

THE UNEXPECTED FEMINIST

BY VAN BADHAM

A response to:
The Removalists
by David Williamson



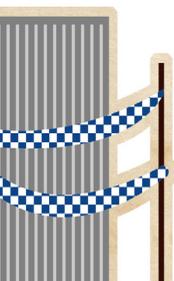
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Author's Biography



VAN BADHAM is an internationally acclaimed, award-winning playwright, critic, novelist and screenwriter. Her plays have been performed across Australia, the UK, the USA, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia and Iceland. She was the first Australian selected for New York's Summer Play Festival and a two-year residency at London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. She won the Harold Hobson Award for Drama Criticism in the UK and received a Premier's Award in Queensland for her much-lauded play *Black Hands / Dead Section*. Van also trained in writing for television on the BBC serial *Holby City*, has written and performed for music theatre and cabaret, and has had an extensive career in radio. Her radio plays have been broadcast by the BBC and she co-hosted the monthly *Speaks Volumes Classic Book Club* on ABC666 Canberra.

When Van lived in London she worked as the Literary Manager of the city's renowned Finborough Theatre. Before returning to Australia Van's most recent novel was published—*Burnt Snow: the Book of the Witch*. Upon arriving in Melbourne in 2011, Van began working as the Literary Manager at Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre. During her time there Currency Press published her critically acclaimed play, *The Bull, the Moon and the Coronet of Stars*.

In 2014, Van won the NSW Premier's Literary Award for her play, *Muff*. She is currently a columnist at *The Guardian*.

THE UNEXPECTED FEMINIST

‘David Williamson’s anxieties about feminism have been for a long time manifest in his plays... Williamson occupies a curious position among our public intellectuals in being, unwittingly, the most finished example we have of a post-feminist anti-feminist.’¹

So wrote Frances Devlin-Glass in a 1998 essay for *Australasian Drama Studies* on the subject of ‘Australia’s most successful and popular playwright’,² David Williamson. The immediate subject of her essay was Williamson’s 1995 play, *Dead White Males*. It’s a Williamson comedy specifically concerned with the rejection of canonical Shakespeareanism by feminists in a university department; its story follows that of male academics and students heroically resisting the incursion.

In her essay, Devlin-Glass is unsparing in her criticism of what she sees as a recurring theme in Williamson ‘to make a conservative comedy of manners out of the phenomenon of the feminist woman’.³ She dates the emergence of Williamson’s gendered preoccupation to his 1993 play, *Brilliant Lies*, about a scheming woman who pursues a sexual harassment suit. To this writer, however, the playwright’s preoccupation with feminism as a problematising theme arguably appears far earlier. Certainly, Williamson himself admits that his 1981 play *The Perfectionist* explores thematics of feminism;⁴ the action of that play concerns a bourgeois marriage that crumbles when a wife making ‘feminist assertions’ swaps household gender roles with her husband⁵ and subsequently pursues her sexual desire for another man.⁶ Even earlier, feminist characters appear as sexually combative opportunists in Williamson’s script of the 1974 movie *Petersen* in which the young feminists of an undergraduate tutorial group bully the eponymous anti-hero into performing a political public sex act.⁷

It’s perhaps because feminism can be identified as an evolving subject of consideration in the Williamson opus that the academic attention to analysis of *Dead White Males* in particular has effectively

cemented Williamson's contemporary reputation as Devlin-Glass' 'post-feminist anti-feminist'. It's a belief shared by both ideological sides of the critical divide. From the right, anti-feminist conservative commentator Keith Windschuttle provided a companion essay to the publication of *Dead White Males*, expanded from a piece he published in the *Australian*. 'When (Windschuttle) deals... with the play's anti-feminist agendas, the tone is palpably triumphalist',⁸ writes Devlin-Glass, quoting the commentator thus:

