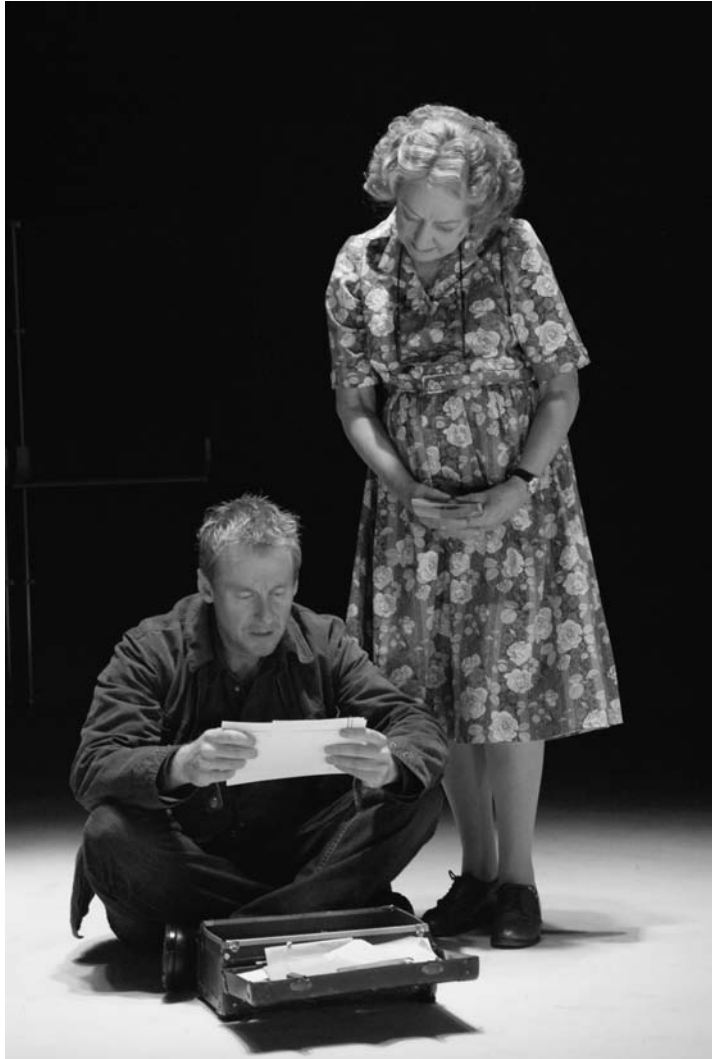




MICHAEL GOW is a writer and director. His writing credits for stage, screen and radio are extensive. His writing credits include the multi-award winning play *Away*, *The Kid*, *On Top of the World*, *Europe*, *1841*, *Furious*, *Sweet Phoebe*, *Live Acts on Stage*, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and *Toy Symphony*. He currently holds the role of Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre Company, where his credits include *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *Private Fears in Public Places*, *Private Lives* (co-production with State Theatre of South Australia), *Away* (co-production with Griffin Theatre), *Oedipus the King*, *The Venetian Twins*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, *Black Comedy*, *Phedra*, *We Were Dancing*, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (co-production with Playbox), *Cooking with Elvis*, *Bag O' Marbles*, *The Tragedy of King Richard III* (collaboration with The Bell Shakespeare Company), *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, *Buried Child*, *Dirt*, *Fred*, *Shopping & F\$\$\$ing*, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *XPO—The Human Factor*. He has also worked as a director for Sydney Theatre Company, where he was Associate Director from 1991 to 1993, Company B, Black Swan Theatre Company, Griffin Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Australian Theatre for Young People, Playbox, Opera Australia, Sydney Festival and Adelaide Festival.



*Richard Roxburgh as Roland and Monica Maughan as Mrs Walkham in the 2007 Company B production in Sydney.
(Photo: Heidrun Löhr)*

Toy Symphony

Michael Gow



Currency Press, Sydney

CURRENCY PLAYS

First published in 2008
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia
enquiries@currency.com.au
www.currency.com.au

Copyright: Introduction: Mind the Gap © Neil Armfield, 2008; *Toy Symphony* © Michael Gow, 2008.

Reprinted 2015

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 that 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 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 address above.

Any performance or public reading of *Toy Symphony* is forbidden unless a licence has been received from the author's estate 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 addressed to Shanahan Management, PO BOX 1509, Darlinghurst NSW 1300; tel: 61 2 8202 1800; email: admin@shanahan.com.au.

