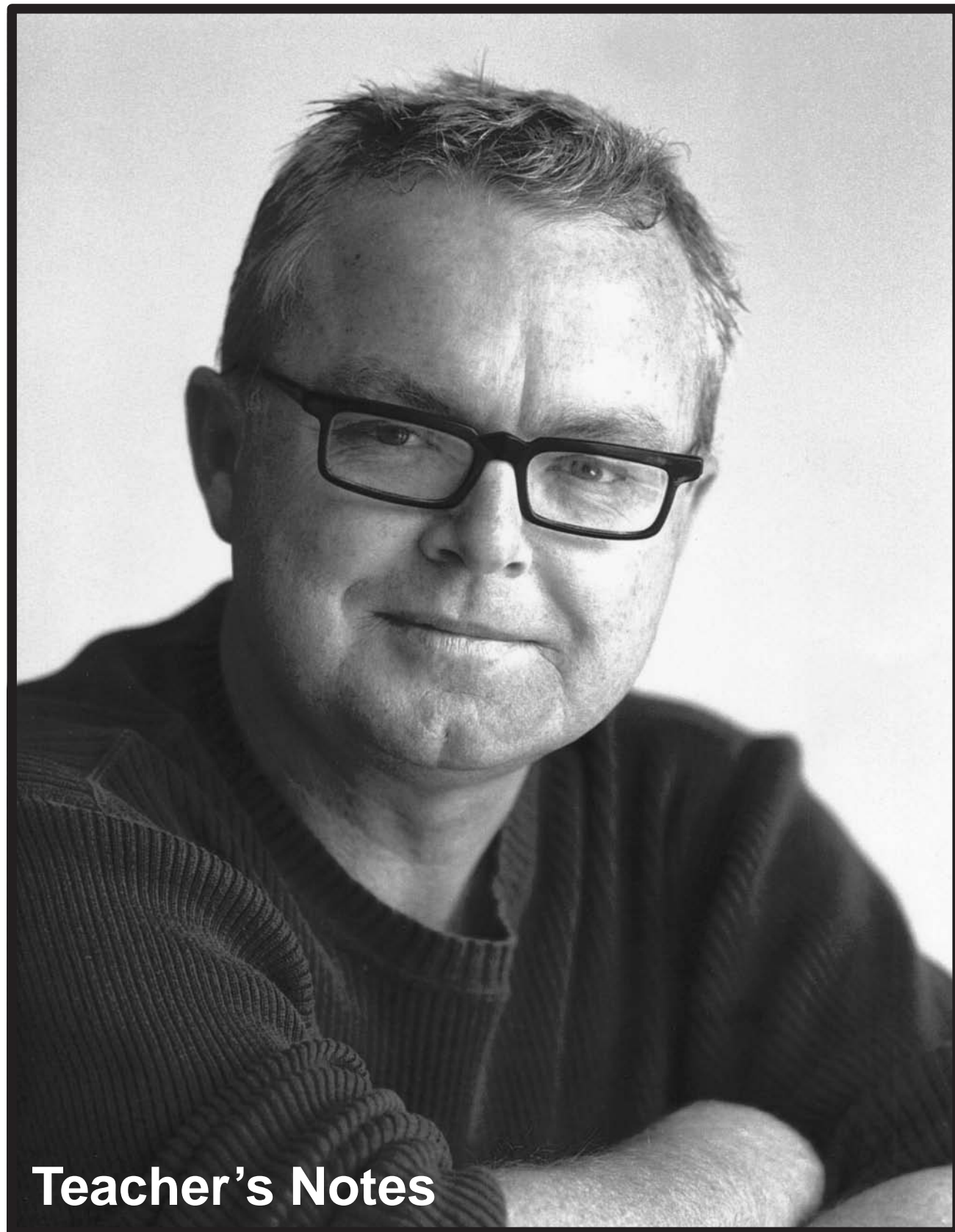


What I Wrote  
Andrew Bovell



**Teacher's Notes**

# Introduction

This study guide for What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell is a DVD on Australian playwright Andrew Bovell. Dr Tess Brady interviews Bovell and provides a critical introduction to *After Dinner* (1998), *Scenes from a Separation* (1995), *Whose Afraid of the Working Class* (1998), The Lantana Series [*Whiskey on the Breath of the One You Love* (1992), *Distant Lights from Dark Places* (1994), *Speaking in Tongues* (1996), *Lantana* (2001)], *Holy Days* (2001), *When the Rain Stops Falling* (2008). The DVD also includes an investigation of Bovell's approach to writing for the stage.

What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell is one title from a series of DVDs spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the writers have to say about their work. Other titles available in the What I Wrote series include:

## Series 1:

- + What I Wrote: Matt Cameron
- + What I Wrote: Louis Nowra
- + What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson
- + What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson

## Series 2:

- + What I Wrote: Debra Oswald
- + What I Wrote: David Williamson
- + What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith



The DVDs are available from Ronin Films, <http://www.roninfilms.com.au>

Further information about the series and film trailers can be found at: <http://www.whatiwrote.com.au> or on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/pinkcat1>

The play scripts are available from Currency Press, <http://www.currency.com.au/>

## About the Filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady *Presenter*

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady *Director*

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary maker. She has made works for a variety of media. This includes radio features for the ABC, educational videos, online

interactive websites and advertising. She is currently working on Series 3 of What I Wrote, which includes an interview with Ray Lawler. You can find out more about her by visiting <http://www.snodger.com.au/catherine/>





