



DAVID WILLIAMSON is Australia's best known and most widely performed playwright. His first full-length play *The Coming of Stork* was presented at La Mama Theatre in 1970 and was followed by *The Removalists* and *Don's Party* in 1971. His prodigious output since then includes *The Department*, *The Club*, *Travelling North*, *The Perfectionist*, *Sons of Cain*, *Emerald City*, *Top Silk*, *Money and Friends*, *Brilliant Lies*, *Sanctuary*, *Dead White Males*, *After the Ball*, *Corporate Vibes*, *Face to Face*, *The Great Man*, *Up For Grabs*, *A Conversation*, *Charitable Intent*, *Soulmates*, *Birthrights*, *Amigos*, *Flatfoot*, *Operator*, *Influence*, *Lotte's Gift*, *Scarlet O'Hara at the Crimson Parrot*, *Let the Sunshine*; *Rhinestone Rex and Miss Monica*, *Don Parties On*, a sequel to *Don's Party*; *At Any Cost?* (co-written with Mohamed Khadra), *Nothing Personal*, *When Dad Married Fury*, *Managing Carmen*, *Happiness*, *Rupert* and *Cruise Control*.

His plays have been translated into many languages and performed internationally, including major productions in London, L.A., New York and Washington. *Dead White Males* completed a successful UK Production in 1999. *Up For Grabs* went on to a West End production starring Madonna in the lead role. In 2008 *Scarlet O'Hara at the Crimson Parrot* premiered at the Melbourne Theatre Company starring Caroline O'Connor and directed by Simon Phillips.

As a screenwriter, David has brought to the screen his own plays including *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *The Club*, *Travelling North* and *Emerald City* along with his original screenplays for feature films including *Libido*, *Petersen*, *Gallipoli*, *Phar Lap*, *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *Balibo*. The adaptation of his play *Face to Face*, directed by Michael Rymer, won the Panavision Spirit Award for Independent Film at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

David was the first person outside Britain to receive the George Devine Award (for *The Removalists*). His many awards include 12 Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Awards, five Australian Film Institutes' Awards for Best Screenplay and, in 1996 The United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Award. In 2005 he was awarded the Richard Lane Award for services to the Australian Writers' Guild. David has received four honorary doctorates and been made an Officer of the Order of Australia.

David has been named one of Australia's Living National Treasures.



*david  
williamson*  
*dead white males*



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Back cover photograph shows Patrick Dickson as William Shakespeare and Michelle Doake as Angela Judd in the Sydney Theatre Company production. (Photo Tracy Schramm)

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(p.ii) Patrick Dickson as William Shakespeare. (p.9) Above: Maggie Blinco as Grace Judd, Simon Chilvers as Col Judd, Henri Szeps as Martin Judd and Anna Volska as Sarah Judd. Below: Maggie Blinco, Michelle Doake as Angela Judd, and Babs McMillan as Monica Judd. (p.12) Henri Szeps. (p.15) Above: Barbara Stephens as Jessica Squires and Michelle Doake. Below: John Howard as Grant Swain and Michelle Doake. (p.17) Patrick Dickson and Michelle Doake. (p.39) Michelle Doake and Simon Chilvers. (p.41) Glenn Hazeldine as Steve and Kelly Butler as Melissa. (p.58) Above: Kelly Butler and Simon Chilvers. Below: The cast.

*Production photographs by Tracey Schramm.*

# Deconstructing human nature...

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David Williamson

The genesis of *Dead White Males* occurred at a literary conference some years ago when a young male academic gave a paper on deconstruction and post structuralism to a roomful of writers. No one in the room understood a word he said. When one writer rose at the end and asked for a plain English translation, we were told that it was a very difficult theory and that we shouldn't bother ourselves with it. 'Just keep writing', was the response, 'and we'll tell you what you've done.' The writers weren't happy at all. The tendency of academics to treat writers as *idiots savants* who scribble away without knowing in the least what they're doing, has always been a source of tension, but this new wave of theory, which appeared to take the language of criticism totally out of the common domain, seemed something else again. Perversely, I became determined to find out what the post structuralists were talking about.

