PLAYING AWKWARD

by NOËLLE JANACZEWSKA

A response to:
The Chapel Perilous
by Dorothy Hewett

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THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

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Copyright Details

First published in 2014
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia
enquiries@currency.com.au
www.currency.com.au

ePub ISBN: 9781921429125
mobi ISBN: 9781921429132

Series Editor: Toby Leon
Cover design: Miranda Costa

Publication of this title was assisted by the Copyright Agency Limited's Cultural Fund.

Author's Biography

NOËLLE JANACZEWSKA is a Sydney-based writer of plays, performance texts, lyrics and libretti, monologues, poetry, essays, radio scripts, gallery and on-line explorations.

A graduate of Oxford and London Universities, Noëlle has worked with, and co-established, several theatre companies and contemporary arts groups, presenting work in Britain, Germany and The Netherlands, before moving to Australia. Following two years as Artistic Director of The Performance Space in Sydney, she returned to freelance practice with *The History of Water/Huyền Thoại Một Giòng Nước*, first produced by the Sydney Theatre Company in 1992, and published by Currency Press in 1995.

Noëlle's numerous nominations, grants and prizes include the 2006 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for *Mrs Petrov's Shoe* (Theatre @ Risk, 2006), as well as the Griffin Award and Playbox-Asialink Playwriting Competition for her play *Songket*. She is the recipient of a Centenary Medal for scriptwriting, an Asialink Literature Residency in Korea, and Fellowships from Varuna Writers' Centre, the Theatre and Literature Boards of the Australia Council, and the University of Queensland/Arts Queensland. Noëlle's radio features *There's Something About Eels* and *Let's Go Brazil* won AWGIE Awards in 2009 and 2006, as did her radio dramas *Random Red*, *The Rush Hour Carillon*, *Glissando 24* and *Slowianska Street*.

In 2014, Noëlle was appointed adjunct Professor in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland.

Dorothy Hewett belongs to a long line of women who spoke out of turn.

So does Sally Banner.

Dorothy Hewett blazed a trail for women writers, and for Australian playwrights (of all genders) interested in theatrical innovation.

I like to think that I'm part of that lineage.

But first—

Let me say right up front that *The Chapel Perilous* is an awkward play.

A gloriously awkward play.

An audacious, fantastic, awkward beast of a play.

'It offers almost insuperable difficulties to producer and actors. Almost. They are a challenge. Let them be met. The play deserves it.' Jo Gibson, the *Canberra Times*, 1972.

The jump-about, incantatory style of the Prologue establishes a tone for the play, introducing us to Sally and all her determined energy:

'I seek the Chapel Perilous and by my courage and great heart I will win through.'

It's not long before there's a roll call of famous women—

'Queen Elizabeth, Madame Curie, Florence Nightingale, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë … ' et cetera, et cetera.

In a whisper, Sally adds her name to the list.

While a chorus of schoolgirls sings about 'Poor Sally' and how she never made the big time and bright lights, but remained 'a

minor poet/Until the day she died.'

A celebrity poet is a joke, an oxymoron. Ask someone in the street to name a contemporary Australian poet and they might proffer Les Murray. Going back you would most likely get Banjo Patterson. Going further afield you might get W H Auden or T S Eliot. But how likely is it you'd get a female name? Sylvia Plath … ? Maybe.

Sally Banner might say that all she wants is to be 'a great actress and a great writer', but I'm not convinced that is all she wants. At the very least, her literary desires are bound up with other more earthy desires. She wants to be loved; she wants sex; she wants attention; she wants male attention; she wants men to be dazzled by her beauty, her sensuality, the suppleness and daring of her intellect. She wants them to remember her years later when they see a star move across the night sky.

She wants to be centre-stage in her own life.

She wants to speak her own words.

She wants her voice to be heard—not so easy if you were a girl growing up in small-town Australia in the 1930s. Probably not so easy in small-town anywhere.

