Norman, Basil and Marie, Basil and Roger, Norman and Marie, Roger and Norman, Roger and Marie) with insults, power games, gags and confrontations – often petty, always ideological – ricocheting between them. The play is explicit in referencing George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) with Roger temporarily slipping into the oil slick skin of Professor Henry Higgins to tutor Basil on all things fashionably moderate.

ROGER: I'm going to make you perfect ... I'm going to make you me' (I, ix).

Many of Basil and Roger's earlier interactions are reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's Jack and Algy – sharing cheerful nonsense – with Marie as their despotic Lady Bracknell. Here cucumber sandwiches have been swapped for Fred Basset comics and Moscato.

*DOORBELL RINGS.*

ROGER: Blast. If it's the Mormons, you'll fetch my hose. Or my pruning shears.

*Basil runs to the window.*

BASIL: *It's my mother!*

ROGER: In that case, we'll require a shovel.

BASIL: Turn off the lights. We'll hide.

ROGER: Now, now, this could be fortuitous, Baz ... we do need a practical test.

BASIL: Mate, I haven't even passed the oral exam. (*Then, looking down*) She's going to laugh at me.

ROGER: Is she capable of laughter?

*The doorbell rings again.*

BASIL: She can't come in if she's not invited. (I, xi)

The grim farce of Joe Orton, in particular *Loot* (1965), with its parodic Inspector Truscott as hypocritical establishment figure, its digs at religious authority and its conspicuous coffin, underpins Norman's grilling of Basil, Roger's appalling eulogy and Basil's subsequent confrontation with his mother, leading to his eviction from her home: 'I love you, Basil ... I just don't want to live with you' (I, v). But these references flash by as part of what Bramwell calls 'a lively stew of Pratchett, Douglas Adams, Roald Dahl, *12 Monkeys*, *Black Mirror* and *The Young Ones*'.<sup>45</sup> In this way, it would be a mistake to think of the text as seriously concerned with logic or naturalistic performances, especially in the frenetic first act when Basil confesses his misdeeds to the shadowy Norman in the form of splintered memories.

BASIL: I was suffocating.

NORMAN: Were you?

BASIL: The walls were closing in.

NORMAN: They'll close in again if you refuse to cooperate, Mr. Pepper.

BASIL: I felt trapped. Delia was my way out.

NORMAN: Quite the opposite ... but by all means, share your love story.

*Basil runs his fingers through his hair, gathering his memories.*

BASIL: Later.

*He exhales.*

BASIL: The wake. (I, iii)

This series of flashbacks, gliding from the funeral of Basil's father, to the wake, the appearance of Delia, and Basil's alacritous approach to brainwashing, initially from his best friend and then from his dark Juliet – as he sees her – is deliberately fractured and hyperreal, punctuated by choreographed musical interludes. What we are seeing is not necessarily truth, but Basil's half-memory, half-dream, as conveyed by him to his interrogator.

In Basil's telling, his mother is a black-caped villainess, Roger a cartoonish buffoon, and Delia herself idealized and magical – appearing as a siren in a summer storm – her sudden arrival, their first kiss, and the radicalization of Basil thereafter all set to R.E.M.'s spellbinding 'Leave' (1996). To decode this text, and play it, one is best positioned to start with the influence that makes sense of all others: playwright and television dramatist Dennis Potter, the master of 'postmodern pastiche, replete with flashbacks, jump-cuts, half-dissolves, voice-overs, and superimposition, most of them designed to create a merging of reality with dream and/or hallucinations'.<sup>46</sup> It is Potter who cements the foundations for this mode of storytelling, in particular his use of music and song not as an accompanying soundtrack but as an essential ingredient in the drama,

inseparable from the dialogue and characterization. Potter's choice of songs 'serve his play as motifs, providing structure and sequence' as well as 'psychological insight' into the characters and their inner lives.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, Basil's recollections come with a tailor-made soundscape: we do not *really* know if Roger played Boney M's semi-erotic retro disco hit 'Daddy Cool' (1976) at the funeral, or if the wake featured the sultry and even less appropriate 'Your Love Takes Me Higher' (1989) by British electronic group The Beloved ... but Basil *feels* like these things happened because this was the night he met the woman who changed his world. This tells us something about Basil's state of mind, as well as his reliability as a narrator. It may also hint at his long-game manipulation of Norman.

