

# David Williamson Explored

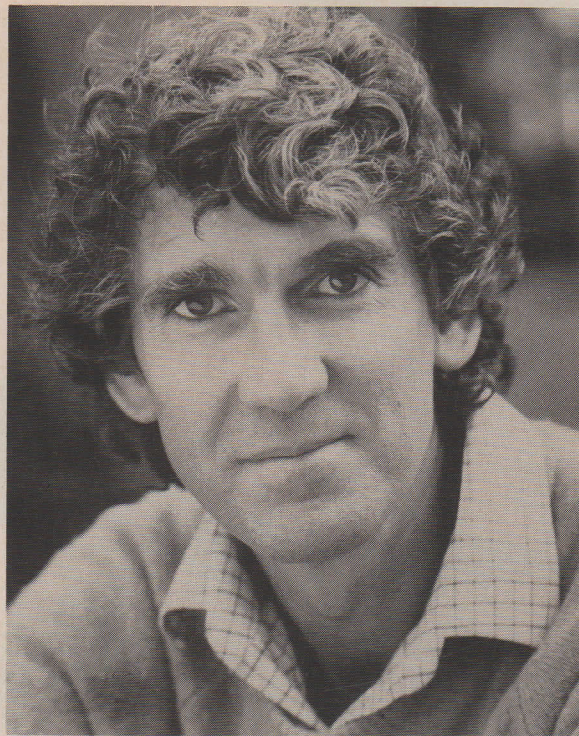
*The playwright of Money and Friends speaks about his work*

David Williamson once joked that he is the tallest playwright in Australia. The six-foot-seven writer is, in fact, the best known, and the most successful playwright in Australia. And the most famous screenwriter there as well. In his native land he is equally known for his prolific output of plays as for his screenplays. In America however, his screenplays for Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* are probably better known than his plays. The U.S. premiere of his latest play, *Money and Friends* could well change this status.

*Money and Friends* has arrived at an opportune moment. A serious comedy for the 1990s, it questions the nature of friendship when tested at a time of a recession. The play takes place in a fictitious beach community named Crystal Inlet, not unlike Malibu in California, which serves as a weekend and holiday resort for the wealthy elite of Sydney. The central character, Peter, an academic, faces financial ruin due to bad investments he made on behalf of his brother in the 1980s. In the course of the play, Peter's friends, all successful professionals, demonstrate the often precarious relationship between money and friends: the loss of one may lead to the loss of the other.

Williamson was spurred to write *Money and Friends* when a severe recession,

which still grips the country, hit Australia in 1990. He says he knew of many middle-class people, who considered themselves financially secure for life, who suddenly found themselves out of jobs when the hard times came. "Much of what passes for friendship in a highly



competitive society is fairly shallow," he says, describing it as a form of entertainment. "We have friends to entertain us, to swap gossip and anecdotes and to reinforce our attitudes to life. But when the chips are down how many of us would help, particularly in terms of cash?"

The "charade of friendship," as Williamson puts it, is presented as a comedy of manners, a style which the author often uses with great expertise. "David's talent is for very incisive comedy

of social observation," says Michael Blakemore, who is directing the American premiere of *Money and Friends*. Blakemore, a fellow Australian who now lives in London, has directed three other Williamson plays in the past and is himself an expert at comedy and farce with the highly acclaimed productions of *Noises Off*, *City of Angels*, and *Letting It Go* on his credits. Inspired by Sheridan and Moliere, *Money and Friends* follows the classic comedy of manners model, which Williamson defines as a style in which the actors and the audience "enter into a conspiracy with each other to send up and make fun of several aspects of society of which they are critical."

Ever since Williamson began writing, about twenty-two years ago, he has scrutinized contemporary Australian middle-class behavior and values. He traces this focus back to his desire to pursue a career in psychology before he became a playwright. Williamson actually majored in mathematics and lectured in thermodynamics and fluid mechanics before he turned to psychology. He laughs at the surprised reaction that he gets saying he was just steered into that path because he happened to be good at mathematics. "My consuming passion was human interaction processes. The engineering was never more than a vocational thing, and I was starting on a masters in social psychology when I had to choose between writing and becoming an academic."

The crucial event which guided Williamson towards becoming a writer

Above: Australian playwright David Williamson's *Money and Friends* is a send up of middle-class behavior and values.

by Gerard Raymond



was the founding of Melbourne's La Mama Theatre by Betty Burstall in 1967. Burstall, along with her well-known Australian filmmaker, husband, Tim, discovered Ellen Stewart's La Mama Theatre in New York. La Mama was one of the first seeds of the off-Broadway theater movement, and has made a lasting contribution to the development of theater in the U.S. "Betty was very inspired by the concept of theater devoted to new writing," Williamson recalls. At the time there was virtually no new writing to be seen on the Australian stages. Apart from a handful of plays from the 1950s, like Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Australian theater meant imported British theater.

