

## **The professor and the word: On value in culture and economics**

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### Published

2021

### Book Title

Griffith Review: Remaking the Balance

### Version

Version of Record (VoR)

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## MEMOIR

# My Covid dreaming

*Lamb*, Frankston, 25 February 2021

Julian Meyrick

HE WORE OFF-WHITE trainers with built-up soles. The caved-in line of his jaw told me he had no teeth of his own. The other one, with honey-brown skin, held numerous bags and an ancient boom box. They met outside the bunker-like train station, arms raised in mutual salutation, no Renaissance princes more deferential. How long since they had seen each other? A day? An hour? I watched them asseverate in clown-show while above the sky grew mottled and spat rain. Loss gathered about us like clouds of stone. COVID-19 ground to one of its many temporary halts.

In two hours' time, *Lamb* by Jane Bodie would open at the Frankston Arts Centre and become the first Victorian play to set off on an interstate tour in 2021. In this interstitial moment – neither a beginning nor a middle nor an end, but an impenetrable mix of all three temporal states – I sat on a Frankston street corner pondering all I had seen in the weeks gone by. And what it meant.

There is, in government policy, something called 'arts and culture' that has a discrete, bounded existence, like 'waste management' or 'dental services'. Sometimes people are *in* arts and culture. Sometimes they go to them or express a desire *for* them. It's a matter of prepositions, positioning this aspect of our lives at different intellectual angles in certain officially regulated ways. It is in this respect that we say culture is *consumed*. Though, really, is it?

When COVID-19 hit Australia, those *in* arts and culture – sundry practitioners, from huckster music producers in snakeskin boots to ethereal video poets in virtual surreality – got fucked over. First, we heard we were

*really important*, the ‘glue’ holding the nation together when it was mired at home for months on end with the horror of only immediate family for company. Then we were left out of every policy calculation the government made. Attention was paid, as it is always paid in Australia, to elite sport, the building industry and big business. Artists were the cur in the corner, whining about having no job when anyone could have told us we didn’t have much of one to begin with. By the day of my street-bum summit, the cultural sector had figured out the deeper message. We’d been getting fucked over for quite some time.

*Lamb* is a play about three siblings who reunite for their mother’s funeral. It’s set on a sheep farm, and the issue of what do with the property, the burden of it, the labour of it, the home it once represented, hangs heavy as the children unpack their family past, which, like all family pasts, is full of secrets and lies and things that went oh-so-terribly wrong. At the heart of the story sit Frank and Mary, the parents, and the long fall of their marriage into disappointment and thwart. The children, Annie, Patrick and Kathleen, have to unpick two densely interwoven problems: what do with their own lives and how to solve the riddle of their mother’s and father’s. After Frank dies, Mary is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. In the play’s backstory, Annie, who has her mother’s singing voice, leaves the farm at that point to become a famous folk singer, never seeing Mary again. When Jane wrote *Lamb* in 2016, her own mother had just been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. By 2017, when she asked me to direct it, so had mine.

I was then embarking on a stretch of archival work investigating Australian theatre in the interwar years. I had started my history research two decades earlier, looking at theatre in the 1970s. Yet the more I tried to move *forwards* to the brief breath of the present, the more I got sucked *back* into an old litany of horrors: the White Australia policy, sectarian hatreds, the forced removal of Indigenous children, the disastrous Premiers’ Plan of 1931. It was as if ghostly hands kept dragging me into earlier times, wanting me to connect the life I was leading as an artist to the things I was learning about Australia’s past. But how? What was I supposed to see? It was like staring into dense fog.

THE FRANKSTON ARTS Centre looms over its working-class neighbourhood like a granite fortress. I went there by train, an hour from

Melbourne, past tattered hair parlours, tattered pizza parlours, Thirsty Camels, real-estate agents and more real-estate agents. The odd glimpse of the sea, cobalt blue and flat as a spirit level. Past fields that used to be fields but have now been, in the great misnomer of our age, 'developed'. Frankston is one of Melbourne's battler suburbs: 15 per cent of people live in poverty, 6.3 per cent are unemployed. I recognised the feeling in air the moment I stepped onto the platform. The feeling of being forgotten. I instantly felt at home.