Not only will we the audience observe the usefulness of songs to what we hear in the play and to how we interpret its events, but they will have a prominent effect on what we see and on how the play's visual aspects connect and conflict with what we are told, in much the same way that hallucination and reality also [dis]connect.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond the confines of naturalism as a theatrical style lies this deeper internal logic: 'Potter's characters reach beyond their ability to express themselves in words when they break into song, and the songs give the spectator insight into the urges and frustrations of their characters.'<sup>49</sup> Or, as Potter himself puts it, the use of a popular track outside of its original context will '... give the song the meaning of the emotional and physical surround out of which you are made to rehear it'.<sup>50</sup> While they refrain from lip-synching, the characters in *Watchlist* live in a scored world that draws heavily from this tradition, as do the characters in *Blackpool* (2004) and *Wakefield* (2021); Potter's influence over contemporary writers is knowingly dissonant, unsettling – even unmusical – as the effect is often a discord between a happy song and a brutal act, or a pop serenade when one of the lovers is planning to change the world violently and irrevocably.

The structure of *Watchlist* pays homage to Potter's *Traitor* (1971) and *The Singing Detective* (1986), incorporating 'montage-based storytelling'.<sup>51</sup> As the narrative moves into its second act, Basil's recollections dip into the sinister. Norman's shadow stretches over the interrogation scenes into Basil's memories, taking the form of the Snoops – mute, trilby-clad government agents – who may or may not be real, yet steadily grow in number; an Agent Smith-style *Matrix* virus infiltrating Basil's fantasies. The Snoops remind Basil that the system will always hunt free creatures like Delia ... and Basil too, unless he can play the chameleon and slip back into apathy and obscurity. Pushing against this sense of dread is the defiant vision of Benjamin, the last Tasmanian Tiger, emblematic of Delia's psyche and her mission, highlighting both her incompatibility with Basil and her refusal to compromise for him.

There is further intrigue and unlikely layers to the plot but, principally this is a play of thoughts – big, disturbing, important thoughts, thoughts for a world destroying itself with greed and short-sighted priorities, with perversity and blithe hypocrisy. Emblematic is the thylacine and, screened on the backdrop in grainy black and

white footage, is Benjamin, the last survivor of that doomed species. He is the totem of extinction rebellion. 'How far would you go to save the world?', asks the play.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to the fast-cut opening scenes, the pace slows as the play draws to its climax, the characters becoming flawed, three dimensional and grounded in some sense of the real. Marie confesses to her activist past and demonstrates layers of love for her son; Roger drops the sardonic dandy routine to voice a commitment to Basil as ally and protector, as well as a nuanced understanding of who Delia is and where she is coming from. Even cardboard Norman shifts from the shadowy to the grey. In what becomes the play's final double act, Basil and Delia are forced to face each other – see each other – as real people, beyond the fiction Basil has constructed for us.

The 'boy meets girl' narrative turns from comedy to politics and back again so easily, yet it's not satire: it's a frustrated tale of the state of the world that signals virtue but actions nothing important, waiting for 'some mythical grown-up to take care of it'. Whilst this play is a reflection of our own apathy we see in Roger, our resignation in Marie, and our fear of the surveillance-world through Norman in his many guises – this is a call to arms: to be captivated by the planet as much as Basil is by Delia, indeed, as much as Delia is by Basil, for us to say her words: 'I wasn't supposed to like you this much'.<sup>53</sup>

