

# I Have a Feeling We're Not In Australia Anymore

*David Williamson's Emerald City arrives from  
Down Under at New York Theater Workshop*

**by Gerard Raymond**

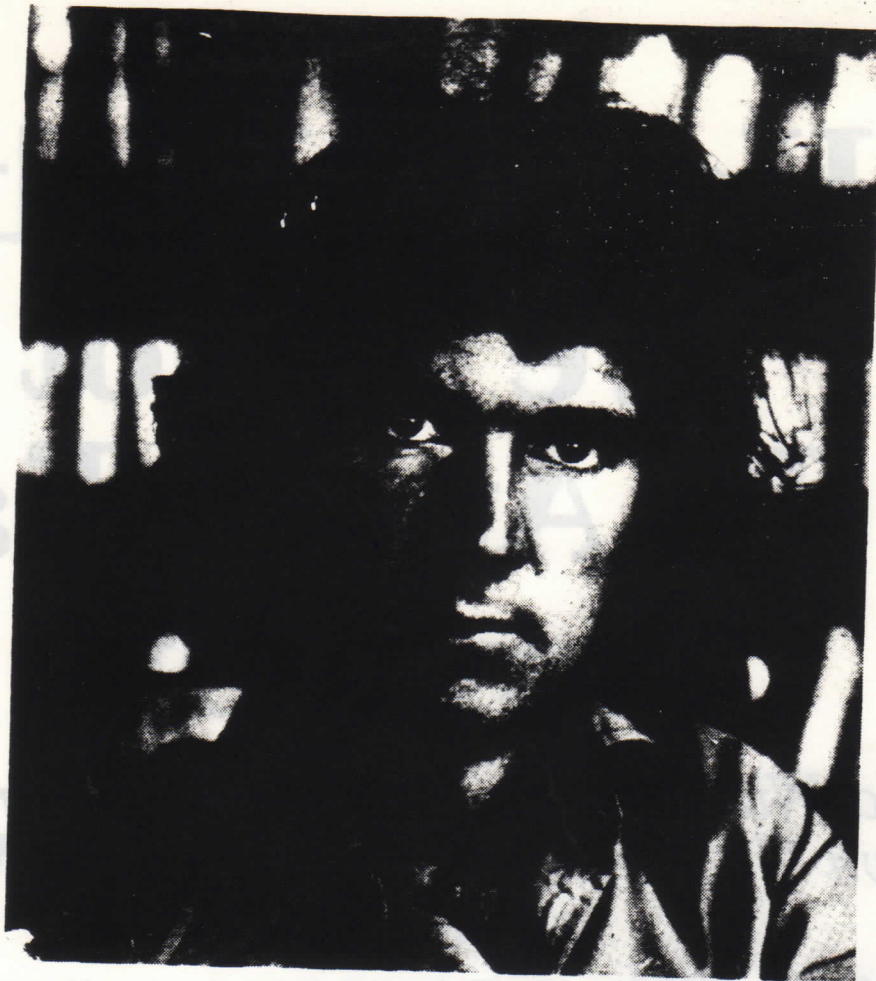
**W**hen James Nicola, artistic director of New York Theater Workshop, was in Toronto looking at plays for his company, he discovered an Australian play, *Emerald City*, by David Williamson. "The most exciting thing about it," says Nicola, "was that I went thinking I was going to find out what was going on in Australia and what their concerns were, and I actually went on a journey to another continent and found many of my own concerns." *Emerald City* opened at the Perry Street Theater on November 30.

Nicola sees New York Theater Workshop as being the ideal environment to support emerging playwrights and is proud to bring Williamson's work to New York theatergoers. Ironically, the six foot, 46 year old David Williamson is pre-eminent in contemporary Australian theater, cinema, and television. He is phenomenally successful in his own country with a prolific output of 14 plays in 18 years. He was in the vanguard in the 1970s revival of Australian cinema. Many of his plays were made into successful films;

among his screenplays are *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). He has been awarded ten AWGIES, the Australian Writers Guild Annual Awards, both for his stage and screen work. However, he is practically unknown as a playwright in the U.S. His plays have been performed in regional theaters; his first play, *The Coming of Stork* (1970) ran for nine months in a small theater in Los Angeles in 1983. But the last time he was represented in New York was in 1979 with the short-lived Broadway production *Players* (originally titled and filmed as *The Club*).

"I think it was the wrong venue," says Williamson, explaining the failure of *Players*, which was set in the dressing rooms and the board room of a Melbourne football club. "It was put into a big Broadway theater and it only ran for five weeks. It opened in the middle of a newspaper strike so there weren't any crits, which wasn't a help. I'm much happier when my plays open in modest theaters," he says, referring to the Perry Street Theater,





David Williamson

where *Emerald City* will, in a sense, reintroduce him to New York audiences.