Burstall returned to Australia, converted an old shirt factory in Melbourne into a theater space, and set about finding actors, writers and directors who would devote themselves to new Australian writing. "Unless somebody actively goes around looking for new writing it never actually happens," remarks Williamson who credits Burstall for almost single-handedly sparking the Australian new wave. Williamson was invited to participate in the opening meeting for the Australian La Mama but says he didn't pursue it because he was intimidated. Nevertheless, he sent the new theater company short scripts for revues, which Burstall liked. Eventually, Burstall produced Williamson's first full length play, *The Coming of Stork* at La Mama in 1970.

At the same time that Australian theater was asserting itself, a new wave of Australian cinema occurred. Williamson was part of the vanguard of both movements. Indeed one of the first Australian films of the new wave which caught world attention in the early 1970s was Tim Burstall's film version of *Stork*. Ever since then Williamson has been able to think and write "bilingually," maintaining his successful careers in theater and film simultaneously.

When La Mama started up in Melbourne, and when films like *Gallipoli* were made, there was a conscious desire on the part of Australian artists to emphasize what made them unique from the rest of the world. Williamson says that impulse has changed over the past

*"I do like sending up our vulgar middle class and send up myself at the same time."*

two decades and believes that the Australian public had become bored with exploring their historical myths and accentuating their otherness. "We do have a physical landscape that is totally unique, but I think it took us some while to realize that our psychological and social landscape isn't all that unique. The human processes of love, betrayal, greed, anger, acquisition are pretty invariant across cultures."

*The Coming of Stork*, Williamson's first play, is an episodic series of raucously comic scenes revolving around a tall dropout named Stork and his friends, all young men in their twenties. Williamson himself was in his late twenties when he wrote it. Over time, the ages of his main characters and their social milieu have reflected that of the author. In the past twenty years he has generated a comfortable income from his highly successful writing career, and this year he turned fifty so it isn't surprising to find that the key players in *Money and Friends* are in their mid-forties and occupy an affluent stratum of Australian society.

The characters in *Money and Friends* belong to professions which Williamson describes as "recession proof." His lawyer friends tell him that they are equally busy during a recession, when they do bankruptcy work, as during a boom. Further, the playwright explains that articulate, educated middle-class people, like himself, make ideal targets for his style of comedy. Lawyers, doctors and academics — the professions represented in *Money and Friends*, he says, use their capacity for language to delude themselves and other people. "The human comedy at this level is usually how you use language to draw a smoke screen over your true motives."

Philip Adams, who produced many landmark Australian movies including *Don's Party* which was directed by Bruce Beresford from Williamson's 1971 stage hit, has noted a semi-autobiographical strain in Williamson's plays. He once compared being at the opening night of a

Williamson play to being at Elsinore when Hamlet first presented the play-within-the-play to King Claudius. "We sat in an audience uncomfortably surrounded by the originals for the characters on stage." He recalled how everyone from Williamson's parents to friends reacted with various degrees of pain and embarrassment as the play unfolded. "But," Adams added, "it was hard to resent Williamson's candor for, of course, it extended to himself."

Director Michael Blakemore agrees that Williamson writes out of his own experience but says, "if David writes himself into his own plays, he does it with a great deal of detachment and usually critically." There is no character specifically like Williamson in *Money and Friends*, but Blakemore hints that Williamson has made fun of some of the playwright's own characteristics in the portrait of the gloomy surgeon, Stephen, in the play.

In *Emerald City* however, a previous hit play which was staged in this country four years ago, Williamson presented a character which is close to a self-portrait. Colin, a screenwriter, wrestling with his conscience, faces the choice of writing quality work for the sake of art or writing potboilers for the sake of money. Like the author at that time, Colin has just moved from Melbourne to Sydney, and is aspiring to a harbor-view luxury apartment and all the materialistic trappings of Sydney high society.

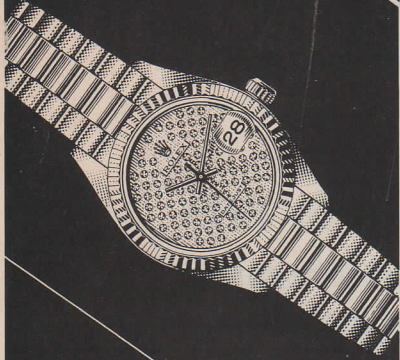
While Williamson's critique of Australia's venal middle class is sharp, one cannot help noticing a certain ambiguity on his part towards his characters. Many have noted that Williamson himself is as successful and as affluent as the people he satirizes. After all, in addition to the harbor-view mansion he poked fun at in *Emerald City*, he also has a holiday house in Pearl Beach, the real-life model for Crystal Inlet in *Money and Friends*.