## About Andrew Bovell

Andrew Bovell grew up in rural Western Australia. He studied theatre at the Victorian Collage of the Arts and lived and worked in Melbourne collaborating with other writers including the playwright Hannie Rayson. He currently lives on a rural property in an olive and wine growing district of South Australia.

His film credits include *Lantana*, which received over 10 awards including Best Screenplay at the 2003 London Critics' Circle Film Awards. He has also co-written two films with Ana Kokkinos, *Head On* and *The Book of Revelation*, and with Baz Luhrmann on the original screenplay of *Strictly Ballroom*.

His play, *When the Rain Stops Falling* was first performed at the 2008 Adelaide Festival of Arts where it was a highlight of the festival. The play has won both the Victorian and the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards in 2008.

More about Andrew Bovell's publications can be found at his publisher's site: <http://www.currency.com.au/search.aspx?type=author&author=Andrew+Bovell>

## The Writer's Context

Andrew Bovell writes plays for his times. Brady points out that he combines three aspects of knowledge, intuitive (what he feels and senses), cognitive (what he knows through books and learning) and a great knowledge of patterns. He weaves these three together to write thoughtful plays which deal with ideas, generate compassion in the audience and explore the various patterns of existence.

### Discussion

- As you view *Adjusting Patterns – The Plays of Andrew Bovell*, compile a list of statements that describe Bovell's fascination with ideas.
- On the DVD Bovell says, "Pattern and shape is a way to contain my ideas or thinking." Using the work you are studying, create a diagram to show the patterns Bovell employs. Do they move or change over the course of the work?
- Bovell talks about his debt to the film maker, Robert Altman in developing his style of drama. Investigate Altman's films and discuss in class what might be meant by the term *multi-narrative drama*.
- Were you surprised to learn that Bovell did not see or read a play until he was 19? If it is not from reading and going to plays when young, how else might a playwright develop their ideas? Discuss in class.
- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shape Bovell's work as a playwright/scriptwriter. Discuss your findings with others in the class.



