

MICHAEL GOW's plays include the classic *Away*, *Toy Symphony*, *The Kid*, *On Top of the World*, *Europe*, *Sweet Phoebe*, *Live Acts on Stage*, 17 (for the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain) and *Once in Royal David's City*. His plays have been performed in Poland, the Czech Republic, Vietnam, Japan and all over the USA. Michael has been Associate Director of Sydney Theatre Company and Artistic Director of Queensland Theatre Company. He has directed for all the major Australian theatre companies as well as Opera Australia, Australian Theatre for Young People and the Lincoln Centre's New Visions/New Voices program. Michael's awards include two NSW Premier's Literary Awards, two Sydney Theatre Critics' Circle Awards and an AFI Award for writing the ABC miniseries 'Edens Lost'.



*Jane Menelaus (Coral) and Jeremy Scrivener (Tom) in the State Theatre Company of South Australia production, 1987.
(Photo: David Wilson)*

Away

MICHAEL GOW



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‘What country, friends, is this?’

Twelfth Night, Act I, sc ii.

‘I have done nothing but in care of thee,

Of thee, my dear one.’

The Tempest, Act I, sc.ii.

INTRODUCTION

May-Brit Akerholt

Away is set in the summer of 1967-68. Australia was a young nation in the sense that 40% of the population was under 21. By 1968 more than 8000 Australians were fighting in Vietnam and young people were becoming more politically aware. The play ends at the beginning of that year; a 'holiday' is over and around the world 1968 becomes a watershed. Students stage revolts in Paris, Germany and around the United States and focus attention on the bitter debates and splits in Western Society. Censorship in theatre and literature undergoes radical changes. In Australia, plays with four-letter words were still banned in most states and actors risked going to jail for using obscene language. In 1966 the longest running show in Sydney was the revue *A Cup of Tea, A Bex and a Good Lie Down* at the Phillip Street Theatre. By the Aquarian generation in 1969 *Hair* had taken over. The holiday was indeed over for Australia.

The portrayal of Australia in *Away* is as ironic as the title of Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country*. Gow's characters are imprisoned in a world in which their worth as human beings is measured in the cost of their holidays. To preserve a way of life means sending their sons to fight America's war in Vietnam; to celebrate Christmas means hot dinners and plastic trees; the aim is to be the same as everyone else, as long as that means to be better than one's neighbour. Gwen's attitude to life echoes Girlie Pogson in Patrick White's *The Season at Sarsaparilla*: 'I like a hat to look different so long as it's what the others are wearing'. But, like all works which have an endearing quality, Gow's play dramatises a universal world through one which is limited by time and space. And like many recent Australian plays, such as Patrick White's *Shepherd on the Rocks*, David Malouf's *Blood Relations* and Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age*, *Away* is about reconciliation and the power of healing through love and compassion.

Away is historical in the sense that it places its characters and

themes within a particular society and draws on the mood and spirit of a particular era to portray a larger world. It is a play about families—the young generation and their parents—and a play about the world we live in. The three families go away on their annual holidays, but their journey becomes a theatrical metaphor for a spiritual quest. As in classical Greek and Shakespearean drama, the purpose of the quest is to gain self-knowledge. Thus *Away* is essentially about coming home, or undertaking a journey from ignorance to knowledge; from blindness to insight. At the end, the characters have a new understanding of the world around them because they have accepted the motives, ambitions, hopes and fears which determine their actions. This journey is embedded in the character of Coral, who links the school play with a Shakespearean world of distortion, the tragedy of lost hopes and the possibility of restoring order through love. She sees the darkness within Tom, the bruises of his illness and the image of death behind his vitality.

Away belongs to a growing tradition which integrates other sources into the fabric of new works. But in its very use of classic material, the play is of a classical nature. From the times of the ancient Greeks through to the Renaissance, legends and foreign literary works were introduced into local art forms and became part of an indigenous body of works. The fact that *Away*, as he has himself pointed out, is set at the time of Gow's own early adolescence means that he is dealing with a period he can now see in perspective. The Shakespearean connotations provide a retrospective view in the same way that looking at events from a distance and in the same light of a wider knowledge and experience can heighten the understanding and meaning of those events. The resonances brought to the action by classic texts add a dimension to the character's reality. The magic rites of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the fairies' tempest enhance the events of ordinary lives and take them beyond the realm of surface experience. We see the characters in terms of magic and poetry, as if their own lives gain new meaning through dreams and visions played out on stage. Another Australia emerges, a country which is no longer an isolated island but part of an extended world. It has the beauty and freshness of a new world and the wisdom and mythology of a very old one.

