



Photo: Tony Lewis

Sean Riley was born in Burnie, Tasmania, in 1967 and spent most of his childhood dreaming of escape. He got his wish in 1989, when he moved to Adelaide, taking Oddbodies, the theatre company he co-founded with Kim Liotta, with him. His recent writing credits include *The Time of Ashes* (Urban Myth Theatre of Youth, UMTOY for Come Out 01); *The Last Acre* (Oddbodies, 2003); *Significant Others* (Oddbodies, 2005); *My Sister Violet* (UMTOY, 2005); *The Sad Ballad of Penny Dreadful* (Windmill Performing Arts and Mainstreet Theatre, 2006); *Beautiful Words* (Oddbodies, 2006); and *The Angel and The Priest* (Oddbodies as part of the Adelaide Festival, 2008).

His play *Significant Others* was short-listed for the Patrick White Playwright Award, and *Beautiful Words* won the Adelaide Theatre Guide's Curtain Call Award for Best Dramatic Production of the 2005/06 season; the Adelaide Theatre Critic's 2006 Ozcart Award for Best New Play; the 2004 Jill Blewett Playwright's Award; was nominated for a 2007 AWGIE for Best Play for Young Audiences and short-listed for the 2004 Patrick White Playwright's Award. *The Angel and the Priest* received an Honorable Mention for the RAI Prix Italia's award for original work and was broadcast as a radio play on ABC Radio National.

A 2004 recipient of an Australia Council Literature Board Established Writers New Work Grant and the 2005 Arts SA Established Artist Fellowship, Sean is currently writing and developing several projects, including *The Poisoned Wife*, a feature-length screenplay set in 1850s Tasmania.



Kim Liotta (left) as Pearl and Jacqy Phillips as Lurl from the 2006 Oddbodies Theatre Company production in Adelaide. Part 2: Pantheon. (Photo: Tony Lewis)

*Beautiful
Words*

Sean Riley



Currency Press, Sydney

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Front cover shows Andreas Sobik as Papa and Eliza Lovell as Mama from Part One: Zugang; back cover shows Tim Morgan as Ari and Eliza Lovell as his Mother, from Part Three: Epiphany. Both photographs from the 2006 Oddbodies production. (Photography: Tony Lewis)

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Introduction

Beautiful Words, Harsh Realities and Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Murray Bramwell

In December 2001 a story was published in the *Age* newspaper about a young Afghan girl named Zaynab. Her photo shows a very typical looking 12-year-old wearing a boldly patterned headscarf—but, unlike most 12-year-olds, her expression is solemn, her eyes downcast. The report notes that although she is in the care of her uncle, a government spokesman says her future in Australia is uncertain.

Zaynab was one of only four children who survived the sinking of the infamous SIEV-X, a boat containing more than 400 refugees from Afghanistan via Jakarta, which capsized in international waters causing 65 men, 142 women and 146 children to drown. From Zaynab's immediate family her mother, father and four siblings all lost their lives. Her six-year-old brother Mahmoud died beside her, as the report says, 'choking on a deadly cocktail of fuel and seawater'.¹

This article, says Sean Riley, was one of the triggers for his play for young people, *Beautiful Words*, written and developed over four years from late 2001. During that time a number of maritime emergencies occurred in addition to SIEV-X. There was also the Tampa crisis in August 2001 and the infamous 'children overboard' incident just days prior to the December 2001 Federal Election.

'There was a whole lot of turmoil and press about children overboard,' Riley recalls, 'and it seriously took my breath away, this clinical, detached approach to children. How could the government provide so little certainty for a child? And as I worked on the play I was able to observe how the world was changing, how borders were changing and how politics and public opinion were altering.'²

Much has been written documenting the politicisation of asylum seekers—the hardline policies against illegal immigrants, the use of

¹ Kelly Burke, 'Orphaned survivor faces uncertain future', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Dec 21, 2001.

² Personal interview with Sean Riley, Adelaide, 26 March, 2008. All subsequent quotes are from this conversation.

the navy to turn boats away, the expansion of detention centres on the Australian mainland and the establishment (known as the Pacific Solution) of detention centres on outlying islands such as Nauru.³ The slow processes of refugee verification, the arduous internment, including that of families and children, and the issuing of temporary visas created a climate of anxiety, uncertainty and despair. Some asylum seekers in custody resorted to violence and self-harm, sewing their lips together in silent protest and refusing food and medication.