## Critical Perspectives

- Search through the newspapers for the theatre review pages. Make a copy of three or more reviews. List the kinds of things the reviewer commented upon - plot, acting, direction, etc. Are there differences between the reviews? Is one more informative than another? Is a review of a new play different from a review of a well-known play? What would you like to see in the review but which is missing? Discuss in class.
- Go to a live performance of a play. Now write, in point form, the kind of review you think would be helpful to other students. Discuss what you would include and leave out if you were only allowed three points.
- Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Bovell's writing. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?
- Bovell says sometimes reviews in newspapers are just filling space between ads, and yet as a writer he craves engagement with his work. Discuss in class. What is the role of the theatre critic? Is it more than a reviewer? What are possible outlets for that criticism?

## Views and Values

- Drawing on *What I Wrote: Adjusting Patterns – The Plays of Andrew Bovell* and your knowledge of the play you are studying, make a list of the issues that Bovell has brought to audiences' attention.
- Bovell's plays have the power to generate in the audience a compassion for others? Do you agree? Discuss in class using examples from his work.
- Working in groups, and using resources available, construct a powerpoint presentation on the key elements of the Australian History Wars. Share this with the class.
- Discuss Bovell's concept of *melancholy* and the part it plays in the shaping of new ways of thinking? Could this be a key element in the history of ideas?
- All plays are about change; Bovell is interested in emotional, intellectual and political change. Drawing on the play that you are studying, create an annotated visual display that explores Bovell's portrayal of change.



# Analytical Responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- “I’m interested in eliciting an audience’s compassion and I also want to tell a good story... a mystery. *Who did it* is a dramatic question that allows me to take the audience into a more difficult emotional or political terrain.” Bovell. Discuss.
- Bovell’s work is part theatre, part music, and part architecture. (Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards, 2008) Discuss.
- “In our household we talk about something being a *Lantana moment*. It’s that instant when you suddenly recognise the unexpected and hitherto hidden connections between seemingly unconnected events or people. It’s a more accurate measure of life’s coincidences than “six degrees of separation.” Simmonds, *Stage Noise* (2008) Discuss.