### **Red peppers, green peppers: the socio-political perspective of *Watchlist***

Perhaps the main way that *Watchlist* contributes to the global conversation is through its subversive approach to the 'culture wars' by positing a complication to the traditional 'right vs. left' political dichotomy. Bramwell, accordingly, argues that *Watchlist*, 'overflowing with wit and mercurial polemic ... is an ambitious comedy with a sharp message'.<sup>54</sup> While he is surveilled by right-wing government forces, Basil is torn between his left-wing lover and his left-wing friend; two ideologically incompatible characters who loathe each other, despite the broad labels that define them. This conflict captures internal left vs. left/right vs. right divisions which are opening up, messily, all around the world. These internal divisions can only be exacerbated by recent global catastrophes, coupled with a broad lack of individual self-awareness, nuanced civil discourse and detailed critical reflection. As Helen Karakulak argues:

Much of the humour of the production plays into the political, with nods to differentiating between communism and socialism, and references that encapsulate the differences between being socially aware and socially active ... Audiences are introduced to a comically bumbling, slightly awkward boy with a crush. His journey into activism effectively captures the slope of social consciousness that must be navigated as our eyes are opened to consequence.<sup>55</sup>

Through Delia (Fig. 3), the narrative goes even further and suggests that on green pepper priorities – the urgent environmental and ethical sustainability issues of our time – the old traditional left is not only failing but patting itself on the back while it fails. It is this distinction between those who 'talk the talk' and those who 'walk the walk' that gives the



FIG. 3 In the 2021 premiere production of *Watchlist*, Delia (Katherine Sortini) shows Basil (Gianluca Noble) she means business. Photograph by John Newton.

play its teeth. In his *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, Hitchens warns against the glib appeal of 'identity politics'; the underlying thread of Roger's dialogue in *Watchlist*.<sup>56</sup> Feelings in place of thought, narcissism and fragility masquerading as cooperation and community spirit, or what Hitchens identifies as a preoccupation with who someone is – and the group to which they belong – rather than *what they stand for* is the honeytrap of many retaliatory social movements, and a criticism from which contemporary Australian theatre should not be spared. It is no great secret that the Australian theatrical landscape positions itself to the left of centre. Right-wing plays in Australia are so rare as to be an almost absurd proposition. Within this framework, there are unspoken rules about what kind of political positions a playwright is permitted to take, and which jokes are acceptable to the faithful core audience. This moral map encourages diversity on and off stage, which is overwhelmingly positive, but provides little room for stepping outside these 'correct' political perspectives; in short, everything's fine so long as you do not diss the red peppers. Playwright and political activist Michael Gurr alludes to the pervasive pressure for theatre to be reassuring instead of challenging. His Ortonesque work *Underwear, Perfume and Crash Helmet* (1996) may have, according to his memoirs, ventured a little too far into the darkness:

This play was never going to provoke warmth. It's about moral vacuums, the civilised face of fascism, a homeless girl is doused with kerosene ... No, there won't be too much joyful foyer whopping after this one. A couple of plays later, I have a spat with the theatre management. One of the things they say, to put me in my place, is that they nursed that unpopular play of mine *Underwear, Perfume and Crash Helmet* through its difficult season. Perception is a funny thing. It did better box office than other plays of mine, but is less fondly remembered. It's an 'unpleasant' play, so therefore it must have done less well.<sup>57</sup>

This misremembering of the play's success seems ideologically rather than commercially driven, much as few remember that Sewell's *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster*, as at 2007, had 'won more awards than any Australian play in history'.<sup>58</sup> *Watchlist*, however, while not an overtly 'unpleasant' play, does accuse the audience themselves of being 'unpleasant' in terms of their personal hypocrisy. One may assume that Basil, as the play's central character, would act as the audience's representative, a figure with whom the audience can relate as they traverse the plot's twists and turns 'together'. However, it is Roger (Fig. 4), Basil's Moscato-sipping, pontificating and overcompensating best friend who is the bolder, more accurate choice of *porte-parole* (the audience's voice within the world of the play). Through Roger, *Watchlist* dares to highlight the personal and political hypocrisy of the traditional left and the playwright's own self-reflection. The critical response to the premiere production recognized Roger's role as jester but also as a searing satirical figure:

As Roger, Basil's faux sophisticate housemate, Eddie Morrison delivers a fearlessly funny parody of our own meagre efforts at token change – whether sorting our yellow bin re-cycling, or fussing over Lean Cuisine. He is preposterous, but as the play suggests, so, mostly, are we.<sup>59</sup>

A lot of the comedy falls to Morrison and he succeeds in his uncertainty delivering a eulogy then flipping instantly and confidently to the wake's DJ. But he is also us, the audience: selectively informed and doing just enough to make us feel comfortable. We sip our wine (Roger's choice is Moscato) and recycle our bottles, then go back inside to watch the game.<sup>60</sup>

*Watchlist* roles out some important ideologies to give them time in the exercise yard, from totalitarianism to militant veganism, but the ultimate focus is on apathy. Delia is repulsed by apathy among activists and that is what pushes her to take extreme measures, while Roger revels in it, occasionally dressing it up with fancy parlance.<sup>61</sup>

Delia, meanwhile, is a direct challenge to the traditionally leftist theatrical clique, its pandering to established discourses, boundaries and battlelines, and its underlying sense of accepted morality, through her demand that Roger – therefore, the audience – consider the imperfections and hypocrisies that have splintered the left as it fails to address deforestation, resource shortages, animal rights, and the increasingly apparent climate emergency. She best encapsulates the play's polemical style, building from Sewell and Miller, as well as the core of *Watchlist* as an experiment: how will an



FIG. 4 *Watchlist*'s Roger (here played by Eddie Morrison) embodies the performativity and pretentiousness of left-leaning ideologies. Photograph by John Newton.

audience react to Delia's criticism? Will her exposure of hypocrisy be met with derision or introspection? Should she be positioned as hero or villain in Basil's world?

Katherine Sortini's Delia is captivating; even when she is in the shadows of the action, you know she's the reason for what happens next. She conveys the passion, determination, and uncompromising commitment to the cause, whether that be pulling Basil from his inert life into hers or threatening the future of half the human race.<sup>62</sup>

She's an environmental radical with the pull of a televangelist, complete with all the lines about capitalism, patriarchal society, the despoliation of nature, and all ... Under her thrall, Basil is transformed, and not for the better.<sup>63</sup>

Her black-and-white, intolerant rendering puts distance between her and us. In this way, *Watchlist* is not a vehicle for training up new activists but rather for encouraging introspection over the gaps between ideals we voice and the actions we live out in daily life.<sup>64</sup>

As an activist, Delia is emblematic of this alternative green pepper environmental movement and perspective, which has no more patience for the clichés and platitudes of the left than it does for the ignorance and hostility of the right. She has been born into an age where tolerance is a luxury the young cannot afford. While Basil masquerades as a traditional leftist, or red pepper, when questioned by Norman Gould – to make fun of his captor and throw Norman's agents off Delia's scent – it is quickly made clear that the young protagonists have a different cultural and



ideological perspective, for which Norman is unprepared and ultimately in sympathy, if not favour.

Walsh, Black and Prosser characterize this perspective as 'young people's changing acts of citizenship' that are 'only poorly recognised through the conventional lenses or blunt measures of political participation, which still tend to emphasize traditional political institutions, channels and affiliations'.<sup>65</sup> They argue that these young activists are 'negatively portrayed' by 'the traditional discourses of politics and power' and that these stereotypes 'devalue the ways that young people are participating and seeking to shape their worlds, or overlook them entirely' leading to 'cruel patterns of exclusion for rapidly growing numbers of young people'.<sup>66-67</sup> This 'othering' of Delia as a practical (and radical) activist was reflected in the premiere production's design (Fig. 5).