Cataloguing-in-publication data for this title is available from the National Library of Australia website: www.nla.gov.au

Typeset by Dean Nottle for Currency Press.

Printed by Fineline Print & Copy Service, St Peters, NSW.

Cover design by Laura McLean, Currency Press. Cover shows Richard Roxburgh as Roland in the 2007 Company B production. Photo: (Photo: Heidrun Löhr)

Contents

Mind the Gap

Neil Armfield

vii

TOY SYMPHONY

Act One

1

Act Two

36

I'm having amnesia and déjà vu at the same time.

Steven Wright

Mind the Gap

Neil Armfield

Michael Gow and I grew up on either side of the same town. He in Como, me in Concord. We both started infants school in 1960 and did the HSC in '72 at Jannali and Homebush Boys' High Schools respectively. At school we were both called the same names that are given to the gentler boys by the footy heroes in the playground, we both experienced the premature death to leukaemia of someone close to us—for Michael his best friend David, for me my brother Ian. At Sydney Uni we fell into the fabulous refuge of SUDS (Sydney University Drama Society) and, having serious fun doing plays, our professional development began. We acted together occasionally (he was much better) and I directed Michael in our last SUDS show in 1979, the same year that we began parallel professional careers. In 1986 I directed Michael's great play *Away* at Melbourne's Playbox, in 1988 he wrote the screenplay for *Edens Lost* that I directed, and we worked together on a mini-series from Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* that has never been produced. In 1991 a mutual friend was living in my house in Leichhardt when her boyfriend's mate's dog Phoebe, that they had been minding while the mate was overseas, went missing. Thus began a chain of events that informed Michael's play *Sweet Phoebe* and most recently, *Toy Symphony*.

I suppose I list all of the above information as a way of saying that I feel very (at times uncomfortably) close to the world of this play, and, I guess, singularly qualified to direct it! Ultimately, of course, this is all privileged information and the test of the play will be how it stands on its own terms.

In a *Sunday Arts* interview with Virginia Trioli last week, the great comic Magda Szubanski offered the comment that we in Australia fight our suburban past but are also defined by it and that any artist at some point has to work from it because it has made us who we are. And I realised that Michael has written a profoundly personal and

honest work about the collapse of the suburban dream. A work about both the power and the bastardry of the artist. What's fascinating is the way the play apparently changes shape, morphing two or three times along the way into what can seem to be another kind of play altogether.

I love that. And that the whole play works through action which is analogous to the central experience of the blockage and flow of creativity.

It's two weeks before our first audience we're still finding the direction, the humour, the pain of the work. It's exciting and difficult fun. It comes straight from the heart.

The above is a note I wrote for the program of the Company B premiere of *Toy Symphony* at Belvoir St Theatre in 2007. It's written at the most vulnerable time in rehearsal before you really know what you've got on your hands and everything is informed by a kind of wilful optimism that it will all turn out ok! Like many directors about to open a new play, I'm using the note as a way of anticipating criticism and shoring up our exposed flanks.

Nothing had prepared us for the pleasure that *Toy Symphony* would give people in the theatre. As always, it's during the previews that patterns emerge and you carefully begin to form your expectations for the First Night.

Early on in rehearsal Roland's great opening monologue had ceased to be funny. After initial blocking where the emotional and physical shape was explored, and the movement of thought mapped, I said to Richard 'It's now kind of undirectable: you will know how to perform this only when there's a house in—we will go through weeks of this seeming like torture as you chase evaporating rehearsal room laughs—it will all change totally with an audience'. For once, I was exactly right. Richard Roxburgh is an actor who can smell an audience's hope. Michael knows that instinct in a great actor because he's been one. That's why he writes so well for them to let rip in performance—which is just what happened at Belvoir St. Immediately.

Peter Kingston, who directed the historic premiere of *Away* for Griffin in 1986, sat in the front row of our second preview: he stretched back and just received the play. He said 'It was like this with *Away*—we

thought we were doing a story about a boy dying. Then audiences came and told us what this play was’.

The gap between the rehearsal experience and the performed show can sometimes appear very large indeed. For instance, there had been scenes that seemed quite fragile, that had changed almost daily in rehearsal. Michael had been unsure of the tone of nearly all the school and childhood scenes of Roland’s past (except for the two great classroom scenes—they never changed): just how far the cartoon of memory could stretch; how to achieve the balance, especially for Nick Eglitis (as he became) and Steve Gooding; how to weave them through the developing Act 1 spine—the series of sessions with his therapist, Nina. Unlike other parts of the play, the text for these scenes remained mutable, with great input from the rehearsal room floor, right up to Opening. But once we hit the audience, they seemed so solid! The alchemy of performance rendered those scenes as if they’d always been thus ... they were suddenly classical.