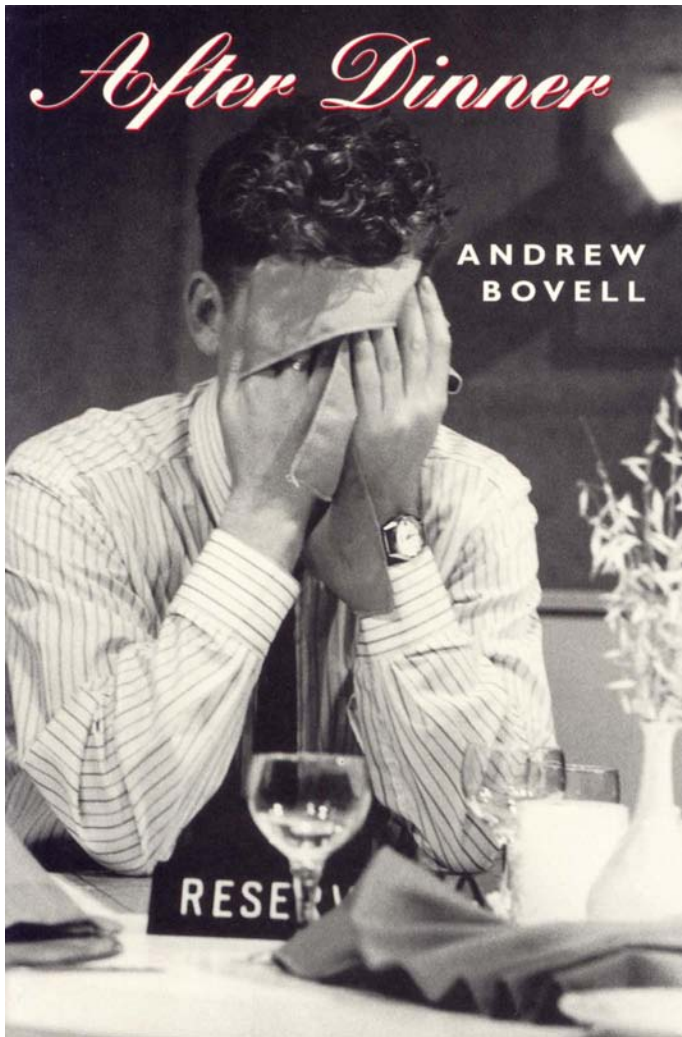
# The Writing Process

- ‘What I don’t want to do is write a play that illustrates an idea.’ Bovell. What for Bovell are the three key elements of his writing process?
- Characters for Bovell often begin with an image. What does he then give to the characters to draw us in and sympathise with them? Apply this to a character of your own that you are working on. Share your findings with the class.
- What does Bovell mean when he says he tries to find the musicality of the play?
- Where you surprised to learn that Bovell would like to re-draft his award winning play *When the Rain Stops Falling*? What are the various merits of writing a play for a commissioned performance with a set opening night as compared to one which you sell after it has been written?
- Do you agree that Bovell is an intuitive writer?

# From Script to Stage

- Create and present a short solo performance from one of Bovell’s plays. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.
- Are you surprised to learn how hard it is for Bovell to leave the works alone and not keep re-writing them long after they have been performed? Form teams and debate: *A play is never finished*.
- “The writer and the director are the collaborative relationship that give birth to a play.” Bovell. Discuss.
- Explore the relationship between the audience, the actors and the play. Is it a static or fluid relationship? On what does it depend?





## After Dinner

This is Bovell's first major play success.

Three women meet after work on a Friday night at a bistro-pub. Dympie is a control freak and frumpy; Paula is more risqué but dreamy; Monika's husband has recently died and she is on her first singles outing.

They are joined by Gordon, a conservative man who has recently been divorced and Stephen, who wants to

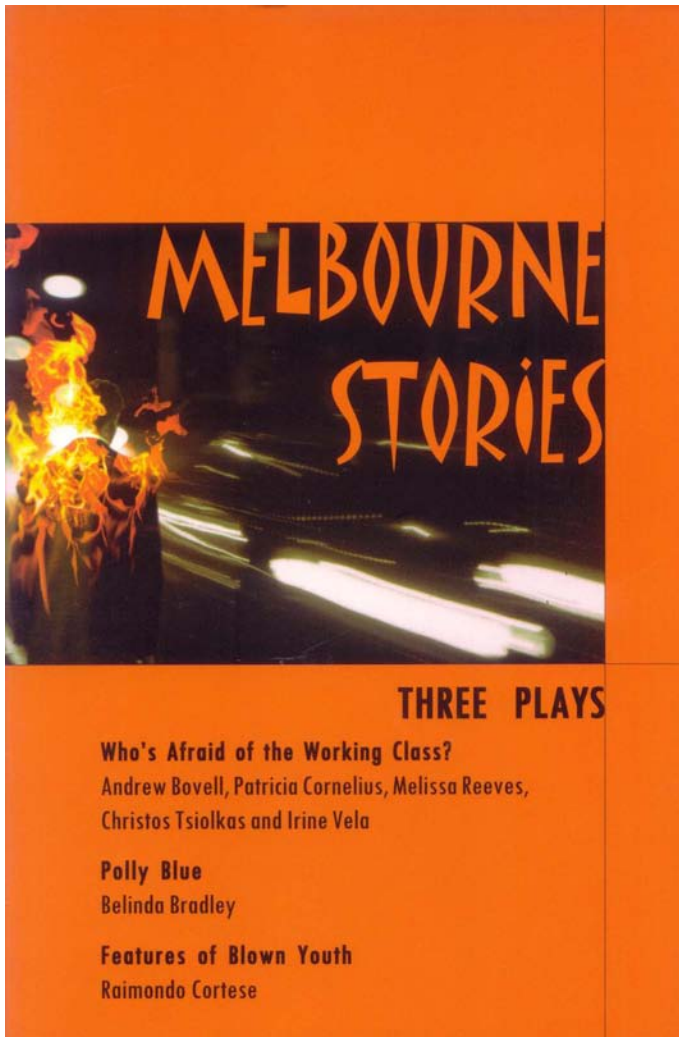
find a long term relationship but only ever ends up with one-night-stands.