On the one hand, the scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which opens the play tells us that life is filled with mystery and poetry, but

on the other, the scene's execution by a group of high school students adds a measure of humour and irony to the statement. In the middle of fairy lights and tripping fantastical school-elves appears Puck, as if by magic, but he is soon revealed to be Tom, their own Chips Rafferty.

Just as Puck 'directs' the dance of the fairies in the school performance, so it is that Tom's character channels the play's action. Within the mythology of *Away* it is Tom who conjures up the fairies' tempest which destroys the caravan park, as if in terrible revenge on injustice and insularity; and it is the tempest which brings the families together on a secluded, unspoilt beach. It is Tom who creates a magic play for amateur night, a play about loss and hope which restores Coral to life. At the end of the play, Tom reads the role of *King Lear*, bringing death into life, with the paradox that in death there is reconciliation and hope. This play about the experiences of a dying schoolboy is a celebration of life and the power to heal through gaining insight. It is a celebration of sun, sand, water and fire, the vital energies of Australia, energies which have the power both to destroy and restore.

The theme in *King Lear* of blindness and healing through a journey of division, pain and death, is also the theme of *The Stranger on the Shore*, the playlet performed by Tom and Coral on amateur night. It functions as a tragic interlude, a play-within-the-play which deals with love, sacrifice and death. In showing Coral how to walk again, it tells all the characters how to find their way home after their time away from themselves and each other. It also tells Tom's parents not to grieve; they must suffer the loss of their son, but they have shown him 'how to walk' while he lived. The scene ends in an image of cleansing and purification: the red glow of a bonfire on the beach.

Tom's playlet gives perspective to Harry's speech in Act IV sc. i in which the father tries to see his son's inevitable death in the light of a much larger scheme. He points to the Chinese belief that to grieve too much when someone dies means that their life was unfinished and that they had not achieved enough to be worthy of death. Harry's tribute to his son is to accept death: 'in a funny way we're happy. Even while we're very, very sad'.

These lines also sum up the tone of the play as well as the feeling the audience at the end; a feeling of simultaneous elation and sorrow. The characters' self-deception is portrayed through comedy, but the

humour is counterpointed both by a dark tone of longing and bitterness, of unattainable dreams and lost ambition, by a lyrical tone of magic and beauty, which in this play expresses the poetry of life. Throughout the play, comic and serious scenes are juxtaposed, and each scene contains a mixture of light and dark tones. Gow infuses the serious themes with a comic vision; he finds both the ridiculous and the tragic in ordinary people and everyday events. The character of Gwen is genuinely funny as the stereotypical nagging wife and mother, the pretentious snob whose aspirations are symbolised by a caravan with all the comforts of her suburban home. But her actions and language are like an armour hiding pain and fear as tangible as Tom's illness.

The comedy in the amateur night scene lies partly in the send-up of typical holiday camp entertainment, partly in the way the characters respond to it. The playlet performed by Tom and Coral is also funny, and stage directions such as '*CORAL makes ship noises on a bottle*' and '*She swoons*' specify the comic aspects of the performance. But the comedy is gradually undermined by the tragic implications until the scene has moved from tired jokes and a rendition of 'Pearly Shells', accompanied on the ukulele, to Coral's line 'I'm walking, I'm walking' to the tune of Mendelssohn's 'Nocturne'.

The structure of the dialogue works in the same way as the tone, emphasising themes and action. Short, quick lines, usually duologues, in which the characters respond to each other's words without really listening to their meaning alternate with lyrical passages which reveal the characters' feelings and inner lives. Repetition of words and phrases emphasises the emptiness of their social language, and of the personal language they create to avoid confronting what might lie beneath the surface meaning of the words they speak.

