

Australian Theatre, Modernism and Patrick White: Governing Culture (Book review)

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Australian theatre, Modernism and Patrick White: Governing Culture. By Denise Varney and Sandra D'Urso. London, New York: Anthem Press, 2018. Pp viii + 109. £45.00, \$79.95 Hb.

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This short but compelling book tells the story of the Noble-prize winning writer Patrick White's involvement in a then-emerging Adelaide Festival of the Arts with two of his best-known plays. *The Ham Funeral* and *Night on Bald Mountain* were recommended for production by the Festival's Drama Committee in 1961 and 1963 respectively. Both were rejected by its Governors as too risky and "unsavoury". These rejections were fateful, however, catalysing a debate about who has the right to decide what Australians see on their stages. This in turn fed into broader agitation against censorship laws, and against the apparatus of an oppressive colonial paternalism. In the book, this paternalism is encountered at its most ridiculous. But it would not be right to conclude, and indeed the authors do not conclude, that it is a force banished from Australian culture together.

Governing Culture takes an approach where the material conditions of play production and the symbolic meanings of the plays produced are viewed through a common lens showing how they relate to each other – a relation always political to some degree, and sometimes strongly so. Varney and D'Urso observe, '[a] backward glance at the Patrick White controversy draws attention to historic incidents that amount to motivated acts of governing culture in 1960s Australia ... There was no turning point after what modern art was free and unfettered, only an uneven series of ups and downs. The practices of governmentality and sovereignty as described by Michel Foucault and [Carl] Schmitt and

applied to the Patrick White Affair constitute an ongoing feature of cultural production in Australia. And Australia is not alone in governing culture' (94-5).

The book has three dimensions to it, each of which are useful, though it is how they are woven together that is its chief value. First, it supplies an important narrative about the Adelaide Festival, based on an examination of primary sources, illuminating the motives and meaning of a string of contradictory human actions. Second, it throws fresh light on how cultural Modernism took hold in Australia. The authors do an excellent job of showing how White's plays were associated with a range of subversive values that the Governors were keen to keep off Australia's stages because they were keen to keep them out of Australians' minds. They failed in both objectives, and the defence of White by, among others, director Harry Medlin, publisher Max Harris, historian Geoffrey Dutton and critic Harry Kippax – champions of Modernism all – represented a decisive undermining of the suburban insularity and commercial triviality Australian theatre had been reduced to by 1960.

It is the third dimension that is the most interesting, however: an analysis of governments' urge to control culture. The authors make good use of Foucault and Schmitt to illuminate the nexus of forces in which artists and arts organisations are implicated, forces whose structuring and extent they often seem unaware. They are surely right in seeing cultural politics as metonymic of the politics of the state at large. Governments are nervous about art, especially oppositional art. Their indifference to it today is as studied and self-serving as the repression and censorship of sixty years ago. If the Governors used economic arguments to reject White that we regard as patently false, we nevertheless accept versions of the same arguments in respect of culture's value now.

The book ends by considering the concept of 'authentic' politics. The authors comment, 'according to Schmitt, deciding who your "friends" and "enemies" are is a game of

life and death that produces politics proper. The decision becomes a kind of visible or theatrical display of the sovereign himself' (101).

There is a message for academics here too. If cultural politics is an authentic politics, and this book makes a persuasive case for why this is so, then the opinions and actions of individual researchers, and of the academy as a whole, who have much to do with its management – and its defence – matter today as much as they did in those fateful struggles sixty years ago.