



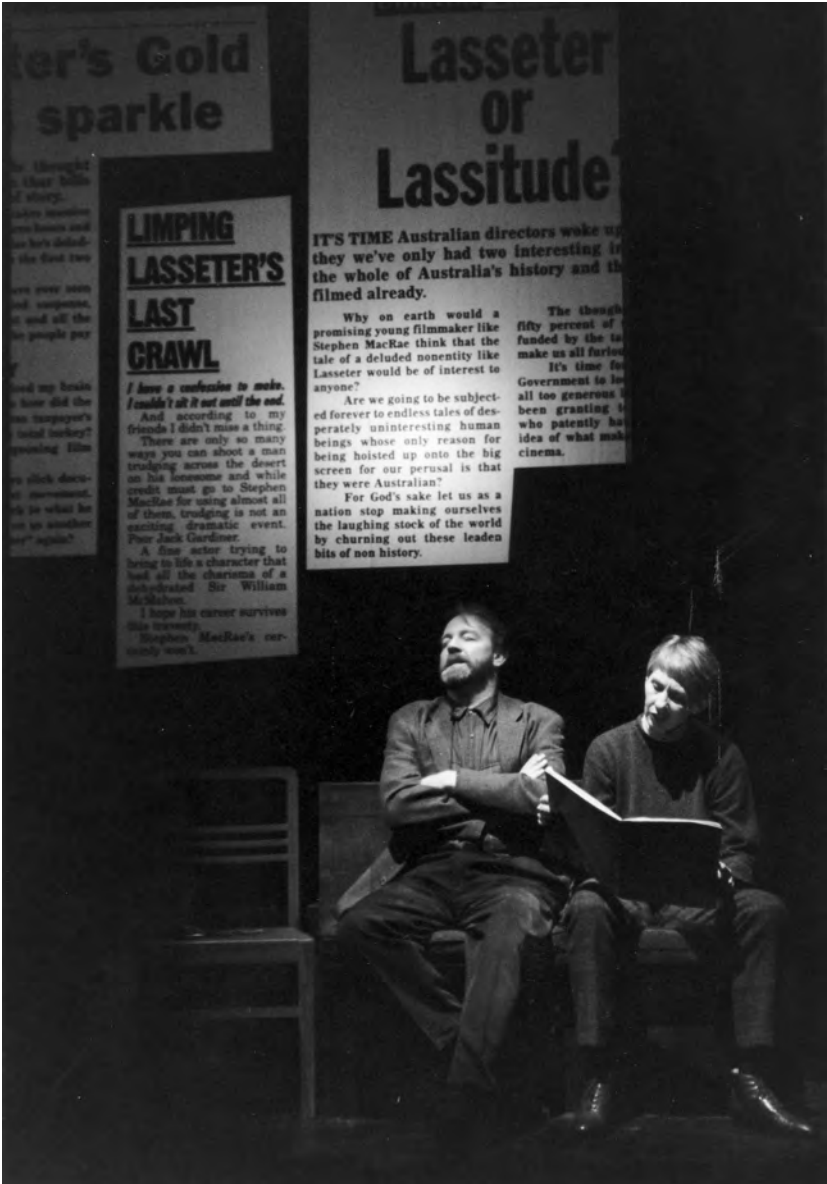
David Williamson's first full-length play, *The Coming of Stork*, premiered at the La Mama Theatre, Carlton, in 1970 and later became the film *Stork*, directed by Tim Burstall.

The Removalists and *Don's Party* followed in 1971, then *Jugglers Three* (1972), *What If You Died Tomorrow?* (1973), *The Department* (1975), *A Handful of Friends* (1976), *The Club* (1977) and *Travelling North* (1979). In 1972 *The Removalists* won the Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Award for best stage play and the best script in any medium and the British production saw Williamson nominated most promising playwright by the London Evening Standard.