Sally's youthful mix of arrogance, naïveté and self-doubt, her longing to escape the confines of home, resonate for those of us who spent our adolescence mired in suburbia or stuck in small towns. Dreaming of the magical big city—London, Paris, New York, even Sydney, anywhere but here—that spoke to fantasies of liberation and a transforming walk on the wild side.

Thinking about writing this essay, thinking about Dorothy Hewett and Sally Banner, got me thinking about the culturally awkward relationship that so often exists between the female voice and the public sphere. (Like her or not, Julia Gillard had to put up with a helluva lot of crap, and don't tell me gender had nothing to do with it.)

Speech-making.

Politics more generally.

Playwriting.

Women often pay a high price for being heard—even trying to be heard.

Sally Banner is condemned by church and school. Judith calls her ‘evil’, her own mother says she’s ‘a dirty little whore’. She takes up with and is abandoned by a string of men, one of whom beats her, has an abortion, attempts suicide, relinquishes a child, and when he expels her from the Communist Party for speaking out, Saul doesn’t pull his punches:

‘I denounce Sally Banner, minstrel of the grubby bedroom, lover of the seamy side of life, pseudo-revolutionary, ideological leader of intellectual delinquents, decadent, bourgeois, revisionist, factionalist—’

There’s a long backstory here …

The über-text for women without tongues to tell would have to be Philomela from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* who is raped by her brother-in-law, and then mutilated by him when she threatens to reveal his crime. Rendered mute, she weaves the name of her assailant into a tapestry and sends it to her sister.

In Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia’s rapists not only rip out her tongue to avoid any come-back, but also hack off her hands to prevent her identifying them the way Philomela did her attackers. It doesn’t work because in Act 4 Lavinia puts a stick in her mouth, and guiding it with her stumps, scratches their names in the sand. But it doesn’t work out for Lavinia either; in the next Act she’s killed by her father because her shame causes *him* so much grief.

Echo, the talkative nymph of Greek mythology, would entertain Zeus’ wife Hera with elaborate tales while her husband entertained himself with the other nymphs. When Hera discovered what was going on she punished Echo by taking away her voice. She could no longer initiate conversation, merely repeat the words of

others.

Moving on from uppity women of ancient times, Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid wants to swap her fishtail for legs. To this end she surrenders her voice to the witch of the sea.

André Brink's harrowing and haunting 2002 novel, *The Other Side of Silence*, explores issues of narrating silence and how to give voice to the voiceless, be they without the power of speech for reasons anatomical, social, or because they've been excised from the historical record. Hanna X, an impoverished orphan is shipped from Bremen to South-West Africa to service the German colonists. A violent assault leaves her disfigured, discarded—and silenced.

Back to *The Chapel Perilous*.

First production, 1971.

'First liberated woman ever seen on an Australian stage', wrote Kristin Williamson in her Introduction to *Dorothy Hewett's Collected Plays, Volume 1*.

'Sally Banner storms her way to a place in the Australian imagination.' Sylvia Lawson, introduction to the first edition, 1972.

The Chapel Perilous is all about Sally. She's the main character, not the hero's wife or mistress. Not the maid or the nurse or the mad woman in the attic. She's the one who holds it all together. The play is Sally's quest for her essential but fugitive self—as an artist and as a human being. Or as she puts it, 'to answer to my blood direct'. From schoolgirl to sixty, she jousts with social expectations and taboos. As valiantly as the noble Lancelot when he confronts the knights guarding the Chapel Perilous in Thomas Malory's tales of King Arthur.

The play reflects the time of its writing.

The hinge of two decades: the 1960s and 70s.

A time of Pink Floyd and purple eye-shadow and feelings, lots of feelings, everyone had lots of feelings and talked about

relationships and the sexual revolution. Men ventured into the kitchen to cook up elaborate curries, but it was still the women who did the washing up and swept the floor.

Yet women were going to university in increasing numbers. I read once that the real beneficiaries of the big expansion of higher education that took place in the 1960s and 70s were middle-class daughters.