Director Lisa Harper Campbell guides the great cast around her own stage design: an almond shaped boundary of red gum bark chips: an eye, with an eyebrow at the rear of the stage. Delia's world of action is within the eye – everyone else's apathy is outside it. Delia is the only one really looking at the world – and the one being looked at.<sup>68</sup>

As the reactions to the recent 'OK Boomer' hashtag and associated debates have demonstrated, when young people speak truth to power and demand to be heard the backlash from the entrenched generational power bloc ranges from the precious to the hysterical. Indeed, *Watchlist* was written in early 2019 as Extinction Rebellion grew to prominence and teenager Greta Thunberg became a rallying figure for the global, youth-led environmental movement. In February of that year, 224 academics signed an open letter of support for Thunberg and she drew the encouragement of many mainstream politicians around the world, while Australian prime minister Scott Morrison, Russian president Vladimir Putin and US president Donald Trump led calls to censor and ridicule her. In this war of ideas, Thunberg's youth became both her marketable point of difference and her Achilles heel.

By the time *Watchlist* was completed, Australia was in the grip of devastating fires and the Coronavirus – transmitted from animals to human beings – was emerging as a global threat. What had, only a few months earlier, seemed like science fiction was now the new normal. Vickery-Howe went from worrying that the final draft was far-fetched, to expressing concern that the narrative would read as exploitative rather than prescient by the time it reached the stage. Unintentionally, Delia had become a prophet and her call to arms consistent with what Grossman frames as 'people demanding change, for themselves as working people and for all those they serve – against the powerful little knot of millionaires and billionaires and their oh-so-eloquent marionettes'.<sup>69</sup> The discourse that defines Delia's actions – exacerbated by the events that followed the writing of the play, and evident in the reception of its first audience – is a discourse that, by necessity, moves beyond the 'identity politics' that Hitchens deplores and Roger clings to in a vainglorious bid to maintain status. Trapped, as she sees it, between the 'cruelty' of the right and the 'apathy' of the left, Delia asserts her perspective by skipping straight to the pragmatic: time is running out and neither platitudes nor 'conventional measures' will cut it anymore.



FIG. 5 In *Watchlist*, Delia invites Basil into her world. Photograph by John Newton.

Georgina Woods from the Climate Action Network embodies Delia's dilemma, her underlying misanthropy, and both the practical and the psychological battles young activists face:

If one tree is being felled, one person can stand between it and the chainsaw, and with their pluck, their pathos and their wit, talk or act the chainsaw into silence. If a forest is due to be cleared, a small team of people can work with their minds and bodies in cooperation to save that forest. Now, nearly every forest, every reef, whole communities and ways of life are under threat. Billions of people, millions of cars and cattle, thousands of power stations, cement plants, smelters and mines and scores of governments stand between us and success.<sup>70</sup>

One such battle is to see the Great Barrier Reef recognized as 'in danger' by UNESCO, which has exposed not only the churlishness of the Morrison government and the parochial backlash of Australia when the world dares to comment on our neglected backyard, but also the savage socio-political divide between the Delias who confront reality and the Rogers who fuss over appearances. Inspired by his relationship with Delia, Basil rejects Roger's superficial politics and the sheltering of his mother, Marie – an activist from the previous generation, who owns the compromises she has made, even as she regrets them. If, as Wade states, 'the self comes into being only in relation to the Other', it is narratively cogent that Basil discover a new sense of self over the course of the play, through the many 'others' who seek to influence him (Fig. 6). As Davis suggests, there exists a 'struggle between Delia, Roger, Marie, and Norman, as



FIG. 6 Basil finds himself slithering into Agent Gould's (Matt Hawkins) leather-clad clutches. Photograph by John Newton.

