

A richer tapestry of many identities*

What it means to be Australian is harder to define than ever in these complex, shifting times

I'VE BEEN LOOKING INTO WHAT IT MEANS to be an Australian all my life. As one of a group of young playwrights who came to prominence in the early 1970s, our group mission, in so far as we articulated it, was to investigate the "Australian identity".

In an interview I gave in London in 1973, I was quoted as saying: "There is an awful Australian uniqueness, and for the first time the Australian theatre is getting down to the business of finding out what it is." A bit of an overstatement, perhaps, but we did see ourselves as exploring the darker side of Australian life, albeit in a satirical way. Australia's chauvinism, materialism, conservatism and suburban conformity were put under the microscope, but even as I was savaging such tendencies in my plays, I found my country endearing as well as horrific. In those days there was a sense that the whole population shared common characteristics — our black, sardonic humour, our energy, our directness and our hatred of pretentiousness — that could be thought of as typically Australian.

Then, at a literary dinner at the start of the 1980s, the articulate, scathingly witty, but sternly moral journalist, David Marr, scolded us all for our preoccupation with "Australian identity". He said there was no such thing. What we had been calling the "Australian identity" was nothing more than the Anglo-Celtic identity and a male, middle-class, heterosexual version of it, to boot. We were, in fact, a country of many identities: Aboriginal, gay, ethnic, feminist, working class, rural and dozens of others. There was no overall "Australian-ness", and to claim we were trying to find it was naïveté at best, and arrogance at worst.

I slunk away and tried to find reasons to include feminist lesbian Greeks and rural Aboriginals in my plays, but quickly decided that it was probably better that they wrote their own plays, which they promptly did, and Australian theatre has been all the richer for it. The lesson I learned is that when one tries to make sense of a topic like "what it means to be Australian", one has to tread warily. If you're one of the 700 000 Australian children being raised in poverty, you're obviously going to have a very different view of what it means to be Australian than if you're a futures trader making \$500 000 plus at the age of 26.

If I were writing about this issue at the start of the 1960s, I could truthfully say that being an Australian meant living in the country with the smallest gap between rich and poor in the world. In 2003, we have one of the largest income disparities of all the industrialised nations. Although the top 30% of income earners in Australia are much better off, in absolute terms, than they were 40 years ago, surveys show they are no happier, and this baffles the science of econom-

ics. Writers and artists have been suggesting for thousands of years that happiness is never simply a question of consumption. It also has a lot to do with feeling loved, fulfilled and creative. Some part of human happiness may be bound up with wealth, but the more enlightened economists are now discovering that it's relative rather than absolute wealth that counts.

Humans as a species are very sensitive to their relative status in a community. We don't just want to be loved, but also respected and noticed. So part of what it means to be an Australian these days is working longer hours, experiencing more stress and suffering increasing rates of depression in order to purchase the symbols of success which will make one feel respected. Forty years ago, a 120 m² house was considered quite acceptable for a family. Now it has to be double that size before one feels adequate.

The single most important measure in the political governance of most countries remains the rate of growth of gross national product (GNP), implicitly maintaining the fiction that increased consumption equals increased happiness; this despite the fact that galloping GNPs also mean a galloping increase in resource consumption and a galloping rate of increase in pollution and environmental degradation.

What it means to be an Australian varies widely. Being a rural Australian last year meant experiencing the worst drought on record, living with more uncertainty and hardship than city Australians, thanks to El Niño. Being an Australian in many areas meant facing major bushfires. If you're a Muslim Australian, it means being under suspicion; if you're a female executive, it means not being as well paid as your male counterpart. If you're second-generation Greek Australian, it means being able to send up your Greek-ness and love it at the same time. If you're a young Australian, it means working harder and longer and having a more uncertain future than your parents had; and if you're an Australian over 60 and in good health, it apparently means that you're happier (as a group) than anyone else.

So was the magisterial David Marr right after all? Is the "Australian identity" a fantasy? When I find myself laughing at the truly appalling Kath and Kim, I can't help feeling that, for all our preening and pretensions on the world stage, there's still a bit of that awful Australian uniqueness around. And any country that can laugh at its own awfulness can't be all that bad.

One of the really good things about this country is that we remain, by and large, the world's most successful experiment in multiculturalism. With our Muslims and Aboriginals, we have a long way to go, but there is more intermarriage between ethnic minorities and Anglo-Celts here than in any other comparable country, indicating that the long-lived racial ghettos of America are not going to happen here.

I don't think it's a matter of the Anglo-Celts absorbing and dominating minority groups, but a genuine interaction in which the social centre of gravity will shift to a new and

* An edited extract of David Williamson's John Batman Australia Day Oration, delivered in Melbourne on Friday 24 January, 2003, and published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 January, 2003 in the News and Features section on page 19.

original position. The personal perspectives by doctors from migrant backgrounds, Yu (*page 598*), Houssami (*page 595*) and Santoro (*page 600*), reflect these changing dynamics. If the world manages to avoid travelling down its present road to long-term disaster, we might well have one of the most interesting countries in the world here, in time.

I'm alarmed at the way the world is heading — greed and envy pushing us towards what could be an eventual terrible

reckoning. And I'm alarmed that we're such an enthusiastic little helper in the whole process. But when I look around the world at the other options, I'm still rather glad I'm here and hold an Australian passport.

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