It was a time when society as a whole was worried about women and where the second sex was heading ... unmarried mothers, career women, loose women, divorcees, feminists—

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* was published in 1970.

'A pleasure to read despite its erudition', announced *The Australian Women's Weekly*. A few paragraphs earlier, the interviewer tells us that Miss Greer doesn't fit the popular image of a woman with a Cambridge Ph.D. 'Would this formidable lady lecture me with all the earnestness of a dishevelled headmistress?' she wonders. 'Would she urge me to cast off my bra?'

Sally Banner embodies those social uncertainties.

The play embodies a different notion of theatre.

'I think we are obsessive about naturalistic writing.' That's Dorothy Hewett quoted by the *Canberra Times* in 1987. She goes on to discuss the role of theatre managements which have been 'terribly hidebound and unwilling to take risks … But management has to create a taste. Australian audiences will never be ready unless given new things. In a beleaguered profession, which the theatre is, it is difficult to find the courage to do that. But it is sad that we are not more secure and more daring.'

Dorothy Hewett wasn't interested in playing it safe.

The Chapel Perilous has a zigzag, genre-crossing narrative. Crowded with semi-rhetorical questions, moments of melodrama, lyricism, humour, sharp details, and shifts of mood and style.

It's romantic.

It's epic.

It's a musical—in the way some of Brecht's plays are musicals.

There are shouts and whispers, songs and chants, choruses and solos, echoes and amplification. Scenes of mass orchestration. And always an attention to rhythm.

I love the the vigour of Dorothy Hewett's language with its lurches of tone and texture; the way street slang and scraps of children's rhymes can co-exist with something like this:

'And all that we were, and all that we knew,

Has gone with the wry, dry dust that blew.'

The parallels between Dorothy Hewett's life and Sally Banner's are many. Both grew up in the Western Australian wheat belt; both were educated at a Perth girls' school; both went to university; both joined and left the Communist Party; both chose unconventional paths.

Writing about *The Chapel Perilous* five years after its first appearance, Dorothy Hewett explained that it began as a semi-autobiographical novel.

Many reviewers zeroed in on the relationship between playwright and protagonist.

'Highly personal … a work of private stock-taking and a cry from the heart', wrote Leonard Radic.

'Like the albatross, I suspect she will always be slung around my neck', wrote Dorothy Hewett.

In a 1986 interview with Candida Baker, Dorothy Hewett made the point that although bits and pieces of her writing are drawn from her own life and experience, 'it's not nearly as autobiographical as David Williamson's work for example, and nobody ever says that

about him'.

Is labelling a work autobiographical another way of, not exactly silencing the voice, but diminishing the achievement of the writing?

Look at Sylvia Plath, another female writer whose life story so often overshadows her work.

Even Simone de Beauvoir.

Autobiographical—I bet it's an adjective with a hefty gender bias.

And over-simplified. Once you've made an omelette there's no taking it back to the raw eggs.

Incidental aside: Before she was Sally Banner she was Sally Thunder. The 1972 Melbourne University production's subtitle was The Perilous Adventures of Sally Thunder.

The Chapel Perilous provoked a storm of protest and praise.

Currency Press published the play shortly after its Melbourne season. They sent a warning letter to schools, advising them to read the book before adding it to their library shelves, and offering them the option of returning it if they deemed it unsuitable. A lot of schools did just that.

The Chapel Perilous—

Many were impressed.

A few were critical.

The personal is political, said some.

The personal is political is not political enough, said others.

Instead of putting the character into a larger context Dorothy Hewett flipped it and put the big picture into a personal narrative.

'An introspective theme brilliantly externalised as theatre by the author.' Patrick White, 1974.

‘Left me unmoved and uninvolved.’ Leslie Walford.

Responses took some nasty turns.

‘Maybe it represented an inner experience Dorothy Hewett had to get out on paper but why did the Old Tote have to put it on the boards?’ Leslie Walford again.

‘I found Sally a monumental bore’, wrote Romola Costantino in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

It was October. It was 1974.