*Emerald City*, voted the Best Australian Play for 1987, is a satirical comedy about a playwright/screenwriter named Colin who moves from Melbourne to Sydney, attracted by glitz and glamour and the promise of fame and money. Colin (Daniel Gerroll) battles with his conscience about compromising his integrity, while his wife, Kate (Gates McFadden), a book publisher, self-righteously believes that she will never be compromised by material values. They meet Mephistopheles in the form of Mike, a would-be writer with little or no talent, who is able to hustle his way to the top on the strength of his association with Colin. Kate discovers that the firmest of principles can be swayed by the lure of a first-class airline ticket and a promotion; Colin is still unsure if he is more interested in art or money; Mike ends up with multimillion dollar, trans-

atlantic movie deals; and Williamson gets a chance to expose the venality of the Australian film and television industry.

Colin is obviously Williamson's alter-ego. Just how autobiographical is *Emerald City*? "I will be lying if I say there wasn't a lot of me in both of those central male characters. Certainly I'm only too willing to admit that I do share the ambivalence to art and commerce and the ambivalence to social injustice and wealth Colin shares onstage. But there are large elements of fiction as well. My wife isn't in publishing. She's a journalist and a writer."

In the play, Williamson takes full advantage of the rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney. He has moved recently to Sydney with his family. "I had all that inadvertent research that I had done, by virtue of the fact that I had switched cities. I thought that it's a convenient dramatic device to take a character from a city of moral rec-

titude to a city of moral decay. In fact, the two cities are not that dissimilar but there is a discernible difference between them in their tone. Melbourne is more left-wing, more intellectual, more inclined to search for meanings in life, more inclined to be worried about social inequality. Sydney is more inclined to chase money in order to buy beautiful harbor views."

Williamson says he's ashamed to admit he too owns one of those same harbor views. "That indicates the depth of my ambivalence. But I do feel concern and guilt about inequalities and I do very little about them, as the character in my play does. I wish I could have been born one of those conscience-free Republicans who thinks that making money is the ultimate test and have no guilt whatsoever. In my teenage years I became fairly fiercely left wing and felt passionately about the inequalities in the world and in my country. I couldn't claim to be very left wing now. I still am not right wing, but the passion of my youth has become sort of blunted as the years go on, which is unfortunate."

It was in the late '60s in Melbourne that Australian culture asserted its own national identity. Williamson explains, "I think the impetus for the new film and television and drama came from Melbourne, perhaps because there is a different sense of ferment in a city that is the second city of a nation. There is an energy and a frustration and there is a willingness to try things that the first city won't try." His first work was performed in 1969 at the La Mama Theater in Carlton, a Melbourne suburb. Principally a writers' workshop, the theater was founded in an old shirt factory by Betty Burstall in 1967. Burstall had visited New York and had been inspired by Ellen Stewart's influential La Mama Theater. "She saw the vigor of the off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway scenes, saw what places like La Mama were doing for new writing, and came back determined to start one of her own," says Williamson.

"She ran the place herself for many years and actively sought out new Australian dramatic writing. That was