'The funniest scene of the play comes from its assault on the pretensions of academic feminism... Williamson presents one female student attempting to pass her literary theory course through a hilarious Cixious [sic] inspired attempt to subvert the dominant phallogentric discourse. For my money this is Williamson's most powerful play yet and also his most courageous'.⁹

Similarly, the right-wing Samuel Griffiths Society hailed the apparent politics of the play, with Peter Coleman lauding Williamson as a 'brilliant and witty playwright [who] comes down firmly on the side of liberal humanism to the rage of the arts pages'.¹⁰

From the left, the Chaser team declared of Williamson's 1996 play, *Heretic*: 'the play mounts a veiled and ultimately unsuccessful attack on feminism, and the sexual revolution generally'.¹¹ Brian Musgrove quotes Williamson's own introduction to Currency's edition of *Dead White Males* in a 2006 article for the left-wing journal *Overland* to conclude Williamson's 'core beliefs' bear the 'scent of social conservatism'; the basis for this conclusion is the playwright describing his play as 'satire aimed at the political correctness enforced on society by the "holy" ideologies of post-structuralism, radical feminism and multiculturalism'.¹² Established through his own subject preoccupations, quoted statements and public commentary, Williamson's anti-feminist reputation endures: Graeme Blundell voiced a popular, if generalised, opinion in the *Australian* in 2011 regarding Bruce Beresford's 1970s film adaptation of Williamson's *Don's Party*—that 'academic critics detest it as the antithesis to

feminist values'.¹³

It is precisely because the contemporary critical discourse of Williamson has coalesced around perceptions of anti-feminism that revisiting his 1971 play, *The Removalists*, is such an academic treat. As the script that launched Williamson's international career when he became the first Australian to win London theatre's prestigious George Devine Award for Most Promising Playwright, *The Removalists* is venerated as an Australian classic, an inevitable citation in any contemporary consideration of Australian drama, and apparently inextricable from a popular discourse of its own. Its story of two police officers, an older and a younger, who sexually pursue a battered woman and her sister and, when they are frustrated, beat a man to death, is most frequently considered within the context of a discussion of abuse of power and the violence that implicitly lurks within the establishment of authority. Described by critic Leonard Radic, *The Removalists* is 'a practical lesson in authoritarianism... it shows what happens when those in positions of power and trust let their feelings and their aggressions get the better of them'.¹⁴ The source of the discursive preoccupation with authoritarianism is the playwright himself, who is referenced by Fitzpatrick in the summation: 'The action deals with police brutality that gets out of hand, but Williamson has justly claimed that his play is concerned with authoritarian behaviour on a wider scale'.¹⁵ These assertions are echoed by Carroll, although that author extrapolates: 'Though the playwright himself sees the play as about authoritarianism and the process whereby individuals are drawn into it... the term "authority" implies a societal sanction whereas *The Removalists* moves beyond that arena and charts a primitive drive of assertive individualism that tolerates no competition'.¹⁶

It is in this arena 'beyond' that's suggested by Carroll where this writer believes a most unexpected thematic of a Williamson play to exist. Analysis of *The Removalists* reveals its 'primitive drive of assertive individualism', its 'authoritarian' concerns and its 'practical' demonstration of abused power are all blatantly gendered. According to established paradigms of feminist theatre study, *The Removalists*

may be the work of an author described as a ‘post-feminist anti-feminist’, yet it is—in both form and content—a feminist play.

While I recommend further and extensive reading of feminist theatre criticism to furnish detailed understanding of the theory, the basic precepts required to identify a theatre work as explicitly feminist in ideology are thus. Annette Kuhn describes feminism at foundation level as ‘a set of political practices founded in analyses of the social/historical position of women as subordinated, oppressed or exploited either within the dominant modes of production... and/or by the social relations of patriarchy or male domination’.¹⁷ Susan Hayward explains the practical application of this understanding to literary criticism is to analyse how ‘narrative codes and conventions sustain patriarchal ideology in its conditioning and control of women’.¹⁸ Teresa de Lauretis stresses the reminder that women depicted on stage are not, of course, real people. They are ‘fictional constructs’ and through being so represent cultural assumptions and attitudes of what is ‘female’.¹⁹ For this reason, writes Sue-Ellen Case, feminist criticism engages ‘deconstructive strategies that aid in exposing the patriarchal encodings in the dominant system of representation’.²⁰ An example of this is Laura Mulvey’s explorations of ‘the way in which sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive and erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stamping ground, the family’.²¹ It’s through applying these considerations to *The Removalists* that its powerful pro-feminist values may be determined.