These events formed a continuing narrative in the first years of the twenty-first century, amplified by the fear and mistrust of the Middle East and the Muslim religion after the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Australian society was divided about these questions. It became a major feature of political campaigns. In the lead-up to the election in November 2001 a defiant Prime Minister John Howard announced: 'We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'. Many Australians strongly supported punitive government action and policies, while others wrote letters of protest and formed support groups to assist refugees who were forbidden to work, yet expected to manage without support from the authorities.

These turbulent events form the background to *Beautiful Words* but they are not the subject of Sean Riley's play. When the Afghan boy, Ari, is miraculously washed up at Herring Bay in North Western Australia, it conjures up these recent occurrences—leaky boats, illegal entry, misery and death on the high sea—but the play is preoccupied with more personal imaginings and a larger timeframe also.

The contemporary events in the play are part of a larger wheel of history which goes back to 1945. In the first of its three sections, entitled *Zugang* (meaning 'access' in German), Riley begins his story in the Auschwitz Birkenau Camp in Poland in 1945, during the last weeks of the World War II and prior to Germany's surrender to the Allies.

Here the young gypsy boy, Roman Kansler, forms an unlikely, but very natural friendship with a German boy, Jan Klein-Rogge. They are

³ Some relevant further reading includes: Marr, David and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, Allen and Unwin, 2004. Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Wake of the Tampa*, New South Wales University Press, 2003. Robert Manne with David Corlett, 'Sending Them Home: Refugees and the New Politics of Indifference', *Quarterly Essay Issue* 13, 2004.

in a terrible place, one interned, the other a child of the jailers. But they are also just boys who love to hang out together and go skating, doing normal things in a cruelly insane environment. Jan learns how myths are devised to justify fears—slanderous stories about Jews and Gypsies, providing reasons to exclude and dominate. But his own experience also contradicts that. When he meets a Gypsy close up, and becomes friends with him, the stereotypes explode, the prejudice fades.

Something very similar happens in Part 2, *Pantheon*, named for the magical movie house run by the zany Pearl and Lurline up at Herring Bay. When Ari arrives he is a strange and frightened figure. The impulse of those who find him is to offer kindness and sanctuary. But there is also apprehension and suspicion as exhibited by Sheree, who not only runs the post office but is the self-appointed border protection monitor. For her, issues are black and white and the power of exclusion is an important part of her sense of her own belonging. We learn that she was not always Sheree, but was once called Otlia Pavlukovic. She carries painful memories as a recently arrived migrant herself, of being ridiculed for eating salami and called racist names. Her situation reminds us that, apart from the first inhabitants, everyone is a boat person, that Australian history is a succession of arrivals from somewhere else.

It could be said that *Beautiful Words* is about the suspicion that we have for 'other' people. We love our own kind of clannish loyalty, but often fear and despise those who are strange or different. Until, of course, we get to know them, then preconceptions and abstract hatreds tend to fall away.

Not only is this Riley's theme, it also his strategy. As his audience we are encouraged to recognise familiar bonds with the young Ari as he hides out at the Pantheon watching old movies. As he learns English from the beautiful words of the cinema, we share the pizzazz of Gene Kelly and Judy Garland, the romance of *Casablanca*, the dark intensity of Cagney and Garbo, and those powerful stories of home and the separation from it: Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* and the forlorn ET, pining to phone home. As Ari soaks up this popular culture, his emotions and aspirations are no different from ours, and just as familiar as Zaynab, the young SIEV-X survivor in the newspaper article, whose one wish was to learn English and study to be a doctor.

The migration stories in *Beautiful Words* cross several generations and deal with both simple and complex truths. As Riley observes of

those citizens close to the terrible events in the camps: 'I don't think everyone who was there believed in what they were doing'. If atrocities occur when good people do nothing, then small positive actions have large meanings. When Jan takes on the identity of his friend Roman, he is also doing penance and redeeming his shame for his family. When Saul Greenberg appears in Part 3, he is the international voice for refugees and he is also speaking out in a way that few did when his own mother was interned and narrowly escaped death in the camp.