The 1980s saw his success continue with *Celluloid Heroes* (1980), *The Perfectionist* (1982), *Sons of Cain* (1985), *Emerald City* (1987) and *Top Silk* (1989); whilst the 1990s produced *Siren* (1990), *Money and Friends* (1991), *Brilliant Lies* (1993), *Sanctuary* (1994), *Dead White Males* (1995), *Heretic* (1996), *Third World Blues* (an adaptation of *Jugglers Three*) and *After the Ball* (both in 1997), and *Corporate Vibes* and *Face to Face* (both in 1999). *The Great Man* (2000), *Up for Grabs*, *A Conversation*, *Charitable Intent* (all in 2001), *Soulmates* (2002), *Birthrights* (2003), *Amigos*, *Flatfoot* (both in 2004), *Operator* and *Influence* (both 2005) have since followed.

Williamson is widely recognised as Australia's most successful playwright and over the last thirty years his plays have been performed throughout Australia and produced in Britain, United States, Canada and many European countries. A number of his stage works have been adapted for the screen, including *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *The Club*, *Travelling North*, *Emerald City*, *Sanctuary* and *Brilliant Lies*.

David Williamson has won the Australian Film Institute film script award for *Petersen* (1974), *Don's Party* (1976), *Gallipoli* (1981) and *Travelling North* (1987) and has won eleven Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Awards. He lives on Queensland's Sunshine Coast with his writer wife, Kristin Williamson.



Bille Brown as Stephen (older) with Jennifer Flowers as Judy (older) in the 1997 Queensland Theatre Company production. (Photo: Rob MacColl)

*After the
Ball*

DAVID
WILLIAMSON



Currency Press • Sydney

CURRENCY PLAYS

First published in 1997
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia
enquiries@currency.com.au
www.currency.com.au

Reprinted 2000, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013

Copyright © David Williamson, 1997

COPYING FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES:

The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of this book, whichever is the greater, to be copied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

For details of the CAL licence for educational institutions please contact CAL, Level 15, 233 Castlereagh Street, Sydney, NSW 2000; tel: within Australia 1800 066 844 toll free; outside Australia +61 2 9394 7600; fax: +61 2 9394 7601; email: info@copyright.com.au.

COPYING FOR OTHER PURPOSES:

Except as permitted under the Act, for example a fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. All enquiries should be made to the publisher at the above address.

Any performance or public reading of *After the Ball* is forbidden unless a licence has been received from the author or the author's agent. The purchase of this book in no way gives the purchaser the right to perform the play in public, whether by means of a staged production or a reading. All applications for public performance should be made to the author, c/- Cameron Creswell Agency, Locked Bag 848, Surry Hills NSW 2010; tel: +61 2 9319 7199; email: info@cameronsmanagement.com.au

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA CIP DATA

Williamson, David, 1942–.

After the ball

ISBN 978 0 86819 537 7.

1. Williamson, David, 1942–. After the ball. II. Title. III. Title:
After the ball.

(Series: Currency Plays)

A822.3

Printed by Finline Print & Copy Service, St Peters, NSW
Cover photograph shows Penny Everingham as Kate (older) and Billie Brown as Stephen (older) in the 1997 Queensland Theatre Company production. Photo: Rob MacColl.

Contents

<i>Introduction:</i> David Williamson	<i>vii</i>
<i>A Classic Text:</i> Robyn Nevin	<i>xi</i>
Act One	1
Act Two	35



Left to right: Melissa McMahon as Judy (younger), Carol Burns as Kate (younger) and Anthony Weigh as Stephen (younger) in the 1997 Queensland Theatre Company production. (Photo: Rob MacColl)

Introduction

David Williamson

Usually when I'm writing a play it starts with the recollection of a particular incident or person and the emotions connected with that recollection. *After the Ball* was sparked by the death of my mother at four in the morning. I was the only other person there.

One of my very favourite playwrights is the Russian dramatist, Anton Chekhov. The puzzle that Chekhov always seems to be investigating in his plays is why it is that human beings are almost always disappointed with the progress of their lives in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Why is it that human happiness seems so transitory, so difficult to achieve and so rare? A movie producer I briefly worked with in Los Angeles was possibly the wealthiest man I had ever met, yet, with a drug addicted son, and an uncontrollable fourteen year old daughter, he was not a happy man.