When confrontation does take place, the characters' worlds fall apart. But it is a necessary destruction, bringing the characters together on a 'magical' beach to be restored and reconciled. Coral's escape from Roy and the glittering Gold Coast hotel leads her to the healing powers of Nature and Tom. Gwen, Jim and Meg are ravaged by the forces of Nature on Christmas Day, by a fierce tempest brought by the fairies of the school play—and Puck/Tom. The storm destroys a whole way of life as it tears at the family's belongings; a way of life dramatised in the chorus of campers and emphasised by Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March'.

(Richard Wherret's Sydney Theatre Company production brought out the central role of Gwen in this scene by having her buffeted by the wind as she clung to her possessions. The fairies also appeared battered and torn, embodiments of the characters' inner lives as they journeyed through the storm.) In the next scene the storm is replaced by the almost dreamlike stillness of a sun-filled beach and Mendelssohn's 'Midsummer Night's Dream' music.

The quest undertaken by the characters in *Away* brings them home to the same old world but with a renewed sense of reality. The characters have moved from the artificial lights of the school hall through the distorted landscape of Shakespeare to scenes set in Nature. The more the characters reveal themselves, the closer they move to Nature. We last see them under the trees in the schoolyard reading *King Lear*: 'it is the power of Nature, its participation in the drama' which illuminates the 'struggle between Man and Nature, as well as between Man and Man, and between Man and himself.' As Tom reads from the opening speech, he is setting his role in the play in perspective: 'While we/Unburden'd crawl towards death'.

Sydney, 1988

May-Brit Akerholt is a dramaturg, translator, lecturer and former Artistic Director of the Australian National Playwrights' Centre.

THE PLAY ON THE STAGE

Richard Wherrett

When I first saw the Griffin Theatre production of *Away* at the Stables in January 1986 I was immediately struck by three things: this was a wonderful night in the theatre; the play was deserving of being seen by more people than those who could fit into the 140-seat space in six weeks; and the play had the potential to be served by production resources far more expansive than the Stables could provide. Most audiences shared my delight: the season at the Stables was packed out, and these 6000 people were clearly only a sample of a vast audience potential. The Sydney Theatre Company season at the Drama Theatre in 1987 was seen by a further 22,320 people, and since then *Away* has been seen in theatre right across the country.

It is a rare work that can fit comfortably into any venue. One of the key factors in the success of a production is the suitability of the venue in which it is produced: an intimate space for a chamber work, an expansive one for an epic work. The essential qualities of *Away*—its lyricism, the simplicity of its staging demands, and the economy of its line and form—mean that it can very easily be realised on a small scale with minimum production attributes. On the other hand while the play begins apparently naturalistically, the ‘away’ to which the three families go for their summer break is a world where anything can happen—a dreamscape (as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), a sanctuary (as in *As You Like It*), and a danger zone (as in *The Tempest*)—and as such provides vast scope for theatrical, magical and fantastic effects. This flexibility is a producer’s delight and the range of production scope is a director’s dream.

There is a similar range possible in the cast size of the play. While the doubling as suggested by the original production makes conceptual sense (as well as economic sense), I would love to see a production in which Leonie, Miss Latrobe, and the MC were played by additional cast members. This would provide two distinct advantages: it would

accentuate the doubling of Tom/Rick which is valuable insofar as Coral sees both Tom and Rick as her lost son; and it would provide a handful more fairies to permeate the play, to wreak joy and despair on the holidaymakers in the same apparently arbitrary way that Nature does in life. In particular the storm scene of III iv asks for a deluge of fairies and panoply of effects. And while, in keeping with the naïve production style, which the opening scene (from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) seems to demand, these effects can be produced by thunder sheets, wind and rain machines, wind fans, water pistols and so on (ideally all clearly visible), there is every reason why they might also be reinforced by the modern technology of sound tapes, lighting effects, 'flying' fairies and so on. The maximum chaos here finds its natural and deeply touching counterpoise in the tranquillity of the following scene which ends the first half of the play. A bigger cast would add reinforcements to the hotel guests, campers, and school students who people other scenes. And I was particularly taken by the idea of hinting at the possibility that the malevolent campers of III iii might also be fairies. A good-sized band of mischievous fairies has indeed a delicious if expensive appeal.