At the start of Covid, one of my actors lost a year's employment in an afternoon. In the morning they had work lined up back-to-back, including two tours and a trip to New York. By 5 pm they had nothing. They were lucky. They eventually found work in a retail shop that kept them on through the lockdowns to follow. Jane wrote to me from the UK, where she had gone in January to take care of her mum. Unable to return to Australia, unable to find a job there, she was forced to go into isolation in Somerset. Could I get her work? Any work at all? Her mother was dying expensively.

*Lamb* has an unusual though not unique feature for a play: it steps back in time over the two days of Mary's funeral, then runs forwards again with action that, from the perspective of the present, has already taken place. Jane calls it a 'whydunnit'. In life, things happen. Mothers get Alzheimer's and endure lingering deaths. Nations get pandemics and have governments that run the country for the benefit of their mates. The narrative element of a play is never the most interesting: if we didn't tell one story, we'd tell another. The interesting stuff happens when the human element gets added, the intentions, motivations, aspirations, accommodations, moments of truth when we realise we are living a different kind of life than the one we expected or hoped for. Which is what happens to Mary. In the second act of *Lamb*, Frank and Mary appear on stage, played by the actors who play Patrick and Annie. Amazing how easy this is to accept, that we carry our parents inside us, instantly accessible. Close your eyes. Think of your mum or dad. Now: be them.

Act II opens in the country pub where Mary works behind the bar. It's a pub like any other, but the date is not: 11 November 1975, the day Gough Whitlam's Labor government was forced out of office by a weaselly Governor-General and a self-serving Coalition who'd boil their own grandmothers up for bath soap if they thought it would get them closer to the Lodge. The Dismissal is similar to COVID-19 from the Australian artist's

point of view because it represents what Susan Sontag called a 'negative epiphany'. In a flash you realise not only that *you were wrong* but that *you have always been wrong*. You failed to make an important connection, believing things to be this when they were that.

Mary tells Frank she wants to go to the city, to the world 'out there' – to anywhere, in fact, other than stay in the town they're in. She says, 'I don't want to die here Frank.' Then she tells him she's pregnant. Frank says that he's put his farm in her name, that they should get married. He tells her, 'Let's make it right.' Mary hints she wants an abortion and Frank goes ballistic. By the end of the scene they've reconciled, after a fashion. Mary's last words to Frank are 'Shut up about fucking sheep, Frank.' Frank's last words to Mary are 'I love you. And you love me. How could there be anything wrong with that?' When Kathleen is born, she has an intellectual disability.

A moment of truth is never just a simple addition to an existing body of data. It is always globally transformative, always productive of a new way of seeing. This is the central idea in philosopher Alain Badiou's 1988 magnum opus *Being and Event*, the greatest contribution to ontology since Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time* and similar in its radical insistence on human agency and decision-making. Moments of truth have a world-disclosing quality that the ancient Greeks called *aletheia*, which means 'unconcealedness'. I had a dream about this word once. It was shortly after Joseph Stalin appeared in another of my dreams, to justify himself. The ultimate whydunnit. It was him, all right. His heaviness was a thing to behold, as if he were made of osmium, twice the weight of lead. I woke up from that dream but suspect Stalin is in it still, caught in a hell of eternal explanation. My *aletheia* dream was the opposite: a sunburst of transcendent insight (but into what?). There was a book, and I opened it. The word was printed on its first page. Then (August 2001 – I wrote it down), 'I pulled my curtain across and millions of tiny pink clustered flowers were floating in slow motion past my window, against a dark cloudy sky.'