Sean Riley is careful not to draw comparisons between current events and the Holocaust. He states that: 'In some ways I wanted to put things into rational comparison, to make clear that the Holocaust and asylum seeker issues are quite different. I wanted to debunk that myth—but also to show what happens when people stand aside and do nothing'.

Beautiful Words takes us in large sweeps from Europe to Afghanistan to various parts of Australia. But the connections are always precise and poignantly human ones. Sean Riley has said he wanted to find a way to express big questions with a young voice, one that will speak directly, and not down, to school-age audiences. And so he does with young Jan and Roman, Ari and Trent, and later, Ari and Toby. In the familiarity of their larking about, in the natural alliances they form—all other divisions, German and Gypsy, Afghan and backblocks Australian, dissolve. As they do with the older generations: Stella, the bitter widow of a Vietnam veteran is suspicious of her Muslim neighbour until a hospital emergency brings them together and barriers are broken down. Named for the young girl in the newspaper article which was one of the triggers for the play, the bonds the young refugee mother Zaynab form with her fellow Australian are both credible and hopeful.

Beautiful Words is a play of symmetries and magical coincidences, tribulations and strongly affirmative resolution. In vibrant, strongly theatrical ways—with music in Part 1, giddy comedy of Pearl and Lurl and their tinsel Pantheon in Part 2, and in the vivid scenes of connection in Part 3, Riley has created the credible conditions for reconciliation and understanding. In the memorable scene between Old Roman and Mrs Greenberg, rolling lemons under their toes to relieve their tired feet, a simple but powerful visual metaphor is established which typifies the play's instinctive humanity. The title refers to the enticing, but deceptive words, of dictators, but it also

refers to the hopeful lyrics of cinema musicals and the new words of a new language, experienced for the first time.

Sean Riley has said that he wanted *Beautiful Words* to be an epic play for young people 'that challenged them about the world we live in. It came from speaking to my young friends about the concerns they have about migration, the Eastern world, the battle between Christian and Muslim. And it is asking, sympathetically and without fear, if you had to leave your own country, would you want, would you expect, to be accepted somewhere else?'

Adelaide
April 2008

Murray Bramwell is Associate Professor in Drama at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia. He is also a theatre reviewer for the *Australian* and *Adelaide Review*.

*This play is dedicated to the memory of my nephew
Thomas Ian McLeod (1988 - 2005).*

First Production

Beautiful Words was first produced by Oddbodies Theatre Company, at Higher Ground, Adelaide, on 5 May 2006, with the following cast:

Kapo / Harry / Uncle Ramal	Craig Behenna
Mrs Damrosch / Pearl / Stella	Kim Liotta
Mama / Sheree / Ari's Mother / Helen / Zaynab	Eliza Lovell
Young Roman / Ari	Tim Morgan
Old Roman / Alf	Dennis Olsen
Toby / Jan / Trent	Gabriel Partington
Viorica / Lurline / Mrs Greenberg	Jacqy Phillips
Ion / Saul	Stephen Sheehan
Papa / Victor / Ari's Father / Technician	Andreas Sobik

Director, Sean Riley

Designer, Dean Hills

Lighting Designer, Sue Grey-Gardner

Sound Designer, Angus MacDonald

Part 1:
Zugang

Characters

- Actor 1: **Old Roman**, late 60s
- Actor 2: **Toby / Jan**, both 14
- Actor 3: **Mama**, early 40s
- Actor 4: **Papa**, early 40s
- Actor 5: **Mrs Damrosch**, early 50s
- Actor 6: **Viorica**, early 60s
- Actor 7: **Young Roman**, 15
- Actor 8: **Ion**, 40s
- Actor 9: **Kapo**, late 30s

Setting

The action moves between:

The present, a park in Australia; and
1945, Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp in Poland.

Scene One

A park. Night.

OLD ROMAN sits on a park bench at the edge of the space. He sings 'Keserves', a Hungarian lament, quietly.

TOBY skates around the space. He halts, a moment before OLD ROMAN stops singing.

Old Roman I don't know the rest.