The play begins in a quiet Melbourne police station where a young constable, Ross, newly graduated from a police academy, is commencing his first posting. His sole colleague here is his supervisor, Sergeant Simmonds, ‘fat and fiftyish’ and not only older than Ross but ‘old school’ in outlook and practice.²² ‘Stuff the rule book up your arse’, Simmonds instructs the 20-year-old junior, as, over the course of the morning, he unpicks the principles of Ross’ police training.²³ He employs temptations to corruption (‘There’s a good life here for you in the force if you learn how to organise yourself’²⁴), belittling (‘Did you swallow the brochures they gave you, Ross?’²⁵), personal insults (‘Listen, bonebrain’²⁶) and

bullying ('There's one person in authority here and that's me'²⁷). Simmonds' triumph over Ross' resistance occurs when persistent and unpredictable needling coerces the young constable to admit his father is a coffin-maker; the exposure of Ross' private shame allows Simmonds to supplant himself as a fatherly authority over his weakened junior partner. What Williamson demonstrates in these opening dialogues are the 'social relations of patriarchy and male domination' described by Annette Kuhn. Dennis Carroll's analysis of *The Removalists* affirms such a view when he locates the 'social rituals in which one person uses his social role and the authority it embodies to dominate or intimidate others' as particular to a performance of masculinity often seen in Australian plays. Writes Carroll, 'social interactions between men are usually social rituals of accommodation, "trade-offs" in which a basic, reassuring mateship syndrome is reaffirmed'.²⁸

A new patriarchal order in the police station is established when Ross affirms his mateship with Ross by 'trading off' his filial loyalty towards his own father, and it's at this very point that two female characters enter the scene. They are middle-class sisters, Kate and Fiona. Kate is the bourgeois wife of a wealthy dentist who pursues extra-marital sexual adventures. Fiona is married to a working-class loser called Kenny, with whom she has a child; Kenny beats Fiona, and Kate has accompanied her to the police station to formally report the battery before Fiona clears her furniture out of her flatshare with Kenny and leaves him. Although the situation from the outset acknowledges the family as 'the private stamping ground' of male violence identified by Laura Mulvey, concurrent dramatic events actively dramatise a central tenet of feminist performance theory: the 'male gaze'.

The 'male gaze' is a concept attributed to feminist film theorist E. Ann Kaplan, who asserts that 'representations of women are perceived as they are seen by men'.²⁹ Sue-Ellen Case explains the concept as the way a play induces its audience to view a female character as its male protagonist does; for example, if the male protagonist perceives her as an object of desire, the audience will,

irrespective of their gender, identify with his role as the dramatic subject and perceive the woman as an object, too.³⁰ What occurs in *The Removalists* is startling for the way it confounds this culturally-normalised expectation of identification. Although Kate and Fiona's appearance is subjected to both 'scrutiny' and 'study' by Simmonds from the outset,³¹ the refusal of the women to simply acquiesce to Simmonds' authority—despite all the vestiture of his apparent station—undermines his claim on dramatic protagonism and redirects the subject of the dramatic action to the decisions of the women themselves. When asked if an offence has been committed 'against property or person', for example, Kate humanises the subject as 'my sister'.³² Rather than merely accept Ross as their caseworker, Kate adamantly attests her status, claiming 'I would prefer to deal with the person in charge'.³³ If 'narrative codes and conventions sustain patriarchal ideology in its conditioning and control of women', the resistance of Williamson's female characters to relinquish their agency or status in the face of Simmonds' demonstrated patriarchal values amounts to a bold rejection of those values by the play. Even when Simmonds manages to 'wedge' the sisters' apparent solidarity, playing Kate's vanity against Fiona's vulnerability to inveigle Fiona into a reluctant striptease to 'see her bruises',³⁴ the sisterly division bears an implicit recognition that—demonstrably capable of caprice and betrayal—these characters are differentiated subjects in themselves rather than perfunctory, homogenised female objects of a male drama. Similarly, what appears to Simmonds himself as a 'trade-off'—his and Ross' assistance with the furniture removal for sexual favours from the sisters—accords to a patriarchal strategy to exploit and oppress the women at the same time as entirely sexualising their identity.