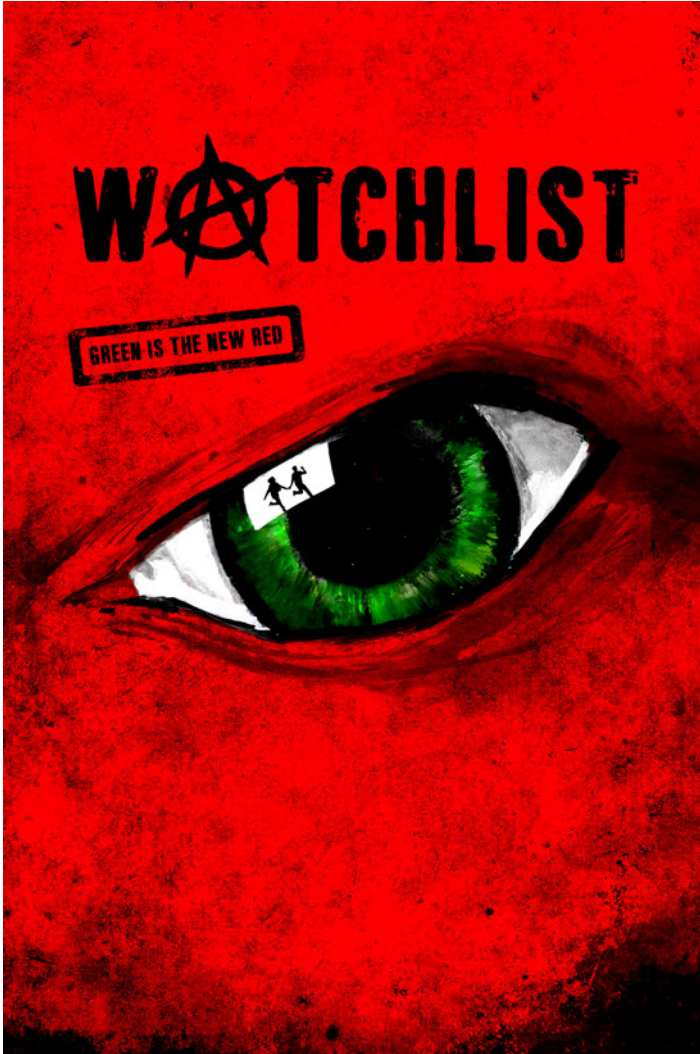


FIG. 7 The front cover of the 2020 edition (Currency Press) of *Watchlist* captures the work's themes of surveillance and radical environmental activism. Design by Nicholas Ely.

they try to shape, style, and fill the blank canvas that is the hapless, naive, and “undriven” Pepper’.<sup>71–72</sup> However, despite Delia being the most strident and passionate figure in Basil’s life, her personal and political dilemma is ultimately solved when Basil exceeds her expectations and embraces his agency by making the climactic decision of the play. The influenced has become the influencer. Apathy bloomed into activism.

The writer acknowledges a sense of being torn between the personas of Roger and Delia, as part of what Ivanova calls the ‘existential split’ characteristic of Vickery-Howe’s work.<sup>73</sup> But in parodying both the traditional left and the right, and drawing attention to other cultural categories – chiefly, internal fissures in political movements characterized