Toby [*to the audience*] My grandfather sings in many languages, but speaks in only one. English. He was born somewhere in Europe, and came to this country when he was eighteen.

Old Roman How does it end?

Toby I don't know. [*To the audience*] What happened between birth and Australia is a no-go zone. He's never talked about it. That time. To anyone.

Old Roman [*to himself*] Something about a bird... in a cage...

Toby [*to the audience*] There are no photos. No memories. No friends.

Old Roman [*to himself*] And something about a letter arriving... I'm a stupid old man...

He pulls up his sleeve and stares at his arm.

Toby [*to the audience*] My grandfather has a tattoo on his arm. But it isn't a pretty thing. It's an ugly black number. B3606. The B stands for Birkenau, a section of Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, during World War Two. It was a horrible place. It's the reason he never talks about his past. And why we never ask.

Old Roman How does it end...? [*He rolls down his sleeve.*] You got chocolate?

TOBY gives him a chocolate bar. OLD ROMAN scoffs it.

Toby Jeez, Granddad—it's freezing. I don't know why we come here. People usually go to the park in the daytime. In summer.

Old Roman Stop your grizzling. You don't know what cold is. Besides, the stars are pretty.

TOBY watches him scoff the chocolate.

Toby I know why you like chocolate so much.

Old Roman Do you?

Toby Uh-huh. 'Cause you didn't have any when you were a kid. In the war.

Old Roman In war no one has anything. Especially chocolate.

Toby But where you were. It was worse. The camp.

Old Roman Why do you keep doing this? Asking these questions? Why the sudden interest?

Toby Because I want to know, Granddad.

Old Roman It's best forgotten.

Toby Lots of others don't think so. Other survivors. People like you.

Old Roman They are not like me. I am not like them.

Toby They have museums now.

Old Roman There are things... people... that should be left in peace.

Toby Why can't you tell me? I can handle it.

Old Roman *Enough!*

The lights change.

YOUNG ROMAN, a memory, enters and stands some distance away, and sings 'Keserves'.

OLD ROMAN stares at him and points.

Toby What is it, Granddad?

Old Roman Him.

Toby Who?

Old Roman [*pointing*] Him!

Toby I can't see anyone.

Old Roman Can't you hear him singing?

Toby Who?

The song ceases.

YOUNG ROMAN fades into the darkness.

Old Roman [*standing, to YOUNG ROMAN*] No! Don't leave me!

Toby Granddad!?

Old Roman [*to YOUNG ROMAN*] Tell me how it ends!

Toby Who are you talking to?

OLD ROMAN stares silently at TOBY.

Why can't you tell me? I only want to know because I love you. I deserve to know. Before you forget. Before you're not here anymore.

Silence.

TOBY's mood turns.

I'm tired of living with your ghosts. And I'm tired of the silence. And so is Mum. Why don't you tell me. Huh?

TOBY gives up and wanders away.

Old Roman [*making an effort*] It's a boy. A boy I remember. From the camp. His name was Roman. Roman Kansler.

Toby [*halting*] That's your name, Granddad.

Old Roman He was a fine boy. Strong. Proud. A gypsy boy... And there was another boy. Jan. Jan Klein-Rogge. A German boy, whose father worked at the camp... He was sickly, weak, lonely. But wilful. Far too big for his boots... They were so different. These two boys. From opposite sides of the wall. For them, a friendship was impossible. But sometimes... magic happens... even in the darkest of places.

A train bellows in the distance.

The lights change.

Scene Two

The German side of the wall. A courtyard at the edge of Birkenau concentration camp. Winter, 1945. Night-time.

Light spills from a house.

YOUNG ROMAN stands inside the gate. He is carrying a heavy sack. He walks closer, staring into the house.

MRS DAMROSCH, a servant, enters.

Mrs Damrosch What are you doing here?

Young Roman Coal. For their fire.

Mrs Damrosch Then leave it, and go.

Young Roman It's heavy. I can carry it in.

Mrs Damrosch Leave it. Don't come any closer. Drop it and go. You know the rules.

Young Roman You're one of us, and yet you talk like one of them.

Mrs Damrosch I do my job—just like you do yours. And I'm not one of you. My grandmother was German.

Young Roman So why are you here, then?