In moments of truth, everything you thought you knew about life is upended, and time spreads out like a tablecloth. You can walk in and out of the past, just as the children in *Lamb* walk in and out of their parents' lives. Time is extant, but the human beings in it cease to be bound by its successive structure, creating what quantum physicist Carlo Rovelli calls a 'quantum superimposition of spin networks' where time and space 'are no longer general

forms of the world'. What makes this possible is memory. By remembering, we are reunited with what we did before, with who we were before; with what was done before us, and who did it. Past, present and future align, like doors down a long corridor suddenly thrown open together. And this is a source of both terrible pain and amazing joy.

For a stage play, two devices provide the occasion for this sort of insight, and they are far from equal: revelations and reversals. Aristotle discusses both in *Poetics*. A revelation (*anagnorisis*) is an increment of information that changes our understanding of the present. In *Lamb*'s first act, learning that Patrick can sing is a revelation. So is finding out he's put the farm up for sale, that Annie is opposed to this and that Kathleen is being assessed for independent living. Often, too, there's what Alfred Hitchcock called a MacGuffin, an object that focuses attention on everything we think we do not know but must discover. In *Lamb*, this is Mary's recipe book. In Act I scene 2, the night before the funeral, Patrick comes home drunk to find Kathleen and Annie using the recipe book to make crumbed cutlets. He grabs it from them and they quarrel. Later he says to Annie: 'Mum's written stuff down in there. Personal stuff.' Annie replies, 'In her recipe book?'

A reversal (*peripeteia*) is a particular kind of revelation – the nuclear kind. It changes not just our understanding of the present but of the past and future as well. No MacGuffin can focus our attention on this information because we don't know we don't know it. Revelations change one aspect of a situation. Reversals change the whole situation. We are not the same person after as before. Reversals do more than provide for insight. They inflict it.

The most important word in any stage play is 'when'. As a succession of related events (or events that are related because they are successive), meaning is created by choice of point of temporal insertion. Learning that a character is a murderer at the beginning of a story is different from learning it at the end. 'When' determines the difference between relief and grief, love and hate, life and death. The messenger arrives *at the last minute*. Or they don't. The child is rescued *at the critical moment*. Or they aren't.

Think of a reversal as the destruction of 'when', the death of time. Events blur in such a way that past, present and future liquify into a single register of understanding. The first and best-known reversal is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In this play, the King of Thebes discovers he has killed his father and married his mother. An outcome, we may all agree, that isn't good. What provides

Oedipus his moment of truth, however, is connecting it to the prophecy that he would do exactly this. His whole life he thought he was running away from his predicted fate when actually he was running towards it.

Reversals can be good or bad, large or small, frivolous or profound. There are as many registers of understanding as there are things to understand and people to understand them. Their essential characteristic is what I call ‘retrospective narrative activation’ – realising that a thing that happened one way actually happened another; that its real meaning is different from its perceived meaning; that, as a result, the real meaning of other things is different too.

The longest scene in *Lamb* is Act II scene 2, and it’s a monster. The actors and I dubbed it Big Momma. It goes for forty-one minutes. The average length of a scene in television drama is two-and-a-half minutes. The longest scene in Shakespeare is fifteen minutes. To construct and propel a continuous sequence of action between three characters of this extended length is Jane’s greatest technical achievement in the play. The scene comprises a number of carefully linked exchanges that blend together information from the past, present and future. For Patrick and Annie, *the past* is the riddle of their parents’ lives, why they did what they did. *The present* is what they face now. The fact that Patrick hates the farm but thinks he has to keep it because where would Kathleen go? The fact that Annie is suffering from crippling anxiety and no longer has a career because she can’t sing.