The characters drive this play. There is humour and compassion as we work through the evening with these essentially lonely and unhappy people. It works because we know these types of people, we recognise the characteristics.

### Discussion

- Watch the interview on *After Dinner* (DVD2). Do you agree that Bovell has stripped the layers away from these characters?
- In class, do a rehearsed reading of a scene from the play. Explain why you selected that scene and how it relates to the play as a whole.
- Humour is a device which takes us on a journey so that we might in the end feel compassion for human frailty. Form teams and debate this in regard to Bovell's play.
- Using the web and the library as resources, give a brief outline of what you think Bovell means when he said the play was originally Existential but he changed it after he found the comic in himself and made it into a black comedy. Share your findings with the class.
- Did *After Dinner* give you the ending you expected? Take one of the characters and write a short monologue as the character dresses to go out the following weekend. Don't be afraid of humour.





## Discussion

- Watch the DVD interview about *Whose Afraid of the Working Class?* (DVD2). Were you surprised to hear how the play was written and how much control the writers had to give up? Working in a group of five, each write a short scene on the same general topic, then combine them together to form a short play. Discuss this process with the class. What worked, what was frustrating?
- Take one of Bovell's collaborators Patricia Cornelius, Julian Meyrick, Melissa Reeves, or Christos Tsiolkas and research their writing. Share your findings with the class.
- "It's a play about people who were left behind by economic rationalism" Bovell. Research Economic Rationalism and share your findings with the class. Do you think history will view this policy as a necessary evil, a great economic policy, or a disaster?
- What did Bovell bring from his film writing to this play? Discuss.
- Using a storyboard unpick the various threads of the play and show how different writer's works were combined to create a unified whole.
- Give a rehearsed reading of a scene from the play. Explain why you selected that scene.

# Whose Afraid of the Working Class

One of Bovell's collaborative works, it was co-written with Patricia Cornelius, Julian Meyrick, Melissa Reeves, Christos Tsiolkas with music by Irine Vela. In this play the collaborative method knits the various pieces seamlessly so that it is virtually impossible to tell who wrote which part.

Who is afraid of the working classes? No one! What come through in the play is how resource-poor these people are. Not only is there no money, but there are no plans and no way forward. They are people without a dream. They have had to struggle so much, just to get on in life, that they have become a-political.

It's all there: rent boys, child abuse, anger, robbery and deception. It is a very bleak view of people who have suffered deprivation for so long that they now consider it to be the way of life. Politics has become a middle class concern.



## SCENES FROM A SEPARATION



ANDREW BOVELL & HANNIE RAYSON

## Scenes from a Separation

This play is a collaborative work with Hannie Rayson where each playwright wrote an act. In the play Matthew and Nina's marriage is coming to an end. Rayson wrote the story from Nina's point of view and Bovell from Matthew's.

Bovell gives Matthew a great sense of loss as he comes

to realise his marriage is over. The loss comes not from the big decisions - who get the house etc - but from the minute detail and it is this detail which pulls at us emotionally. There are many sections which illustrate this including his plea, "Nina. I miss the mess of being married to you." (p17)