It is a rare work, too, that has within it the flexibility to be interpreted in a variety of ways. I believe a great work is one that will continue to be produced beyond its time. A criterion of this continued life is the universality of the subject matter, the capacity of the themes to speak to any place at any time, and in turn to be reinterpreted in terms of any place and any time. The central subjects of *Away*—regeneration, recreation, restoration, resolution and resignation—are universal ones which find some of their most profound expression in Shakespeare, from whom Gow draws his inspiration.

The recreation we seek from a holiday is the restoration of our spiritual and physical energies, our life forces. Tom, Harry and Vic are arguably the only characters who 'don't look forward' (Harry, IV i). They live resolutely in the present, the only time they have as a family under the threat to Tom's health. The remaining characters, with the exception of Meg, are either 'holding back', 'keeping in' or 'hanging on to' the past, which is a kind of death; just as the future, with the threat of loss and abandonment appears also to be a kind of death. The future is the unknown and to embrace it requires a letting go of whatever it

is that binds us to the past. To do this is to be free. To hang on is to be asleep ('like in a dream': Rick III iii). To be awake is the way to face reality: it then becomes an easy thing to let go. Thus *a* way can become *the* way. In its many ways, *Away* is an affirmation of these basic human needs.

The structure of the play reinforces these themes and in this way coheres with content, which is I believe a measure of art. The play begins indoors, within the confines of small domestic interiors. The first scenes away open out a little—a Surfer's Paradise hotel ballroom, a crowded 'caravan city', the rooftop of the hotel. The end of Act III finds us at a beach, *the* beach of Tom, Harry and Vic, and releases us into a vast open space—endless sand, vaulted sky, a place to relish freedom. We never again retreat indoors. The final scene of the play, again set outdoors, brings us full circle as Tom and his classmates undertake their first reading of their new text, *King Lear*. The last lines exploit dramatic irony in masterful poignancy as Tom and we the audience reel from his words, while his friends read on unwittingly.

Tom is central to these themes. Imbued with a sense of his own mortality, he is inspired despite his pain to lead others out of theirs. Puck-like, he is the play's protagonist, mentor, engineer, lifeline, and radiance. He is the catalyst to the situation and its salvation. The play gains accordingly by being delightfully funny, distinctly resonant, and deeply moving.

Sydney, April 1988

Richard Wherrett AM, distinguished theatre director and founding Artistic Director of Sydney Theatre Company.

Away was first performed by the Griffin Theatre Company on 7 January 1986 at the Stables Theatre, Sydney, with the following cast:

TOM	Christian Hodge
ROY	Benjamin Franklin
MEG	Angela Toohey
GWEN	Andrea Moor
JIM	David Lynch
CORAL	Vanessa Downing
HARRY	Geoff Morrell
VIC	Julie Godfrey
LEONIE	Angela Toohey
RICK	Christian Hodge

CAMPERS, HOTEL GUESTS, FAIRIES, etc. were played by the company.

Director, Peter Kingston
Designer, Robert Kemp
Lighting Designer, Liz Allen

CHARACTERS

TOM

ROY

MEG

GWEN

JIM

HARRY

VIC

CORAL

RICK

LEONIE

CAMPERS

MC

HOTEL GUESTS

MISS LATROBE

FAIRIES

Acting roles should be doubled as follows:

TOM/RICK

ROY/HOTEL GUEST/FIRST CAMPER/MC

MEG/LEONIE

GWEN/HOTEL GUEST

JIM/HOTEL GUEST

CORAL/SECOND CAMPER

HARRY/HOTEL GUEST/THIRD CAMPER

VIC/HOTEL GUEST/FOURTH CAMPER/MISS LATROBE

SETTING

Summer 1967-68.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

A school performance of A Midsummer Night's Dream is coming to a close. The Mendelssohn soundtrack blares from a tinny loudspeaker. Kids dressed as FAIRIES scurry about in garish light. The music ends and the FAIRIES strike a tableau. One of them, TOM, steps forward and addresses the audience.