Drama in this sense is less a way to solve human problems than a tool to look at why these problems are so deeply rooted and so seemingly intractable. Drama can show us in a focussed way that is rarely available to us in life, that we're a strange and complex mixture of ruthless ego and tender compassion, of fairness and decency and deceit and duplicity. Drama can show us the ways in which we try and disguise our egotism, sometimes from others, sometimes from ourselves, by the use of self justifying rhetoric. The best drama, like Chekhov's, can show us with power and clarity that we have so many inner contradictions at our core that happiness is probably an unrealistic expectation for most of us most of the time. What I think Chekhov finally tells us is that the most we can hope for are brief moments of true happiness which we should cherish, and that most of the rest of the time we will be doing well if we can

merely keep functioning in the midst of a maelstrom of other people's competing egos, needs and agendas. And that the impetus for us to keep going is, unfortunately, more often anxiety and fear than "happiness". The best and most honest drama tells us just how hard it is, and what courage it often takes, to merely keep our heads above water in the churning social sea in which we all must swim.

After the Ball, despite the fact that we will often invite the laughter of recognition, is not essentially about happiness. When my mother was dying, I tried to talk her through that last hour without knowing whether she could hear me. The nurse said, "Probably—hearing's the last thing to go." I talked to her in the sort of way my character, Stephen, talks to his dying mother in the play. Given this admission, is the drama I write simply a transcription of life, and is this latest play my most blatant bit of life borrowing? Yes and no. It's certainly close in many areas. My purpose in writing it was partly to try and make sense of the family I grew up in and the impact that family had had on me.

It *is* an attempt, among other things, to look at the sadness and humour that occur when two partners as mismatched as my parents are bound together for life in holy matrimony in an era in which divorce was all but unthinkable. (It is *not*, however, a play on the social issue of marriage and its limitations. I recently attended the funeral of my mother's sister who had a marriage that was characterised by fifty-five years of love and respect.)

It's also a play about what happens to an eleven-year-old when the capacity of the human psyche for duplicity is starkly revealed to him. Here again I *have* borrowed from life. At the age of eleven my parents had an argument so ferocious that the end of the marriage seemed imminent. My mother raced from the room, apparently in tears. I followed her, worried, to the laundry where, to my astonishment, I found her giggling to herself. She didn't see me and I crept away; but many, many years later, after more than one drink on both our parts, I plucked up the courage to ask her about the incident. Her reply was, I think, astonishing in its directness and candour. You're going to have to read the play to find out what it was, but it's a reply that caused me, and my character Stephen, forty years on, to re-evaluate the nature of our parents' relationship. But in the same way as my play *Don's Party* is not the transcription of a

tape recording of an actual party, *After the Ball* is not a literal transcription of my life in my family.

The play is shaped to sharpen the conflicts and their consequences beyond the strictly autobiographical. I have created a Stephen who is more declamatory, vulnerable and desperate than I think I am, and he has a sister who survives the marital warfare more robustly than I think my brother and I did. I did this to make the drama stronger and the issues debated more sharply contested. In the play, Stephen's sister, Judy, also discovers that her mother is taunting her father, but at seventeen, and with different sympathies, it has a totally different impact on her life.

The play diverges from life in order to suggest that the same seminal event, interpreted differently by the two siblings, can have vastly different outcomes. On Stephen's part it helps to engender a fear of torment and a distrust of humanity. He has decided, in his sister's words, that the "world is cruel and heartless and he's closed down all connections". Judy has remained open and warm and compassionate, and this difference feeds into the way they see the future of Australia itself. Stephen believes that Europe has generated a priceless artistic heritage and has relocated himself there permanently rather than live in an Australia that he sees as progressively turning its back on its heritage. His sister Judy believes that Australia is an exciting country that is forging a new identity that is not European, not Asian, but something uniquely its own, and she could no more leave it than stop breathing.

