

□ Hoo's on First □

I made my theatrical debut at the Armidale Town Hall in 1954 at the age of ten. I was the Youngest Person in the cast and I played a Russian doll in the Good Neighbour Council's production of a play called *Ballet-Hoo*. The sex of the leading character was changed, many of the cast could not speak English – especially the asthmatic Ukrainian in the lead – and the prompter was the wife of the local MP. It was, however, done with enormous goodwill and the audience enjoyed the experience, if not the expertise. The only unfortunate side-effect was that the whole thing left me stage-struck. I never recovered.

□ Chez Taboo □

When I started writing in the mid-sixties I quickly discovered that there were several taboos concerning the portrayal of Australian characters. No one, for example, was allowed to appear well-educated. As soon as a well-educated Australian appeared the reaction was “people like that don't exist” or “you really put the boot into that bastard”. The fact of secondary and tertiary education in Australia was either concealed or made the subject of Monty Python sketches. Similarly, no Australian was allowed to appear in a role that entailed qualifications, intelligence or authority. Bank managers and doctors, for example, were always played by regal-sounding English actors, many of whom made a good living working their way through the professions. Writers would go blue in the face trying to point out that it would be most unusual, if not scandalous, for a member of the English aristocracy to take on the job of manager of the ANZ Bank at, say, Allambie Heights. But the feeling among the theatre-playing and -going crowd of the time was that even if, in real life, Australians

did occupy positions of authority, then they shouldn't be allowed to. Other zones in this vast Australian proletariat were occupied by the chokkoes. All ethnic characters were played in a pop-eyed ungrammatical greengrocer style. The spectacle of a well-educated, well-spoken salaami fancier was something of an affront, so I made sure my plays were chock-full of people like Ahmed, Abidin, Anthony Martello and Samuel T. Bow.

An equally strong taboo was placed on the idea of females in leading roles. Actresses would complain to the press about never being in a leading role but in practice they would always prefer to play the hero's girlfriend. The impression was given that Australian women always deferred to their menfolk, a process that few have experienced in real life, and none who have met my grandmother. A sound that was never heard in this period was the Australian middle-class accent. In the 1957 film *Smiley* the alcoholic and the policeman speak with broad Australian accents, but everyone else is mysteriously English. As a result, the back-of-Bourke setting seems less than authentic. Around 1964-65 the first really Australian television series began to be made and this led to the creation of a new language, particularly the suspended prepositions Yah Wah and Dah. With their horror of being thought articulate, some actors would turn a perfectly acceptable television line like "Why don't you sit down and have a drink?" into "Why yah don't you wah sit down and dah have a drink?" Some of the actors playing detectives in these early shows fell into the habit of keeping their hats on and their lips buttoned. A normal cop-series line like "Take this sandshoe down to forensic" would come out sounding like this: "Tagus seer shoo ow naff hen sick". Gradually, however, people realised that the country was full of "all sorts", and that some - a minority, certainly - were articulate and decisive.

□ Industry Functions □

The Young Person who wants a career in the theatre and almost everything else will soon face a hurdle in the form of Industry Functions and learn that actresses will always say to them "I've read your script and I found it very interesting" while actors will say "Oh. Yes. *You're* the one". The subversives will call you a reactionary while the reactionaries will call you a subversive. "I really enjoyed *The Godfather*," said one socialite to me. "You must have made a packet out of that." "I thought you'd be a jolly fat man," said another. "You speak English!" shrieked a third. Despite all this, however, the most daunting of all the Industry Functions the Young Person will face are the annual Writers' Guild barbecue and the cricket match with Actors' Equity.

There is also the Question of the Neville. At any Industry Function there is a Neville present. Whether making a speech in a whisper or loudly interrupting conversations, the Neville will make his mark. At one Guild barbecue a Neville strode about the limited patio announcing, "I'm Neville, remember that, and I'm the greatest writer, you'll see." Some people asked "How did he get here?" or, shamefully, "Did he come with Bob Ellis?" Most were agreed that if he was indeed the greatest he'd never make it. On these occasions Young Persons should distance themselves and make sure they are not accused of Bringing the Neville. At Melbourne Guild functions the Neville was for many years a prolific, unproduced associate with a compulsive blink. A Young Person acquires wisdom with the realisation that there will always be a Neville. Armed with this knowledge, however, the Young Person may venture forth to discuss Entertainment with the show-biz types and Art with the artists. This would be a mistake. My agent's parties are full of soapie successes who want to talk about Shakespeare or Uranium, while the most heavily subsidised academics are keen to chat about Roger Ramjet or Foghorn Leghorn. If you get Trapped by a Neville, then it is best not to despair. Most Nevilles are very nice people; they just have unrealistic expectations of the entertainment "industry" and the cautious libertines who inhabit it. One exception is the Neville who haunts the Guild versus Equity cricket encounters. As a