TOM: 'If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearnèd luck
Now to scrape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.'

Music again, the FAIRIES scurry about and the curtain closes. It opens again and they are caught unready. They form a line and bow a few times, the curtain closes again and they wander off. ROY comes to the curtains. They open a little and he addresses the audience.

ROY: Well, I'm sure you all enjoyed the little show tonight. What a lot of little Chips Raffertys we've got here in our own school. Now there are a few people I'd like to say a few words of thanks to before we go tonight. Allan and Betty Shirlaw for providing the timber and so on

at cost to build the settings. Joy Samuels and the Art Department for painting it all and making it look so terrific. Seymours for providing the cordials at half-time. Mrs Walker for the luscious cakes, well done Lois. Mrs Hutton, Mrs Cooper, Mrs Lummis and Mrs Papa... Papalapa... Papalax... oh well, I'm sure she knows who I mean, ha ha ha... for making the outfits... Finally Miss Latrobe, the person responsible for getting the whole show together you've seen here tonight, as well as getting our debating team into the quarter finals. Thank you, Miss Latrobe. Well, that about wraps it up, so thank you all for coming and have a safe and happy Christmas and best wishes for ninety sixty-eight. Thank you.

He moves away, then remembers something.

Oh, and one more thing. A message from Charlie. Please watch the flowering beds as you leave the school, we lost quite a few at prize-giving night. Thank you.

SCENE TWO

Backstage. TOM and MEG.

TOM: You going away tomorrow?

MEG: We're leaving really early.

TOM: Well... have a good time.

MEG: Where are you going?

TOM: Up the coast. Some beach.

MEG: Have a good time.

TOM: Bound to.

MEG: See you.

TOM: Yeah... see you in pictures.

MEG: You too.

TOM: No thanks.

MEG: You were really good in the play.

TOM: Bull.

MEG: You were!

TOM: Cut it out. I'll get a fat head.

MEG: My olds are waiting.

TOM: Anyway, I got this for you. As a memento of the play.

MEG: Thanks.

TOM: It was a real laugh being in the play with you.

MEG: No-o...

TOM: It was! So I got you something as a token of my appreciation.

MEG: What is it?

TOM: If you open it up you might find out. It's a piece of junk, actually.

Actually I nicked it. But it's the thought that counts.

MEG: You nicked it?

TOM: Actually, I got a night job and slogged me guts out for ten years to pay for it.

MEG: A brooch.

TOM: A mere bauble.

MEG: It's really nice. That's really nice of you.

TOM: Oh, stop before you start sobbing.

MEG: I really like it.

TOM: It's from the bottom of my heart, actually.

MEG: I wish I'd got you something.

TOM: I have some beautiful memories.

MEG: Oh, yuck.

TOM: Sick, eh?

MEG: It was good fun, though. Pity it was only for one night. Fancy doing it night after night like in America. Plays go on for years there.

London too. Wouldn't you get sick of it?

TOM: Depends who else was in it. Be great if you hated everyone's guts.

MEG: But then it'd only be the same as a proper job.

TOM: What are you going to be when you grow up?

MEG: An engine driver. You?

TOM: I'll wait and see.

MEG: I'd better be going. Thanks for the brooch.

TOM: It matches your eyes.

MEG: Yellow?

TOM: Joke.

MEG: Ha ha.

TOM: Sorry.

MEG: Well...

TOM: The olds.

MEG: Have a good Christmas.

TOM: Don't go yet.

MEG: Why?

TOM: This is fun.

MEG: What is?

TOM: Trying to think of things to say.

MEG: We haven't done the weather yet.

TOM: Do you really like the brooch?

MEG: Yep.

TOM: Good.

MEG: I really like it.

TOM: It was either jewellery or perfume. But it's hard to buy perfume for someone you don't know very well. You need to know their personal chemical make-up. I could have got something on spec and it mightn't have worked on you and you'd have to put it on and stunk like a dead dog. You wouldn't have been able to wash it off, either. You have to wait till something like that fades. You wouldn't be so nice about me in the play then, eh? My name'd be mud. That's why I went for jewellery. Safer. Better bet. Actually I asked around a few places. Got a bit of advice. Shop girls and that.