I've been asked, and indeed during the writing of the play I had to ask myself, whether I identified with the viewpoint of Stephen or that of Judy. The truthful answer is that I identified with both. This is often what I find happening when I write. The more pessimistic and optimistic sides of my psyche are split into different characters for the sake of heightened drama. I like writing about situations in which I'm never quite sure what I believe or what I feel because it enables me to inhabit a range of characters with sympathy and conviction.

Writing this particular play has made me face up to the question of whether my life's preoccupation—to analyse people in conflict—has arisen from my own family experience. My wife Kristin says there is no doubt that this is so. When she first met my parents she

was astonished by their non-stop repartee. My brother and I might have been turning white with anguish, but she found it intriguing and entertaining. The power of drama, unlike film, which usually focusses on a central protagonist with whom we uncritically “identify”, is that the dramatist can keep an ironic focus on *all* of the characters and ask the audience to make up their own minds about who are the good guys and the bad guys. This, hopefully, will be true of *After the Ball*. I always invite the audiences and readers of my plays to laugh at the egotism and blindness of my characters, but at the same time to remain sympathetic to the fact, as Kristin was to my brother and me, that the characters themselves aren’t having fun. The truth is we *all* behave foolishly a lot of the time. It is truly, I think, part of the human condition.

Marcus Beach
July 1997

*To the memory of my parents
Elvie May and Edwin Keith David Williamson,
loved and missed by their two sons,
and finally at peace.*



Left to right: Gael Ballantyne as Claire, Carol Burns as Kate (younger) and Sally McKenzie as Maureen in the 1997 Queensland Theatre Company production. (Photo: Rob MacColl)

After the Ball was first produced by Queensland Theatre Company at the Suncorp Theatre, Brisbane, on 3 July 1997 with the following cast:

KATE MACRAE (older)	Penny Everingham
JUDY MACRAE (older)	Jennifer Flowers
STEPHEN MACRAE (older)	Bille Brown
RON MACRAE	Max Gillies
KATE MACRAE (younger)	Carol Burns
JUDY MACRAE (younger) / NURSE	Melissa McMahon
STEPHEN MACRAE (younger)	Anthony Weigh
CLAIRE CUMMINS	Gael Ballantyne
MAUREEN DONAHUE	Sally McKenzie

Director, Robyn Nevin
Designer, Bill Haycock
Lighting Designer, David Walters
Music, Max Lambert

CHARACTERS

KATE MACRAE (older)
JUDY MACRAE (older)
STEPHEN MACRAE (older)
RON MACRAE
KATE MACRAE (younger)
JUDY MACRAE (younger) / NURSE
STEPHEN MACRAE (younger)
CLAIRE CUMMINS
MAUREEN DONAHUE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The excerpts from Terence Rattigan's *French Without Tears* quoted in the rehearsal scene on pages 24-28 are reproduced with kind permission of Nick Hern Books, London.

ACT ONE

Dark stage. On a screen the date 1996 is projected. This facility is used throughout the play to pinpoint the year in which the action takes place.

Lights slowly up to reveal KATE, in her seventies, lying in a hospice bed with a morphine drip in her arm. JUDY, her daughter, a woman of fifty-one, sits next to the bed. KATE becomes conscious and looks at JUDY.

KATE: Is he coming?

JUDY: He rang from the airport. He hired a car and he's on his way.

KATE sighs and drops off to sleep. STEPHEN enters quietly. JUDY looks up at her brother, who is one year older than she is. She gets up and embraces him with tears in her eyes. KATE wakes and stares at her son.

KATE: You came!

STEPHEN: Of course I came.

KATE: You came.

STEPHEN kisses his mother. She grabs his hand and clutches it with all her remaining strength, then sighs and lapses back into unconsciousness. STEPHEN is beckoned out of earshot by his sister and moves away from his mother's bed.

JUDY: Sometimes she's awake and can hear what you're saying.

STEPHEN: Is she in pain?