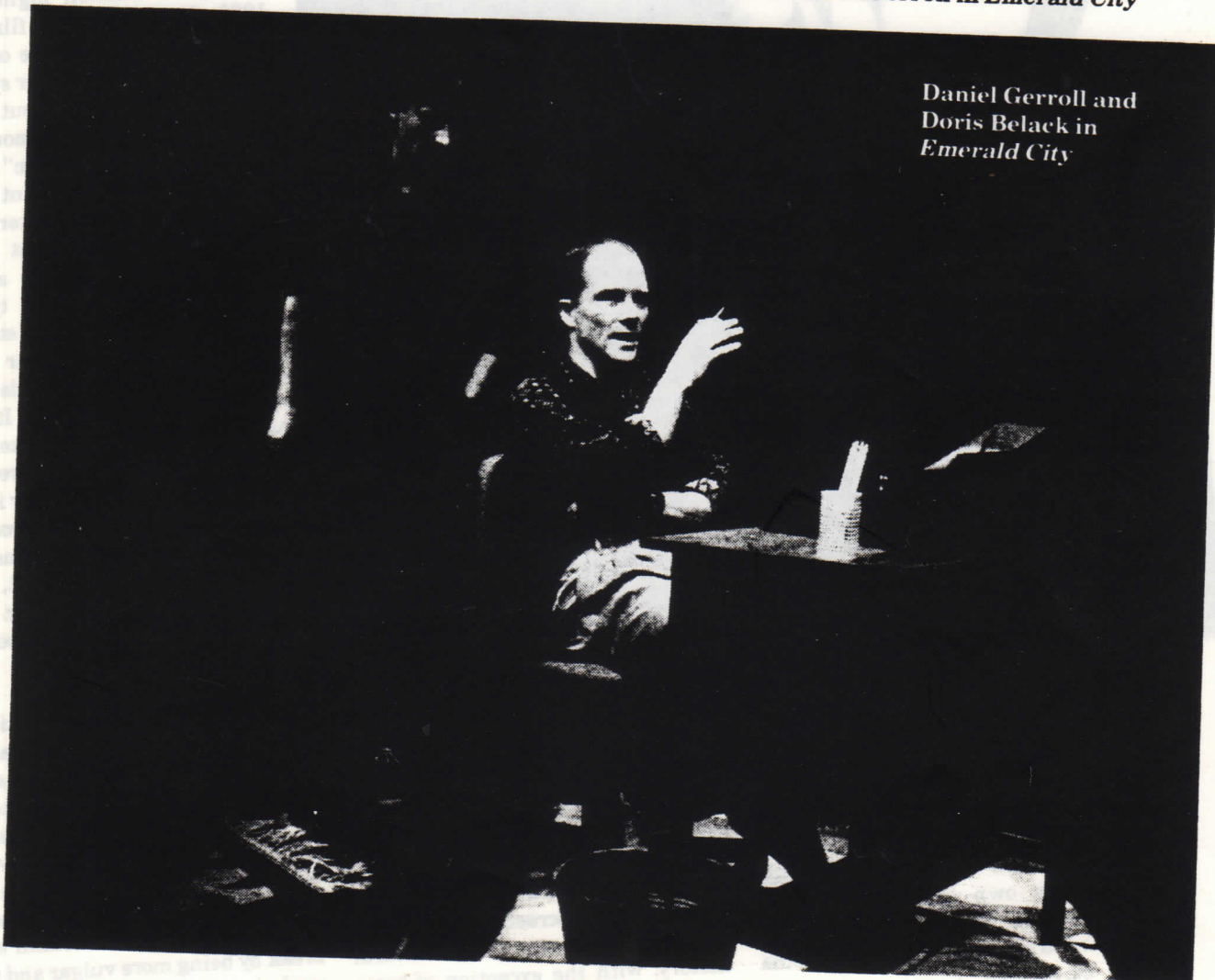
a very exciting time, the late '60s and the early '70s. Suddenly there was a new interest in indigenous writing and discovering our own culture, whatever that was. Up to then it was a very Anglophile society in terms of drama. Most of the artistic directors of our theater companies tended to be Englishmen who saw their role as educating and uplifting the barbarous natives and it was a very rare occurrence indeed that an Australian play would actually get on our stages. Few had happened in the '50s [most notably Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*] but now I think 40 percent of the repertoire of our companies is local work."

Williamson's first full-length play was filmed as *Stork* by Tim Burstall (Betty Burstall's husband) in 1971. It is considered one of the pivotal films of



Gerry Goodstein

Gates McFadden and Daniel Gerroll in *Emerald City*



Gerry Goodstein

Daniel Gerroll and Doris Belack in *Emerald City*





**Gary Busey in the HBO miniseries *A Dangerous Life***

the Australian New Wave and was the first locally made commercial success. "It was a very cheap low-budget film, but it proved that there was an audience out there for indigenous films. They did want to see their own life-style and their own problems reflected on their own screens." Having established a national identity, Australia's theater and the cinema

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developed rapidly. "I think both fed into each other. I think the writers, like myself, that were working in drama tended to become screenwriters as well, so the two things happened in tandem. There was suddenly the means to tell Australian stories on stage and on screen, which there hadn't been in our whole cultural history, with the exception of some

very fine poets and novelists who occasionally got published."

Some of those early films and plays are now classified as sex comedies and it seems that explicit language and sex were the hallmarks of the Australian revival. "Well, there was a sense of rebellion against the strict censorship that was operating at the time. One of my early plays, *Don's Party* (1971) is profane, but it is accurate. I mean, that is what was happening in Australia at the time; it had a lot of swear words in it. A year before, one of our playwrights, Alex Buzo, had been prosecuted for having one swear word in his play, so I suppose there was a sense of taking on the censors in terms of language and sex and maybe an overreaction. We were a bit too exuberant in those days."