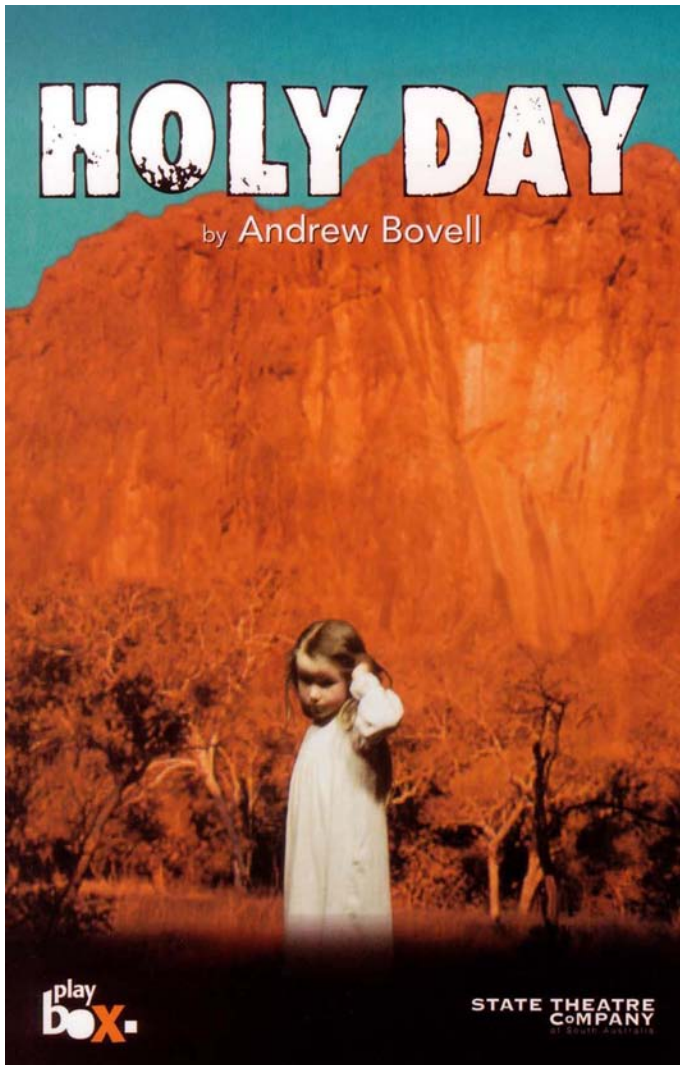
This play is also helpful when discussing voice - we have two main Australian playwrights treating the same subject. Look at the different rhythms, the different choice of words and the different pace they use. This illustrates the different style and voice of the two playwrights.

### Discussion

- Watch the video clip on *Scenes from a Separation* (DVD2). Both Bovell and Rayson speak of their collaboration. In this collaboration why do you think they both wanted to own their separate sections of the play? What did they learn from each other?
- Using powerpoint, take a short speech from Act 1 and show how Bovell uses sonic devices such as alliteration and assonance. Does it aid or hinder the rhythm of the language and the meaning of the passage?
- Bovell and Rayson both thought that the Matthew character was an attractive flawed human but audiences disagreed. What is your opinion of Matthew? Argue your position by reference to both acts of the play.
- Working in pairs, take different sides of a relationship and write a short scene of a meeting in a café. Write from your character's point of view. Compare the scenes and discuss what you found most challenging about this writing process.







## Holy Day

The play is set in an outback traveller's inn run by Nora and her adopted Aboriginal girl, Obedience. Three travellers arrive: Goudry, a vicious man; Cornelius, a boy who's been raped by Goudry and had his tongue cut out; and Epstein, a foreigner and travelling companion.

The other characters are Wakefield who owns a near-by station and represents the authority and the law, and Elizabeth, who is the wife of a missionary. Lastly, there is an Aboriginal woman, Linda, who is blamed for stealing Elizabeth's baby.