JUDY: She says she isn't. It's a very aggressive cancer but she's on a heavy morphine drip.

STEPHEN: Her mind hasn't gone. She definitely recognised me.

JUDY: She can still be quite lucid for a short stretch.

STEPHEN: Sorry I didn't come earlier.

JUDY: You got here in time.

STEPHEN: The bloody doctors were infuriating. All they would say is that it could be a month or it could be days. How are Ray and the kids?

JUDY: They're not kids any more.

STEPHEN: No I guess they're not.

JUDY: They're fine. Your family?

STEPHEN: Fine. Do we have to stay in her house at that retirement village?

JUDY: It's only minutes from here. We could get a call in the night and I don't want to be an hour and a half away.

STEPHEN: I'm not staying there for a month!

JUDY: The nurse I trust says it's just a matter of days.

STEPHEN: I've got to be in Spain at the end of next week. If she hangs on I'll just have to go and come back.

JUDY: [*tersely*] Maybe you might have to cancel Spain. Death doesn't always fit in with schedules.

STEPHEN: Are there any decent hotels nearby?

JUDY: No. Is it that horrific to have to briefly share a house with your sister?

STEPHEN: That retirement village freaks me out.

JUDY: You've only been there twice.

STEPHEN: The walking frames were bad enough, but the thing that really got to me were those gliding electric wheelchairs.

JUDY: It's quite a cheerful village.

STEPHEN: Cheerful? Please. They send a guy around each morning yelling, "Bring out your dead."

JUDY: [*getting up to go*] If I don't get back there and rest I'll be one of them. [*She indicates their mother.*] She sleeps through the night, so there's no point staying after six or so. Do you remember the way?

STEPHEN: I'll follow the ambulances.

JUDY: Pick up some Chinese food or something.

STEPHEN: Watch those wheelchairs. You can't hear them coming and their drivers can't see.

They embrace. JUDY has tears in her eyes.

JUDY: [*indicating KATE*] I didn't think it'd make me this—upset. I'm glad you came.

She leaves. STEPHEN watches her go, then turns and sits by his mother's bed. KATE opens her eyes.

KATE: I'll be with your father again soon.

Pause.

Whether he likes it or not.

STEPHEN: Do you need anything? Water?

KATE: Music.

STEPHEN moves across to the CD player and selects a disc.

Not that one. The other. Did you hear me? I'll be with your father again soon.

STEPHEN: Yes.

KATE: Whether he likes it or not. Probably not. Third track.

STEPHEN nods and puts it on. The music starts. It's "After the Ball is Over"—a redigitalised version of an old thirties recording. STEPHEN and KATE listen to it. STEPHEN looks at his mother who drifts off to sleep.

* * * * *

1996. Later that evening. STEPHEN is with his sister in their mother's living room, a tidy but soulless modern unit in a retirement village. It's about 9pm. Photo albums and packets of photos that didn't make the album are strewn around the floor, together with a cuttings album and various metal boxes containing the family documents. The screen on which dates are projected is also used to allow the audience to see the particular photo or document that is being scrutinised. JUDY is thumbing through the photo album and STEPHEN is looking over her shoulder. JUDY stops at one and they both look at it. On the screen we see a black and white shot of their mother as a young bride on the morning of the wedding. She's a very beautiful nineteen year old in a full bridal dress and veil. She's holding a large bunch of flowers and the train of her dress is held by a pretty

young girl of six or seven. The backdrop, her parents' house, is unmistakably shabby—a cobbled brick garden and a latticework verandah behind with slats missing.

JUDY: God you forget.

STEPHEN: How beautiful she was?

JUDY: No. The house she grew up in. It explains a lot.

The next shot they stop at is of their parents after the wedding ceremony. Their father, RON, handsome in his morning suit, and their mother radiant.

STEPHEN: The agony begins.

JUDY: Deep down I think they loved each other.