*Don's Party*, which was filmed in 1976 by Bruce Beresford, takes place during an election night party in 1969. Typical of the films of the period, it reflects a type of behavior that is dubbed the "ocker syndrome," or as Williamson points out should, in the case of his work, be more correctly identified as "larrrikan" behavior. "The American equivalent would be the good old boys. An 'ocker' is someone who takes a delight in being crude, vulgar, philistine, and anti-intellectual. A 'larrrikan' type is a working class guy who is streetwise and vulgar but his vulgar wit and energy go some way towards making him an attractive character. It's an old Australian tradition. An ocker is a bit coarser than a larrrikan; there is more vulgarity and less wit. Ocker is usually now used to describe the worst type of Australian, who is loud-mouthed, boorish, chauvanistic, racist, sexist, you name it—that's an ocker. I don't think Australia is totally populated by ockers. Well, I hope not!"

Gary Johnston/McElroy and McElroy Productions

Australia's cultural identity was fostered by "a deep distaste for the British class system and an disinclination to recreate that class system in Australia. The working class lad is consciously anti-English. The English laid down standards of decorum and polite behavior which the Australian larrrikan would break by being more vulgar and more crude, but also engaging in some ways



by his wit and his energy. So I think my early plays didn't so much use ocker types as larrikan types." In *Emerald City*, the hustler Mike is clearly one of these larrikins. "He has some mitigating features," points out Williamson, "I mean, he is crass, he is vulgar, he is certainly out for the main chance, out to make a buck, but he does genuinely feel grateful and affectionate about his girlfriend Helen, and he does try to get an \$80,000 dollar job for Colin when he thinks his old friend is in trouble."

Williamson has written the screenplay for *Emerald City*, which is currently being shot in Sydney. It is the seventh play of his that he has adapted for the screen. "It's something I've had to do from the very start. *Stork* was turned into a film right back in 1971 and I had to learn the difference between the two media right then and there, on the run, so to speak. I've done a lot of screenwriting, both for television and the screen since, so I think when I come to one of my own plays I know what has to be done. I look at them as being different versions of the same basic themes."

Williamson's international reputation is based on the strength of the two screenplays, *Gallipoli*, an original, and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, based on a novel by Australian author Christopher Koch. Both were written for director Peter Weir (who filmed *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in 1976). *Gallipoli*, which was based on a concept by Weir, told the story of two friends who joined up to fight for the British in 1915. It was described by Phillip Adams, who produced many landmark Australian movies, including *Don's Party*, as "a great Australian love story." "Ah, yes," recalls Williamson, "Phillip's theory was that Peter and I had a submerged homoerotic relationship that manifested itself in the two principal characters. Well, I wasn't aware of it, I don't know what's in my subconscious, but it is about male friendship and male bonding, there's no doubt about that. Whether there is a homoerotic content to that sort of bonding I don't know. Perhaps there is." Williamson mentions that when talking to old war veterans, he discovered that "when they were

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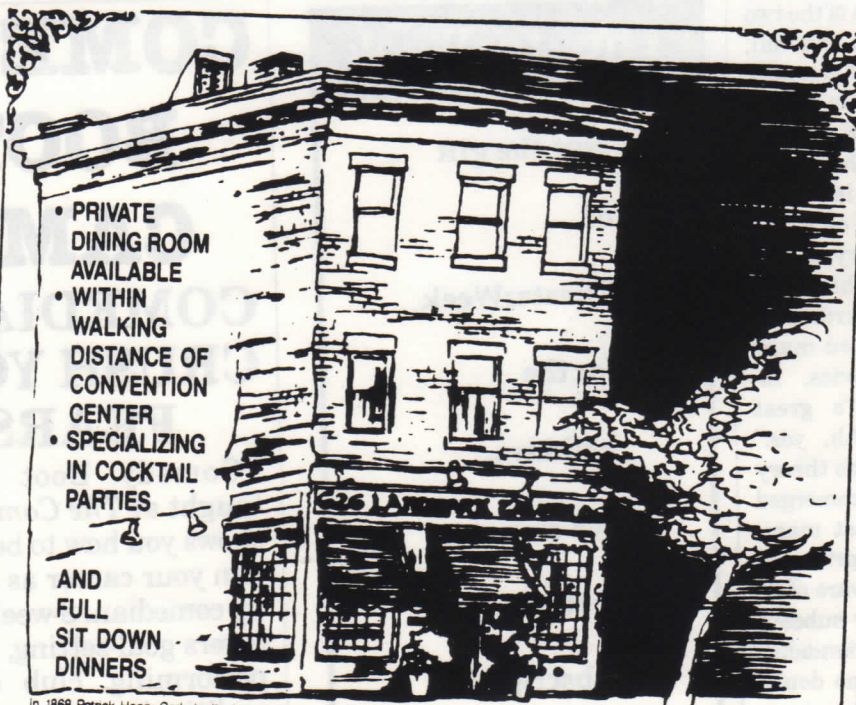
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under stress in the trenches, they always tended to find themselves a special pal. And when they described the nature of the relationship, there was nothing sexual about it—they would have been horrified to think that there was—but it often sounded like a husband-wife relationship. It was very touching, in a way, to see how they felt in those very close friendships."