Over the course of that first season the breadth and the hidden architecture of the play could be more and more felt. I loved the freshness, the sense of delight in which audiences would be bounced from one surprise to the next. Tom Stoppard turned up at one show and quietly admired ‘One senses this playwright has a few tricks up his sleeve’.

Particularly special were the schools’ performances. I felt proud of the respect the play harbours for teachers—well, those very special ones who reach through and change your life—and the sense that who you are is somehow formed in the classroom and playground at school. An amazing thing for kids to apprehend! It was talking to the kids after one show that I realised that *Toy Symphony* is really a kind of classic quest: our Odysseus lost, despairing, abandoning the world, is finally led back to it by a simple action of grace and the redemptive power of art.

I marvel at the apparent miracle that this play, drawn I know so much from the chaos of a life lived, is ultimately a work of such original, delicate, yet secure structure and deep poetic resonance.

But that, precisely, is Michael’s gift.

Sydney
April 2008

Neil Armfield AO is Artistic Director of Company B Belvoir where he directed the premiere season of *Toy Symphony*.

For Diane and the whole idea of Karnak, where this was written.

Toy Symphony was first produced by Company B at the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney, on 14 November 2006 with the following cast:

NINA / JULIE PEARSON / MISS BEVERLY / LYNETTE MCKENZIE	Justine Clarke
LAWYER / HEADMASTER / DR MAYBLOOM / STEVE GOODING / MR DEVLIN / TOM / TITUS OATES / CHEKHOV	Russell Dykstra
NICK / DANIEL / ALEXANDER THE GREAT	Guy Edmonds
MRS WALKHAM / NURSE	Monica Maughan
ROLAND HENNING	Richard Roxburgh

Director, Neil Armfield
Set Design, Ralph Myers
Costume Design, Tess Schofield
Lighting Design, Damien Cooper
Composer and Sound Design, Paul Charlier
Assistant Sound Design, Michael Toisuta
Assistant Director, Michael Lutton

CHARACTERS

ROLAND

NINA, a therapist

LAWYER

MRS WALKHAM, a school teacher

HEADMASTER

JULIE, a schoolgirl

DR MAYBLOOM, a specialist

EXECUTIONER

NICOLAJS, a schoolboy

TITUS OATES

MISS BEVERLY, a school teacher

NURSE

STEVEN, a school bully

LYNETTE, a schoolgirl

MR DEVLIN, a headmaster

DANIEL, a drama student

TOM, a drug dealer

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

ANTON CHEKHOV

ACT ONE

The writer ROLAND HENNING *finds himself in the consulting room of a therapist, NINA.*

NINA: What I'm interested in is clarity, in a better understanding of whatever we're afraid of—

ROLAND: Yes, uh-huh—

NINA: —what it is that's stopping us doing what it is we want to do—

ROLAND: Uh-huh, yes.

NINA: —identifying thinking or behaviour that is clearly negative, destructive—

ROLAND: Uh-huh, right, clarity, yes.

NINA: —So that we know it better, the fear, the pressure—

ROLAND: Okay look, I can't write. Save a lot of time, straight to it, can't write. That's pretty clear, don't you think?

NINA: Roland, we know you can write. There's a body of work, you have a reputation. But, well, this is interesting, this is what I'm talking about. For some reason, you currently believe, for whatever reason, you *believe* you can't write.

ROLAND: Uh-huh.

NINA: And it's that kind of thinking that might be a good place to start. Anyone dealing with a creative block can start to look at—

ROLAND: No. No. This isn't writer's... thing, no.

NINA: Writer's...?

ROLAND: You know.

NINA: Writer's...?

ROLAND: I don't have... it's not that. Let's just get that—

NINA: You mean writer's block?

ROLAND: There you are, you see.

NINA: I didn't actually use that term.

ROLAND: Maybe not, not out loud, but it's still there, underneath. See Dr...?

NINA: Nina.

ROLAND: Nina, if this is going to work, if, and I really don't, I'm not sure, really, if there's any point and this isn't you, no, I have the greatest, I'm sure you're terrific, you're the one who's read *The Interpretation of Dreams* or you saw your grandfather naked when you were six and you have devoted your life to understanding the effect that had, I see that, but let me be perfectly clear I do not have writer's...