As the action relocates to Fiona and Kenny's flat in act two, Williamson's sisters further diverge from the expectations of the traditional narrative code that rigidly informs Simmonds own thinking. Not only has Fiona eschewed her husband's attempts to browbeat her into supplication of either 'quick coital refreshment or a quick steak dinner',³⁵ but as Simmonds and Ross appear at the flat believing a sexual trade has been concluded, the action reveals

the sisters have instead skilfully negotiated opportunities to seize at freedom. The moment the need for the removals are met, the sisters abscond from the scene of sexual transaction before it can take place. For a playwright explicitly celebrated elsewhere for his theatrical condemnation of Helene Cixous, the sisters share the symbolic power of Cixous' own play, *Portrait of Dora*, in which the female protagonist rejects the coercions of all male characters and strides off stage independent of their impositions.³⁶

With all three male characters denied what the narratives of patriarchal culture that 'have been spoon fed them by society and swallowed whole' have long informed them is their sexual entitlement to women,³⁷ their humiliated masculinities are further compromised by their situation, and by one another. Their (in Kenny's case, literal) entrapment within the domestic sphere of the flat relegates them to what's culturally understood as a feminised space, and the 'removal' of the patriarchal apparatus of their authority explodes in Mulveyan violence. Explains Dennis Carroll: 'After the women leave, Ross in turn becomes uncontrollably violent when Kenny criticises his uniform, the basis not only of his "authority" but now the only basis for his sense of self'.³⁸ The play degenerates rapidly into brutal violence as 'Kenny, the husband, becomes so provocative in his taunts that the recruit eventually loses all control and pounds him senseless in the kitchen offstage. The police are about to panic, but then all appears well as Kenny emerges conscious. A deal is struck: Kenny will have free call-girls, at their place, in exchange for silence'.³⁹ The inadequacy of sexual transaction as a means of restabilising patriarchal authority is now exposed with great symbolic potency: even before the call-girls can be summoned, Kenny is dead and the hysterical police are left clobbering one another in bereft frustration.

In the context of the established discourse of Williamson as an anti-feminist, positive feminist interpretation of his work perhaps inevitably invites questions of legitimacy. Is it indeed possible for a 'post-feminist anti-feminist' to write a feminist play? Of course it is. Sue-Ellen Case writes: 'The importance of the author's intent

gives way to the conditions of production and the composition of the audience in determining the meaning of the theatrical event'.⁴⁰ If theatre, for feminists, is a laboratory that allows representation to be 'liberated from the repressions of the past and capable of signalling a new age for both women and men',⁴¹ experimentation in critical understanding should not be restricted to the plays themselves. Our notion of 'the theatrical event' must extend to the discourses that surround plays, productions, artists and authors.

This is not a project for feminists alone. More than forty years on from its first production, David Williamson's *The Removalists* demonstrates its inherent value as a cultural text for the very reason it remains open to a multitude of theoretical interpretations, far beyond those disclosed—or even disavowed—by its creator.

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Further Reading

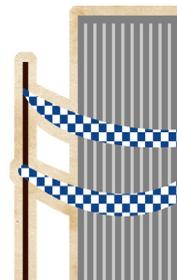
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