After *The Year of Living Dangerously*, which was a enigmatic romance told against the political backdrop of the fall of Sukarno in Indonesia. Weir moved onto a successful career in Hollywood, as did Bruce Beresford. In *Emerald City* it is mentioned that Colin has never been called to Hollywood. In real life, however, Williamson is currently working on a screenplay for Paramount Pictures. "My ambivalence is even more nakedly exposed," he says dryly. "I think it is a good project. It's about the McCarthy era and a particular incident that happened in that era that was a reflection of the times. It could be a very strong movie. So I don't feel any guilt about doing it."

This new film script will mark Williamson's "first straight movie working with American producers." He has, however, worked on an Australian, British, and American co-production for Home Box Office entitled *A Dangerous Life*. It is a six-hour miniseries on the fall of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. "The story of Marcos's overthrow—I jumped at it, it was so powerful. I think the Philippines story is a really gripping one because it almost burst into violence. The whole country could have gone up in flames many times during those crucial four days. In the play, Colin tries to do an imitation of *Miami Vice* and falls flat on his face because the Americans are not interested. This series is one that I am not ashamed to have my name on."

While Williamson, and indeed many Australians, have made their mark internationally through film, it isn't easy for Australian theater to succeed overseas, especially in England. "I think it's very hard for Australians to get much of a hearing in London in the theater. I don't think it's as bad in films, but the theater has got a particular snobbishness about it.



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My film *Travelling North* [based on his play, starring Leo McKern] opened at the same time as *Emerald City* and got euphoric crits. But the reaction to my plays has always been highly ambivalent because I suppose theater was an English tradition. I mean, some of the crits were good in the quality papers, but the lesser circulation press always loved putting the boot to Australians."

A fiercely nationalist theme that runs through Williamson's work is exemplified in his screenplay for *Phar Lap*. The 1983 movie told the true story of a freak Australian race horse, who, against all odds, races to great glory only to die of a mysterious illness after being taken in America. "In a common Australian myth, the underdog tries, almost gets there, and gets shot or gets poisoned," he explains. "I think it's a small country reaction. We feel that nobody notices us in the whole world. Since I've been in America for the last two and a half weeks, I've scoured the newspapers for even one faint reference to Australia, but the word has never even been mentioned! You do get the feeling that big cultures are unconsciously arrogant. They do believe, with all the best will in the world, that all things interesting happen within their boundaries and that the rest of the world is not worth thinking about. And if we are truthful, we do it ourselves to New Zealand. There's an interesting tradition of drama and literature and poetry in New Zealand that Australians never bother to look at." Phillip Adams wrote in 1985 that Williamson's "greatest contribution" to Australian culture is "his unashamed celebration of the national identity we'd lost during the cultural cringe, when we swapped British imperialism for American cultural imperialism without even noticing." In *Emerald City*, the attitude of the film industry in Australia comes under attack. "In the Australian film industry, for most of them, their primary purpose is now to write films that will work in America. In the early days they tried to make good movies which told Australian stories. If the films worked abroad, it was obvious there had been no attempt to tailor them for American au-

diences. They were seen as authentic and different."

Where does that leave Williamson both as a screenwriter and a playwright? "It leaves me doing screenplays for Paramount. But I hope that someday that I chose to do has really something to say. I think it's saying something about an era that should be said, not only for America but for Australia too, we went through our own McCarthy era. I still love writing plays. I've just written another play which is going into rehearsal before I get back to Australia. It's called *Top Silk*. The word silk in England and Australia is a nickname for a barrister. *Top Silk* is about a high-flying lawyer who is making a huge amount of money, as

they tend to do, and who is offered a way into political power. He chooses this path and the play looks at what this does to his wife and son."

Williamson says he likes to work in film "because it reaches such a big audience, if you are lucky." He says he didn't change a single word of *Emerald City* for its American premiere and says he didn't write it as a "transatlantic play." In spite of this, he has observed that preview audiences at New York Theater Workshop have had no trouble working out what it's all about. The truth is, he continues, "that I do write plays primarily as an expression of Australian problems and situations. It may work internationally; that's a bonus and I'm more than happy." □

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