STEPHEN *looks at his sister, surprised.*

Maybe not “loved”, but certainly “needed”. I know Mum was always teasing Dad—

STEPHEN: Teasing? *Tormenting.*

JUDY: *He gave her* a hard time too.

STEPHEN: All he ever did was defend himself.

JUDY: He treated her as if she was stupid. Which she wasn't.

STEPHEN: The madder she got him the more she enjoyed it. Up to the time I caught her giggling—

JUDY: [*wearily nodding*] In the laundry—

STEPHEN: —in the laundry, I thought she was just as upset as he was.

And there she was laughing her head off. What was I supposed to make of that? At the age of eleven?

JUDY: People don't torment other people without a reason.

STEPHEN: Don't they? You try and survive in a schoolyard when you're six inches shorter than you should have been.

JUDY: For God's sake. Your hormones kicked in a bit late and occasionally you got teased.

STEPHEN: You *still* have no idea what my school years were like, do you? Miss Well Adjusted, Miss Bright and Chirpy, Miss Ring a Ring a Rosie—everybody's friend.

JUDY: [*irritated*] Everybody gets teased in the schoolyard.

STEPHEN: Yeah, yeah.

JUDY: It wasn't that bad. You were coming top of your class every year.

STEPHEN: That made it worse.

JUDY: You had friends.

STEPHEN: One. The other outcast.

JUDY: Spare me the agony.

STEPHEN: You want to know how bad it got? It got to the point where I didn't want to be alive. You want to know why I felt warmer about Dad than I ever will about our mother? At least he noticed that I was going through some sort of crisis.

JUDY: Did he ever *do* anything?

STEPHEN: Yes he did. And at the times when it really counted.

JUDY: Such as?

STEPHEN: My first school dance. The only girl I got up the courage to ask laughed in my face. I was genuinely suicidal. He knew something was wrong and he just sat with me and told me that I was brighter than any of them and that I'd have the last laugh in the long run.

JUDY: Well you have, so stop whingeing.

STEPHEN: I'm just trying to explain why I didn't particularly enjoy seeing Dad tormented.

JUDY: The truth is *Mum* was the vulnerable one in that relationship.

STEPHEN: Vulnerable? Her tongue's a lethal weapon. Vulnerable about *what*?

JUDY: About the fact that she was a working class girl from Brunswick whose father was a labourer. About the fact that she didn't have a chance to get a decent education. About the fact that Dad's family didn't want him to marry her.

STEPHEN: You just won't face up to the fact that our mother was *malignant!*

JUDY: You just won't face up to the fact that our father was a pompous old bigot.

STEPHEN: I should have told you back then when I caught her giggling in the laundry. At least you would've understood just what was going on.

JUDY: I knew.

STEPHEN: You knew?

JUDY: I caught her out too.

STEPHEN: When?

JUDY: When I was about seventeen.

STEPHEN stares at his sister and she nods, affirming that she's telling the truth. They remain on stage, and the focus shifts to their younger selves as we see a re-enactment of the moment when JUDY too became aware of the game their mother played.

* * * * *

The date projected on the screen changes to 1963. We are in the living room of KATE and RON's house in Glenhuntly, a south eastern suburb of Melbourne. KATE, played by a younger actress than the one who plays the KATE we have already met, is in her early forties, slim, attractive and personable. RON is in his late forties. STEPHEN is eighteen and JUDY is seventeen. They too are played by actors younger than the ones playing the mature JUDY and STEPHEN. The family are all watching television. The news is being announced that the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, has decided that the new unit of decimal currency, which will be introduced in three years time, will be known as the Dollar.

RON: That'd be right.

KATE: What would?

RON: [*disgusted*] That they'd call it a dollar. Britain gives us Shakespeare, America gives us Elvis Presley, and who do you think our government prefers? They might as well make us the fifty-first state.

JUDY: Dad will you shut up. We're trying to listen.

RON: This is my house young lady. Remember that.

KATE: [*to RON*] Britain, Britain—you're always on about bloody Britain. You've read that biography of Winston Churchill three times.

RON: He was the greatest statesman of our era.