But the charm of Williamson's work is that the playwright acknowledges this dichotomy. He quotes Woody Allen, who once said that satirists are prey to the same impulses they satirize. "I can sense in myself a hunger for material comfort and a hunger for competitive success." He admits he enjoys writing the so-

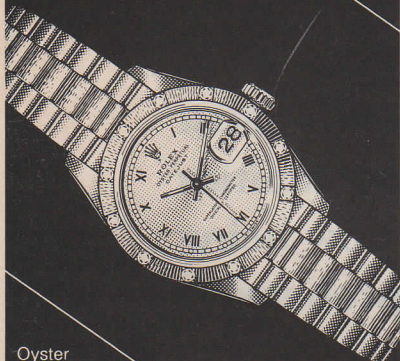


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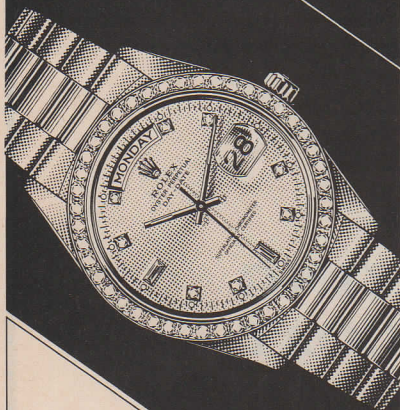
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called bad characters like the unscrupulous lawyer Alex, or the media-hungry environmentalist Conrad in *Money and Friends* because he senses a kinship with them. "While the better part of me might think that I am Peter [a decent-natured victim of the economic hazards of the 1990s], the worst part of me knows that I am Alex or Conrad."

What safeguards does he have to prevent himself from becoming too much like one of his materially-oriented protagonists? Williamson says he has stopped himself from taking on some of the "sleazy projects" offered him by the film industry just to make money. "I do not push myself to maximize my income, that is the only good thing that I can say about myself!" Often Williamson introduces someone with values in his plays, like Peter in *Money and Friends*. "I always like to have a voice which says that human compassion, kindness and contact is an important part of our humanity, and if we lose that we have certainly lost everything."

In his younger days Williamson was perceived as a left-wing writer who stood up for the helpless working class. But he argues that even an early play like *The Removalists* is as ambivalent about human nature as *Money and Friends*, and says he was never a didactic playwright. "I have always had worries about the deeply flawed nature of the human species." In *The Removalists* the working-class hero who is beaten up by the police is every bit as reprehensible, Williamson points out, as the cops themselves.

When it comes to flaws, there is no doubt that Williamson comes down more heavily against men than against women. Time and again the playwright has presented an unsavory picture of a particular Australian brand of male chauvinism and sexual braggadocio. The young men in *The Coming of Stork*; the boisterous bunch of males who use an Election night as an excuse to get drunk in *Don's Party*; the characters who perform what Williamson once described as "ritualistic male violence" in *The Removalists*; and the aggressive and competitive males in *Money and Friends* are not what you would call sensitive men.

"I think that it is a characteristic of

the late twentieth century that men are the assholes of the world," Williamson says, adding with a laugh that men seem to accept this without much embarrassment. He believes that men are "competitive, nasty creatures in general" but occasionally one finds a generous and humane one like Peter. The high level of Australian male chauvinism has produced a very strong feminist backlash in the country, Williamson remarks. "The women in Australia haven't been sitting around and taking it," he adds, quoting a recent survey which indicates that Australia comes right behind America in leading the world in terms of women penetrating positions of power within the society.

In Hollywood, film industry folk apparently know Williamson as the idealistic screenwriter who tackles burning social issues in a realistic, almost documentary manner. After seeing an announcement for *Money and Friends* in Los Angeles, one of Williamson's producer friends in Hollywood called the writer up to tell him that there was another David Williamson who wrote comedies around. For the past few years Williamson has written scripts for Hollywood, but though they have been very well received, none have been filmed as yet. On assignment, he wrote a script based on a military scapegoat trial which was held during the McCarthy era, and an exposé of the American healthcare system, but they were deemed too uncompromising to be made. One of his most recent projects is *Warriors of the Rainbow*, a story about the beginning of the Greenpeace movement.

Williamson says his Hollywood screenplays are a critique of "soporific and audience reassuring" mainstream filmmaking. "You don't have to be very radical to be very radical in Hollywood," he quips. As a screenwriter he undertakes historical and non-Australian subjects, but as a playwright he favors the comedy of manners about his own society. As *Money and Friends* reveals, he has perfected the technique and being able to entertain while pointing out the foibles of his compatriots. "It's the thing I like doing best," he says. "I do like sending up our vulgar middle class and send up myself at the same time." □