The great challenge of Big Momma is tapping into its anger. Normally, when actors play angry, an approximation will do. Bit of shouting, a little redness in the face. Some pointing of fingers. *Lamb* requires the other kind. The searing, vicious, unforgivable, I-can’t-even-bear-to-watch-this anger that only people who love each other completely can ever display. From deep within a magma spew of awfulness emerges the reversal. It starts with revelations about what Mary kept in her recipe book – every clipping on Annie’s career, every letter she wrote home, her whole life annotated by her mum – and goes nuclear with the discovery that it was Frank, not Mary, who was the singer in the family and Patrick, not Annie, who inherited his talent:

PATRICK You were all she talked about at the end. Even though you’d gone. Kept asking me to sing to her and then, then I realised, she thought I was Dad...

ANNIE      You were the one they got right Patrick.

PATRICK   And you were the one they set free.

ANNIE      What did she write in there, about you?

PATRICK   Nothing. There's nothing about me in there. Not one word.

She wrote about Kathleen being born, life, up until she realised that Kathleen was...

Then she stopped, writing about us. And Dad, he stopped singing.

It was him, him that sang, Annie, not her.

ANNIE      But she told us, it was her, that she gave it up, for...

PATRICK   It was always him.

AFTER WE GOT into the Frankston Arts Centre, our production manager took the ghost light off the stage. It was not the first time it had been removed during COVID-19, but it was the first time for us. The first time in a year.

The Arts Centre's auditorium is wide, curved and deep. Its proscenium arch is an ocean of umbrous dark on which *Lamb's* farmhouse-cum-pub set floated like a brilliantly lit Spanish galleon. In 2020, the tour had twice been cancelled. Three days into our 2021 rehearsals, a snap lockdown nearly killed it off again. I had a new Patrick who had to learn the entire play – including the complex twists and turns of *Big Momma* – in just over a week. Yet here we were.

During *Lamb's* rehearsals, I saw up close the ruin and confusion the pandemic had wrought on people I had known for years, sometimes for decades. They were not now themselves. Their heads wobbled when they talked, and their eyes were preternaturally bright. Their sentences began in ordered fashion but then skidded off topic and became emotional, entangled in personal story. I wondered if their brows were hot but could think of no way to empirically test this that would not cause offence. That January I grasped what I had previously guessed but had not been able to confirm because this was the first time I'd seen anybody. These artists were really, really angry. I had had a little to do with the federal government, a very little. From them, I heard that support for 'arts and culture' *was* forthcoming, that the money *had* been there. But if it was, it wasn't there 'when' it was needed. I was taken aback by what I witnessed, the scale of it. Directors are people who fix things, that's the job. No way I could fix this.



On opening night, as the rain grew heavier, our audience materialised like an army of spirits summoned from the void. One minute, the Arts Centre foyer was empty. The next, there they were, mums and dads, and people who looked like they'd lost their way to a footy match, and kids studying the play in Year 12. The mood was...I don't have a word for it. Thankful. Special. Ordinary. Amazed at being gathered together again after so long for this whatever-it-was-going-to-be night at the theatre. Then, the show.

In a reversal, you have to connect the dots in an active way. Though knowledge comes at you like a air-to-surface missile, you must decide what to do with it. New understanding brings new choices about what could or should happen next. This is the door of the future swinging open. There is always promise in that, however bad the confrontation with the past might be. Even Oedipus got to die a peaceful death eventually.

Halfway through *Big Momma*, Kathleen appears carrying Mary's recipe book. When her brother and sister see this, they know she's read what their mother has written in it about her. If realising the anger of Patrick and Annie is the biggest acting challenge of the scene, doing justice to Kathleen's grief is its most painful. There is no way to soften the blow. After talking about the trauma of the drought of 2006, which nearly killed their parents and finished the farm, Kathleen asks:

KATHLEEN Am I ill because of Mum?

PATRICK What?

KATHLEEN Because she didn't want me?

PATRICK No, *no* of course not—

KATHLEEN Did Mum do something, to make me ill?

PATRICK Mum would never have done—

KATHLEEN But why did she keep me, if she didn't want me?