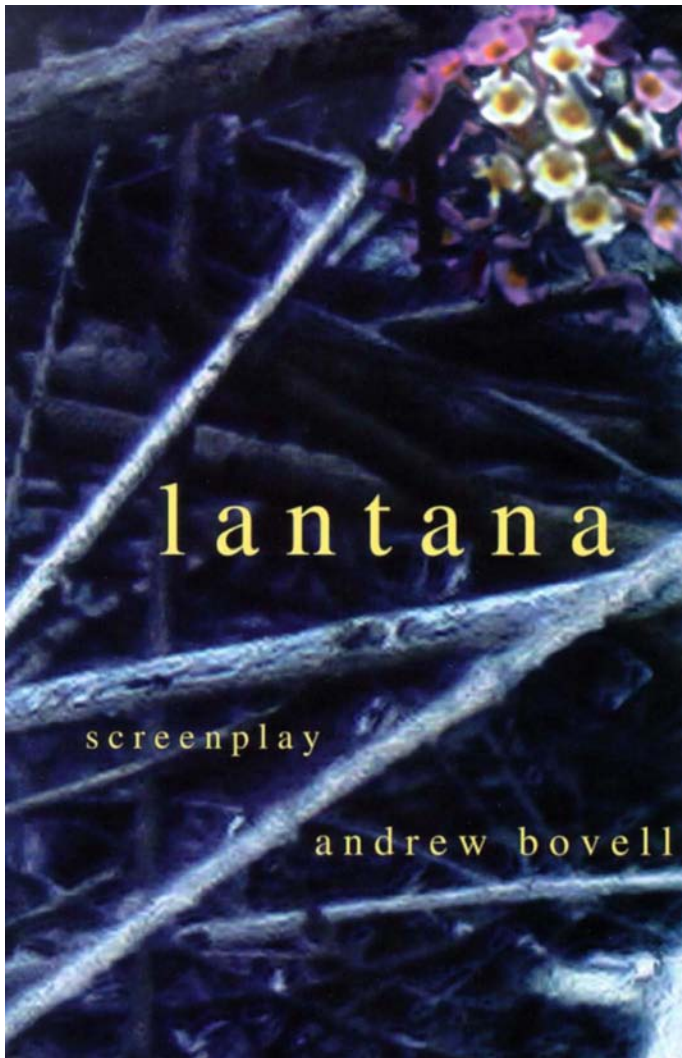
Fuelled by the violent Goudry a massacre occurs. Epstein tries to stop it and warn the Aboriginal people but he is shot trying to do so. Obedience leaves to find her Aboriginal past but is waylaid on the road by Goudry who rapes her and cuts out her tongue. Damaged and silenced she re-joins Nora.

All the way through the play the thunder rolls. The characters are complex and the drama occurs, not so much from the development of the plot, as from the clash between the characters.

### Discussion

- Watch the video interview on *Holy Day* (DVD2) and research the Lindy Chamberlain story. What does Bovell mean when he says that at the time it was in the process of being mythologised? Discuss in class.
- Elizabeth shows no remorse. As an audience we ask, did Elizabeth kill her own child? Suggest a solution as to what did happen at the mission. What dramatic effect does it have keeping the explanation from the audience?
- Take one character from this play and create a character profile which might be helpful to an actor. Include ideas for costume.
- In the interview Bovell discusses how he wrote *Holy Day* using a five act structure, an unusual form for modern drama. Why did Bovell use this structure and how does it help the play?
- The lost white child has been a recurring theme in art and writing in Australia. Research this in the library and on the web. Share your findings with the class. How has the lost black child been treated in art and writing?
- Form teams and debate: *The stolen children policy created more problems than it ever solved.* You might like to refer to the current NT intervention in your debate.
- This play is about the history wars. Using a story board show how Bovell is able to knit the complexities of the history wars into an entertainment full of tension and interest. Discuss your findings in class.





It is in these plays that we see Bovell develop his signature sense of pattern.