MEG: And they said jewellery?

TOM: Most of them. They said I should opt for the jewellery. A few suggested some perfume. Very subtle stuff. Couldn't actually smell it. One of them tried some on and I was halfway down her neck before any smell registered. Pointless.

MEG: Well... I still wish I'd got you something.

TOM: Bottle of gin would've been nice.

MEG: Oh.

TOM: Or a Harley Davidson.

MEG: Is he a poet?

TOM: It's a bike.

MEG: I knew that.

TOM: Poet! Why would I want a poet?

MEG: Maybe you read poetry.

TOM: Me? Come on! Me?

MEG: You might. You're pretty...

TOM: Deep?

MEG: You're pretty quiet.

TOM: Soulful?

MEG: Still waters run deep. My father's always saying that.

TOM: Still waters stink.

GWEN *and* JIM *come in*.

GWEN: You were supposed to hurry, not stand round yapping. There are a million things to do. I'll have to do it all, I expect.

TOM: 'Ill met by moonlight'.

GWEN: I beg your pardon? Are you a friend of Margaret's? I didn't know you were a friend of this boy's, Margaret.

MEG: Not really.

TOM: No, not really.

MEG: Until the play.

TOM: Yeah. Until the play, that is.

MEG: Did you like the play, Dad?

JIM: It was... lovely, yes.

GWEN: What did you have to do Shakespeare for? Why couldn't you have done a musical? A bit of singing. All that talking! And we couldn't see a thing. The people in front kept hopping up and down, up and down to see. We couldn't see a blessed thing. We just managed to see a bit of the queen's crown. And there were these kids near us, why you'd bring kiddies to stuff like this I do not know, but—muck up? I could've throttled them. Little beggars. But whose idea was it to do Shakespeare? Very silly choice if you ask me.

JIM: You looked lovely though, Mags. And you'll be our next Chips Rafferty, eh, son?

TOM: Don't hold your breath.

GWEN: We can't spend all night here. Not if you two want any sort of holiday. Say your goodnights, Margaret. Have you got the keys?

JIM: Keys? I thought I gave them to you.

GWEN: No, I gave them to you. To get the camera out of the car. Why, I do not know. We couldn't see a thing. We were so far back you couldn't get a photo of anything. You always have to bring it. But you kept the keys.

JIM: Did I?

GWEN: Yes.

JIM: I don't think so. They're not on me.

GWEN: They must be. Trouser pockets.

JIM: No, no, I'm sure you still have them. They're not there.

GWEN: I do not believe this. I know I gave them to you. I remember. I gave you the camera and then the keys. I said, 'Here's your stupid camera, it'll be a waste bringing it', and I handed you the keys. Oh, honestly.

JIM: Don't worry. Don't start to worry.

GWEN: I know I haven't got them.

JIM: I... no I haven't. I don't remember. But we'll find them. Just don't get upset.

GWEN: Well, where are they?!

JIM: Don't get upset.

GWEN: I have not got them.

She tips the contents of her handbag on the floor.

There! Are they there? Can you see a set of keys? I can't. Can anyone see a set of keys?

JIM: Well, they must be around. We'll find them. Don't get upset.

GWEN: Look! There are no keys there.

She picks things up and shoves them in the bag again.

No. No. No. No. No. No. No. I haven't come across any keys yet.

ROY and CORAL come in.

JIM: Oh dear. Here they are. Back pocket. Goodness me. What a duffer.

GWEN: I did not have the keys. Did I? Now my eyes are stinging. I can hardly see. It hurts. I need a Bex.

ROY: Any good shots?

JIM: A couple, I think.

GWEN: Of course not. We were so far back. Hulloo. We thought we'd lost the keys.

Awkward pause.

ROY: So what do you think of our little Chips Raffertys, eh? Proud mums and dads?

GWEN: I wish they'd done a musical. My head.

ROY: It... er... it was hot in that hall. We might see the P and C about some air conditioning next year. Very stuffy. It's a pity they weren't selling something a bit stronger than cordial. Made a killing.