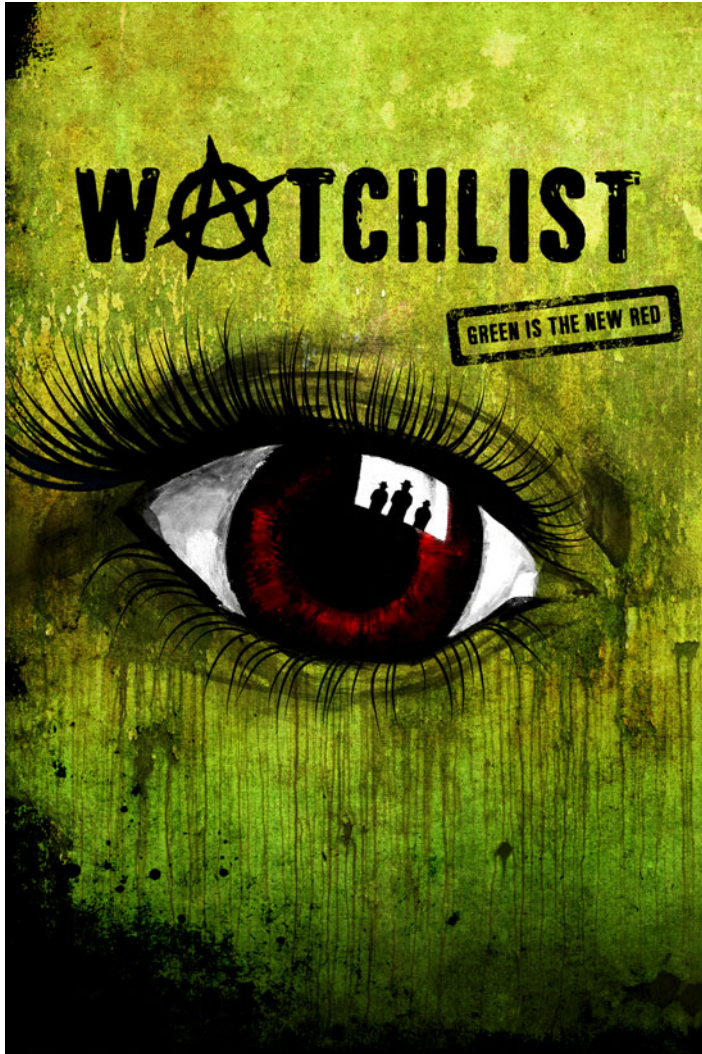


FIG. 8 The back cover of the 2020 edition (Currency Press) of *Watchlist* in which the central image is inverted: Delia gazes back at her oppressors. Design by Nicholas Ely.

by intergenerational and cross-generational recognition, conflict and accountability – the play seeks to break down established enmities and find a new collective. To accomplish this, Norman is employed as the easy target – the representative of right-wing, neoconservative values – while Roger and Delia are personifications of more nuanced positions within the left: red (established gatekeepers) and green (emergent activists). Basil is pushed and pulled between them until he makes a choice. When the lights go up, the audience is encouraged to reflect on that choice and question their own morality:

Alex Vickery-Howe's *Watchlist* is amusing, ambitious, provocative, and a sharp reminder that the changes we know we need to make as global citizens will not be easy, even if we agree to them ... This production eases us in with its comedy, but leaves us staring at a plateful of unpalatable options.<sup>74</sup>

Political discourse, particularly at this fractious point in history, is hyper-partisan, contentious and heated. Impending climate catastrophe, and the degree to which we are morally, ethically and existentially obliged to respond, is an explosive site of global debate. The *Watchlist* experiment (Figs 7 and 8) demonstrates that complicated, thorny conversations like these can be effectively explored through the medium of theatre.

### Concluding remarks

Theatre audiences, as Grehan describes, are subjects who exist in the globalized world, for whom performance offers a space in which to confront ethical questions and to get beyond the potential paralysis of the contemporary moment.<sup>75</sup> The performing arts industry, like countless other industries around the world, has indeed been paralysed in this way, spun off its axis by a global pandemic. If, as countless politicians assert, we are 'all in this together', then perhaps a push for strong, passionate voices – indeed, polemical 'didacticism-enablers' – to engage with 'big ideas' globally will facilitate connections both on and off the stage. Theatre-makers need to open up difficult and contentious conversations and wrestle with pressing issues that affect the entire planet. For Australia, this means breaking free from parochial orthodoxy and transcending national concerns, sharing our perspective with the broader international community.

ROGER: If you want to be real, you must start by opening those sleepy eyes of yours. Take a look at the wider world. (I, ix)

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