Silence.

YOUNG ROMAN dumps the sack and leaves.

MRS DAMROSCH locks the gate as MAMA enters.

Mrs Damrosch This is the courtyard.

Mama It's so bare.

Mrs Damrosch I scrub it every Tuesday and Friday.

Mama I don't expect you to—

Mrs Damrosch Commandant's orders. His wife is holding a dinner party for you and your husband tomorrow evening. I'll press your evening dress in the morning.

Mama Evening dress? I didn't think I'd need one.

Mrs Damrosch There are functions every week. You could drive to Biala tomorrow. There are some shops still open.

Mama No. Thank you.

Mrs Damrosch Then we must make do with what we have.

PAPA enters.

Your new home is to your satisfaction, sir?

Papa Yes. Most... satisfactory.

Mrs Damrosch Hardly the style you are accustomed to. But sacrifices must be made.

Papa Yes.

Mrs Damrosch Breakfast is served at seven-thirty.

Mama I think I can do that—

Mrs Damrosch The Commandant wouldn't hear of it. Now, if that's all, I'll bid you goodnight.

Papa Yes. Thank you.

MRS DAMROSCH exits.

Silence.

Mama Why have we come here?

Papa You know why. We could not refuse.

Mama I do not want him to know what is beyond these walls.

PAPA sighs.

What do we tell him? When he asks what is over there?

JAN enters from the house.

Jan I don't like this house. It has no attic. I want to go home.

Gypsy music begins.

Papa Listen. To the music.

Jan Where is it coming from?

Papa From the gypsy camp, on the other side of the wall.

Jan Gypsies? Why are they behind such a high wall? Are they dangerous?

Papa No... No, they're just...

Mama [*covering*] Loud. Very loud. They play their music all night long. So, it's only fair for everyone else that they play behind a wall. People have to sleep.

Papa That's right! Not everyone loves music as much as we do. It is good we are near the gypsies, yes? They are musical people. Like us. Violins, flutes, bells, tambourines... They even have a carousel, for their children.

Jan Can I go there, tomorrow?

Papa No. Not tomorrow...

Jan When?

Mama We'll see.

The lullaby turns into a lament.

Jan Have you ever met a real gypsy, Mama?

Mama No. But I remember, when I was a girl, I would hear them, from deep within the forest near my house. As if the trees were singing. Their sound was strange, exciting. Your Opa would warn me, 'Beware of the gypsies, they dance barefoot, they will lure you to the centre of the forest, steal all of your gold, charm you, and you will never come home'.

Jan So, they are dangerous?

Mama It was just a story. A fairytale.

Jan But Opa didn't like the gypsies?

Mama No one liked the gypsies.

Jan Why not? Did they steal his gold?

Mama Not all stories should be believed, Jan.

Papa Not everyone's memories can be trusted, either.

Mama It is up to you... to make up your own mind. But saying people are bad, without knowing the real story... well, this is unfair. Don't you think?

Jan Yes...

A train bellows in the distance.

The lights change.

Scene Three

The gypsy side of the wall.

VIORICA, ROMAN and ION with instruments.

Ion One more song, Mama?

Viorica No!

Ion One for good luck—?

Viorica Ha! We need more than luck in this place. No! I'm not singing any more. Not tonight. It's cold. My bones are aching. It's not like I'm singing for my supper any more, is it? What does it get me? Huh? Nothing.

Ion Music is our only wealth. It's what I live for. It's my inheritance.

Viorica Your inheritance! Look at where we are!

Ion Without it, I am nothing. [*Caressing his violin*] My good friend.

Viorica Hah! No wonder you never found a woman!

Roman A woman might betray you. A violin... never.

Viorica [*to ION*] Is this what you've been teaching my grandson?

Ion It's true!

Viorica [*to ROMAN*] Don't listen to your uncle. He knows nothing. He lives with his head in the clouds. Even as a baby, he was peculiar. And his ears stuck out.

Ion I was a beautiful child!

Viorica See? There he goes—lying again!

Ion You are so cruel!

Viorica Yes. I know. I'm a nasty old lady. And I'm tired. Tired of pretending that there is a future for us. Tired of singing songs when our friends and family are taken away, never to come back—