Perhaps some people were in a sour frame of mind to begin with?

In a long and otherwise thoughtful 1984 article in the *Age* about the future for Australian plays, Louis Nowra discusses a score of male writers. The only female writer to get a (brief) mention is Dorothy Hewett.

Let’s be clear, there were women writing for performance in 1984. Quite a lot actually. But their productions were probably low- or no-budget ventures in back rooms and fringe spaces.

Which brings me back to this matter of women’s voices being silenced.

The first thing that struck me when I began researching this essay, was how few professional productions of *The Chapel Perilous* I could find.

‘Technically, the play bristles with difficulties.’ Leonard Radic, the *Age*, 1972.

Well, yes, it certainly offers challenges, but isn’t that a good thing?

Episodic, volatile, powered by Dorothy Hewett’s gutsy language, the play has an awkward immediacy. It feels almost indecently alive.

I wonder if we haven’t got too keen on the coherent, well-

made play? On a certain kind of procedural, cause-and-effect narrative? Plays written with an eye already on the screen adaptation?

In 2007 Suzanne Chaundy directed a production at Melbourne's La Mama. In a conference forum some time later she recalled a question asked at a post-show Q&A. The audience member wanted to know how she coped with the controversial topics in the script—like abortion and communism. For the director however, those were so not the difficult issues. 'I found those aspects of the play so much less controversial to deal with than the neediness of the character … how Sally has to constantly define herself in terms of the relationships she's in and that she can only see herself reflected by the man or woman that she was with at the time.' Suzanne Chaundy, *Double Dialogues*, Issue 11, 2009.

In the 1990s I was researching a play with young women in Sydney's western suburbs. We talked with girls from diverse backgrounds, and one of the questions the director and I asked was:

Who are the women you admire?

Apart from the occasional reference to Jana Wendt—a TV face of the 90s—the women they revered were all helpers and carers behind the scenes. As we drove back to base, the director and I pondered this. Yes, sure, it was great the girls valued work that often went unrecognised, but where were the female artists and scientists? The lawyers, airline pilots, and public figures?

Would those girls' responses be different now we've had a female Prime Minister? Now we've seen women heading up technology companies, major institutions, even the IMF?

If needy is the ultimate put-down for women of 2014, then selfish was for an earlier generation, and to pursue your individual dream was to be selfish—if you were a girl. Different values and vocabulary for boys.

To be described as needy is one of the worst insults you can lob at a young woman.

The internet is packed with this kind of advice: it is a truth

universally acknowledged, that single guys are repelled by neediness because it hints at a woman's insecurity. Ah yes, insecurity, another female problem that rarely, if ever, plagues men.

As if.

Nevertheless, I do agree with Suzanne Chaundy. Sally Banner's neediness sits uncomfortably with me, and I find myself liking her less because of it.

And I'm not someone who usually talks about liking or not liking fictional characters, for goodness sake!

But if I have reservations about Sally, I have none about Dorothy Hewett's stagecraft and theatrical imagination.

'I don't play for halves. I take it all the way.'

Dorothy Hewett is important to me. Ditto *The Chapel Perilous*. Because—

I like my theatre theatrical.

I believe in language as dramatic action.

I admire her candour and sardonic irreverence.

'What would your mother think, snapping the heads off her dead roses beside the river … What would your father think with his long, kind sheep's head in a grey business suit … '

Those words conjure images—I see houses with net curtains to deter flies and prying eyes. I see summer days and those same nets billowing from washing lines before being put back on their wires. I read those words and remember my own teenage longing to escape the parental home and forge a life of art and ideas.

The Chapel Perilous reminds us that telling stories is only one of the many things theatre does.

'I make my own pattern.'

It's a wonderful play, not despite being unwieldy, but because it is unwieldy. It reminds us that life can be messy, meandering, contradictory, and yes—bloody awkward.

Or as Lou Reed put it in 1972: 'Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side'.

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'The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.'

'Teacher resources have been developed in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW.'

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