NINA: Writer's...

ROLAND: I told you.

NINA: Writer's...?

ROLAND: Okay, uh-huh. This is a technique, getting me to admit I have a problem, and then if I admit it then I have it. But I told you. I don't have writer's... block, there I said it.

NINA: Roland, I didn't say—

ROLAND: And I mean writer's... thing, I mean it's such a meaningless term anyway, a Hollywood fiction, a monumental cliché and if that's how you're going to, if you think that's how you're going to whatever it is you intend doing or attempting, by removing this... block, as if, as if there's this there's this river, that comes bubbling up from the deep, way down in the Permian layers, thrusting up through the ancient strata, forced up by the internal forces, pressures, and it spills out, it bursts out into the dazzling light on the slopes of some painfully clear, bright mountainside and runs down this upper slope, this high country all clean and clear and sparkling like a Norsca ad, pure inspiration running over stones, through rapids, until it reaches the tree line. Then, there, it starts to wander through dank forests, spilling over mossy rocks and forming still, deep pools full of incredibly clear-sighted fish and visionary yabbies, carving out ravines all verdurous and gloomy with the slowly forming thoughts, just inklings of works of art. And then our river reaches the edge of the mountain ridge and now it plunges out of this high country, roaring over cliffs, cataracts, thundering over the edge of the falls, down into conscious valleys, deep chasms of impulse and first ideas, flowing on through steep gorges and wild, white water, churning up basic structures. It's violent and dangerous but finally it begins to slow down because it's reached the plains where there's habitation, creative cities full of neo-classical libraries and museums with all the previous works and commentaries and interpretations on show

so they can be admired, where you can find inspiration and study whatever you need to build your own work. And after the city, it flows even more slowly so the happy peasants can draw the water from the river in their intricate, ancient watering devices to nourish the fields where the new works have been sown and where they start to grow. And then, at last, the river reaches the delta and splits into a dozen different tributaries and the mud is incredibly fertile and masterpieces spring up almost without anyone having to do any work and then our weary river winds safely out into the vast ocean, stately, grand, with loud Beethoven playing, out to where Leviathan lives, brooding at the bottom, sending up the simplest, grandest thoughts to keep the ocean busy. And then the sun draws up the water and fat clouds form, thundering with thought so basic it's before thought, chthonic thunderheads. And the clouds drift towards the mountains and get snagged and it rains and the water tumbles down through fissures deep into the earth and it all starts over again and again and again and suddenly. Across our river—bang. Warragamba Dam. And the flow is stopped. It's blocked. By a block, the river is blocked by whatever; impotence, fear of failure, fear of success, fear of death, whatever. And I struggle helplessly with that, until you come along, with the psycho-cavalry and you help me work it through until one day, through persistence and 'I will not be defeated' and 'I am a valuable person' and I don't know, the workings of grace, you fly in like dambusters and drop your bouncing therapeutic bomb and it explodes and the wall collapses and water pours out and floods the towns downstream, and everything gets washed away and cleared away and swept away and new levels of fertile mud are deposited and the river is flowing again. And. I'm saved. Now. If that's how you, if that's what I'm paying a hundred and forty dollars an hour for well... you know. I don't think...

He breaks down.

NINA: Roland, do you need—?

She hands him a box of tissues, he snaps out of it.

ROLAND: I'm fine, I faked that, it's easy to do, been around actors long enough, so breaking down, the sobbing confession or the really sad moment in my past that's caused this isn't going to happen either,

so there's no point... I won't be... okay? And don't expect me to imagine myself as a ten-year-old either, I'm not doing that, don't buy that for a minute, talk to my ten-year-old self, or relive teenage traumas so they lose their power, uh-uh, uh-uh. Is that all... all of that, you know, clear? It's not me, that's all. Not me.

Pause.

NINA: So why are you here?

ROLAND: A friend thought I should come and see you. This friend is worried, he's really worried, he's always worried about me, he's great, his name's Jake, he's my best, and he worries and he's thinking of moving to New York so he worries even more, so he said he thought it would be a good idea to see someone like you.

NINA: But you made the decision to see me.

ROLAND: Well yes, but Jake you see, well he's feeling guilty you see, he feels a little responsible for some of what's been happening. He introduced me to this woman who was babysitting a dog that belonged to friends of hers.

NINA: A dog?