What do you say to that? The right words are vital. And the timing too, because the moment of assist is a slim one, the tyranny of 'when'. But if we can find them, if we can *make the connection*, then a reversal happens, and a way forward is born. In *Lamb*, it is Annie, the shattered daughter, now on the mend, who does this by saying to her sister:

ANNIE She did, Kat, she did want you...she did, she just, wanted other things too.

And that's enough. Around these healing words a different world wheels into view. Annie elects to stay on the unsold farm. Patrick gets to leave it to finally pursue his music. Kathleen opts for a life of greater independence. Everything changes. Yet everything stays intact. Nothing is lost but the pain of a memory that, once confronted, turns out to hold the secret of its own redemption.

AFTER *LAMB* FINISHED, people poured out of the Arts Centre and my heart went with them. I thought, 'I'll never have a night like this again.' I've had some bling openings, with the great and the good, and some of them have gone well, too. But Frankston was more than a memorable evening in the theatre. It was a true one.

Here, then, is my own reversal, blindsiding me as all reversals do, joining things up that, until then, had been separate in my mind. Rehearsing *Lamb*, I saw that the misery of Australian artists *in the present*, the indifference, ignorance, denigration and neglect with which we are treated by governments and often, alas, by the public too – let's call this 'the culture question' – and the terrible record of Australia's colonisation *in the past*, the violence, voracity, ruthlessness and myopia with which the country was settled and run – let's call this 'the history question' – are linked phenomena. The blindness of Australia to 'arts and culture' is of a piece with its blindness to the country's white history – two strands in a narrative that are closely related, in a recipe book we now must open and read. Like the *Lamb* siblings, Australian artists wonder what has traduced their lives. Like the *Lamb* siblings, the answer lies in our family story. The signs are staring us in the face. All we have to do is connect them.

With the Arts Centre deserted, the *Lamb* team and I emerged into a town as empty as any the pandemic had delivered to date. We sucked in damp air. No sign of my street bums now. I hoped they were safe and warm in bed, dreaming of summits to come. The clouds had dispersed and the moon had risen, rain-washed and pure. We were alone. *Frankston, at night, with artists*. I contemplated my reversal and all that it implied.

The term *peripeteia* means something particular in drama, and I am trying to communicate it here. Aristotle defines it as a reversal, 'a change to the opposite in the actions being performed'. In life, a reversal is always an undoing, always a defeat. In a play, reversals offer a bubble universe of new

possibility alongside their onslaught of difficult information. The content of reversals is ever-changing. But the courage needed to face them is drama's equivalent of the Planck constant. It involves allowing the pain of battering events to enter our consciousness and fully touch us. To no longer keep the pain of memory *out*. Contained therein is the jewel of *aletheia*, of a truth that is a transcendence that is a freedom that we call, more simply, hope.

The last scene of *Lamb* is also its first. The play loops back to the moment Frank and Mary first meet. The scene is short, especially in comparison to *Big Momma* – no more than a couple of minutes. The actors switch characters in full view of the audience. One moment we are looking at Patrick and Annie; then we are looking at the parents.

Frank and Mary gaze up into the night sky, as I looked up into the Frankston night sky. Infinite possibility is the feeling of the couple's first meeting – a feeling that will, in time, and out of time, be rediscovered by their children. Though the scene's surface action is about events long ago, events that exist now only in memory, its real meaning is about the hopeful things that might happen in the lives of the characters, next.

That might happen in all our lives, next.

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A previous contributor to *Griffith Review*, Julian Meyrick is Professor of Creative Arts at Griffith University. He is literary adviser for the Queensland Theatre, general editor of Currency House's Platform Paper series, and a board member of Northern River Performing Arts and the Council of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. His book *Australian Theatre after the New Wave: Policy, Subsidy and the Alternative Artist* appeared in 2017. *What Matters? Talking Value in Australian Culture*, co-authored with Robert Phiddian and Tully Barnett, was published by Monash University Publishing in 2018.