## Discussion

- On the DVD Brady suggests, and Bovell welcomes the idea, that it is helpful to view this set of plays and film script as a series, in the sense that a visual artist sometimes works in a series. Research the idea of series in the visual arts and discuss how the essence of the idea can be applied to writing. Try to use examples other than Bovell.
- In the introduction to *Lantana* Bovell writes of the series: "... the characters...share the same sense of yearning ... They are all searching for a sense of clarification in their emotional lives. (*Lantana*, Currency Press, 2002, p8) Using powerpoint take one character and trace their development in the series. Do you agree with Bovell?
- In *Speaking in Tongues* and also *Distant Lights from Dark Places* Bovell makes use of intercut monologues to reinforce the disconnected aspect of the character's lives and their sense of loss. This is echoed in the unanswered phone and the series of messages. Using either of these devices write a short scene about miss-communication.
- *Yearning* is an emotion which is not often discussed. Draw an emotion map of yearning - what emotions would you place near it, what far away? Discuss your findings with the class.
- Either design a program or a set for one of the plays. Discuss how your ideas reinforce and develop the play's central themes.
- Take your favourite scene or part of a scene from one of the works and perform it. Explain why you chose that sequence.
- What is the importance of the man in brogues? Trace his story and identity through the series to il-

## The Lantana Series

This is a grouping of stage and radio plays and a film script which work with the same, or similar, sets of characters and issues. They are the stage play, *Whiskey on the Breath of the One You Love* (1992), the radio drama, *Distant Lights from Dark Places* (1994), the stage play, *Speaking in Tongues* (1996), and the film script *Lantana* (2001).

Various themes weave their way through the different scripts - the man in the brogues, the missing shoe, the therapy session, the infidelity, the car in the distance, the phone messages, the empty road, the chance meetings in a bar, the woman screaming, the unwanted letters from an old lover, the troubled relationship between the therapist and her husband, the cough, the missing woman, a great sense of loss.

The pattern and repetition sets up inevitability - the characters, almost in spite of themselves, work their way towards the denouement we fear, but know is going to occur. There is a constant refrain: "And I couldn't get this guy out of my head" which in various forms weaves its way through the plays.





## When the Rain Stops Falling

Four generations move across a landscape as varied as England, Alice Springs, The Coorong and Uluru. The play is set in the past and the future, from 1959 to 2039.

In England the man is a child molester. The wife discovers this and sends him as far away from her child as she can imagine, to Australia. He sends his boy a hand full of postcards - one from Uluru when unimaginably it is snowing, one from The Coorong and so on.

The son heads out for Australia tracing his father via the postcards. He meets a girl in a service station on The Coorong. She falls pregnant to him but he dies in a car accident before the child is born. Before he dies we realise that her brother who was 'taken' was abused and killed by his father. Bovell sets up his patterns, telling the story in a non linear way.

The pregnant girl marries the local farmer and brings up her son. The son ends up in Alice Springs in a run down flat, and broke. His own son comes to visit him.

He wants to make a special meal for his son and a fish falls out of the sky. As he and the son eat the fish meal he hands his son an old suitcase full of mysterious objects which represent their history and past - an old shoe, a piece of driftwood, the postcards, some ashes, an encyclopaedia.

Over this story of who-we-are is a story about the environment and degradation of the planet and the need for a new way of thinking.

As the play ends we are left with a profound sense of the pattern of life. At the conclusion we weep with the tragedy of it all, the inevitability which generates loss.

### Discussion

- In the interview Bovell talks about the *year without a summer* and the birth of our most fantastic fictional monsters, Frankenstein and Dracula. Using the web find out more about this story. Share your findings with the class.
- All of the characters in *When the Rain Stops Falling* have lives away from the play. Take one character and write a scene depicting part of that life.
- Bovell collaborated with the sculptor Hossein Valamanesh on the sets and design of the play. Research Valamanesh's work and drawing upon it and the play, design the program. In discussion show how your design reflects Bovell's and Valamanesh's ideas.
- If we are moving away from a human-centred way of thinking, the Enlightenment, what might the new criteria's be in a new way of thinking? Support your argument with reference to the kinds of changes you see in the news and elsewhere.
- The play begins with a fish falling out of the sky? Discuss this as a theatrical device and as a metaphor.
- Discuss the device of giving the same or similar lines to different characters throughout the play. What emotional effect does this have on the audience? Argue your position.
- A common response from audiences at the end of this play are tears. What is the audience weeping for?



# Candid Interviews with Australian Writers on DVD

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