ROLAND: [*he looks at her for a moment, then goes on*] She's a friend, was a friend of Jake's. The dog went missing, ran away, got stolen and she went crazy trying to find it again. She told me about what happened and then I wrote a play about it, which is where you might say this started this, lack of... me not...

NINA: But, Roland, you made the appointment, so no matter how guilty your friend was feeling, no matter how worried, you made the call—

ROLAND: Uh-huh—

NINA: —there was a desire, a need on your part, to come here. You've decided you can't write, then you tell me what you don't want, what you're not going to do, make fun of what I'm trying to get started. Then you tell me you're only here to make someone else feel better. I don't know why you're here. You may as well pay yourself a hundred and forty dollars an hour and stay home as far as I can see.

ROLAND: That's probably very true, I thought it would be a mistake, but Jake kept at me—

NINA: So what, you have no control over your friend's concerns? He worries, you react? That might be an interesting place to start any kind of work—

ROLAND: He's my friend, it matters, what he thinks matters, maybe you don't have anyone to worry about you, you've sorted everyone out in your life.

NINA: Oh, I have someone to worry about me. And I can also be honest about the things that concern me. Sorry, but I'm not going to sit here and get boxed into some personal view you have about me and my kind. Before we even start. How can I proceed if that's where we start from? You must want to be here, you must want to address something, but so far, I have no idea. You have an advantage over a lot of the people I see. Most of them can't put even a few words together that gives even the vaguest sense of what they think, feel. I'd say you have language in your grip and that's wonderful. But you also use your command of language to hide, to avoid. You're here for some reason, even if you don't want to admit what it is. You want something badly. So badly you're prepared to do anything, even something you think is as ridiculous as coming here. Yes?

ROLAND: Well...

NINA: You're in trouble, Roland. You're clearly in denial about something, if that's not sounding too much like a cliché shrink talking. Denial. About your work, your life, something. You're in trouble. I know you're in trouble because... I'll just say it, come out and say it. What's your drug of choice, Roland? There's a slight glassiness, there's irritability, as well as the words, this torrent, this wall of words. You're hiding from something, that's what any substance abuse is about—No wonder Jake's worried about you.

ROLAND: Okay okay—

NINA: But if we're going to start any kind of work, we have to start with where you are right now. Before we start to even think about writing. So, what? I assume some amphetamine, or coke is it? Worse?

Silence.

At this point, at any point, you can leave. You can get up and leave, angry at my presumption, every right. Or. We could start. Talking.

Silence.

ROLAND: Okay.

NINA: Yes?

Pause.

ROLAND: So have you read *The Interpretation of Dreams*?

NINA: As a matter of fact, Roland, I have.

ROLAND: Okay. Good. That's something. [*Pause.*] That's a start.



ROLAND *is in the office of an eminent copyright* LAWYER.

LAWYER: What I'd like you to do is think of the telephone book. This I think will make your position, our position, quite clear. As a model it is open to dispute, there are challenges, but I believe it still holds good. Think of the telephone book.

ROLAND: The telephone book, yes, I'm thinking of the telephone book.

LAWYER: The phone book. You've got the *white* pages. The *white pages*; a list of all telephone subscribers arranged alphabetically. And the *yellow* pages. All the material arranged under subject headings, yes? Now. There's no copyright on the white pages, the white pages are not subject to copyright because, the alphabet, as a way of, it's a method in use since whichever smart Phoenician invented the alphabet. So. *White* pages. That's your raw material, that's the life, the event, the experience. Yes?

ROLAND: Yes.

LAWYER: Now. *Yellow* pages. In compiling the *yellow* pages, someone, someone or *other somewhere* came up with the subject headings under which all businesses are listed. Someone *decided*, say, they made the choice, that doctors would be listed under Medical Practitioners and not Doctors. Evening wear hire, it says 'see Bridal and Evening Wear Hire'. And within these listings there is art work, graphics, layout. The whole of the yellow pages phone book is the result of choice, decisions have been made, a shape has been imposed on raw material, yes? There's your work of art, your play, novel, film, whathaveyou. And on that material there is, of course, copyright. The yellow pages. Is subject. To copyright. Now our litigious friend's original experience, the missing dog and the search and eventual discovery of the dog, even though a small part of it was written down on paper, the notes that she made, that is white pages stuff, mere listing of events, especially, *especially* as everyone as you say, many, *many* people, had heard it as well in the same way, the same form. Public domain, that's what that is. Out. There. Whereas