Despite the fact that I have made Doctor Swain the villain of this social satire, on a personal level I don't believe all his theory to be nonsense. Like all ideas that have impact, post structuralism would not have flourished if it did not have some insights to offer. There is no doubt that Nietzsche, the intellectual precursor of post structuralist thought, was onto something when he pointed out that humans find it very hard to be objective and rational. Most of us have been guilty of reconstructing our own history in a way that makes us the hero and the other party the villain and there have been many instances in which so-called historical, philosophical and scientific 'truths', have turned out to be heavily distorted. Power elites in every society have used the slipperiness of language to try and foist their 'constructed' version of the 'truth' onto minorities, but this doesn't mean that there is no *real* truth nor that literature is just another source of misinformation. While ideology can certainly be discerned in literature, it's not all that can be discerned. It is my belief, shared by the young protagonist of *Dead White Males*, Angela Judd, that the great writers can still speak to us

across the ages because they do offer us wisdom and insight about our common human nature.

Which brings me to Shakespeare. When I told my friend the academic Don Anderson, that I was thinking of satirising the excesses of the post structuralists, he alerted me to the controversy that had raged in the *London Review of Books* not long before. Called by the *LRB* ‘Bardbiz’ it had been initiated by Terrence Hawkes, a post structuralist professor of English at Cardiff University, who had declared that Shakespeare was a ‘black hole’ into which we fed our own needs and desires, and that his eminence in literature was not because of any special genius, but was due to the fact that his writings served conservative interests.

For the play, I decided that the central academic issue in Angela’s mind would be over the literary status of Shakespeare and whether, in particular, his works were vehicles of sexist patriarchal ideology, a theory propounded by her lecturer, Dr Grant Swain.

I sent an outline off to my director Wayne Harrison. The story at this stage didn’t include the physical presence of Shakespeare. Wayne rang me some days later and told me that while he was sitting in a theatre enduring ‘an extremely boring play’ he had had a vision of our play opening with Shakespeare being shot by Dr Swain. I raced to the word processor. With Shakespeare up there on stage, however, I thought it would be a pity to get rid of him immediately. We could kill him and still bring him back to defend himself, through Angela’s consciousness, against the attacks of Doctor Swain.

Paradoxically, the inclusion of Shakespeare enabled me to take the play’s concerns beyond the narrow focus of post structuralism and literary theory to the play’s real concerns, the relationship between males and females in the last ten years of the twentieth century.

In the play, Shakespeare (who is not an attempt to recreate the real historical Shakespeare but is the Shakespeare Angela needs in order to make sense of her life), becomes a representative of his era, who believes that male and female natures are biologically different. Dr Swain, in contrast, believes culture is all-important and that biology plays no part. Angela is not sure, and to the end remains unsure, but in other areas of her life her certainty and wisdom grows.

Angela learns in unexpected ways when she adopts Doctor Swain’s suggestion that she examine her family in order to discern



its 'controlling ideologies'. She finds a grandfather who has behaved with a quiet heroism which belies his status as the chauvinist monster the family has 'constructed'; she finds a courageous mother wracked with guilt and exhaustion over the mother/career tug of war, and a father who loves both her and her mother, despite apparent layers of resentment. Angela, in short, finds that human nature *does* often break out of the strictures into which ideology tries to constrain it.

The play is partly a satire aimed at the political correctness enforced on society by the 'holy' ideologies of post structuralism, radical feminism and multiculturalism. The tone of the play is one of wryness rather than belligerent anger. It is an attempt to suggest to the adherents of those ideologies that they *are* ideologies and not 'truths', and that while ideologies typically contain truths they also contain untruths. It is not helpful to claim that all men are rapists or potential rapists. It is also, frankly, not true. It is also not true that all artistic products of minority groups are necessarily brilliant. It is also, surely, still faintly possible that heterosexual family life, despite its complications, can still be one interesting and valid way to live, and males and females are still capable of needing and loving each other.

I would like to thank Wayne Harrison, not just for the play's opening scene, but for his invaluable dramaturgical input during the play's development, and to Wayne, John Senczuk, Nick Schlieper, Tony David Cray, Tony Bartuccio, Marion Potts and the cast, John Howard, Michelle Doake, Henri Szeps, Anna Volska, Simon Chilvers, Patrick Dickson, Maggie Blinco, Kelly Butler, Glen Hazeldine, Barbara Stephens and Babs McMillan, for realising what I consider to be one of the finest productions I have ever been given in the Theatre.

*Sydney, May 1995*

*Dead White Males* was first performed by the Sydney Theatre Company at the Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, 9 March 1995 with the following cast:

Michelle Doake	ANGELA JUDD
Patrick Dickson	WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
John Howard	GRANT SWAIN
Kelly Butler	MELISSA
Glenn Hazeldine	STEVE
Simon Chilvers	COL JUDD
Maggie Blinco	GRACE JUDD
Henri Szeps	MARTIN JUDD
Anna Volska	SARAH JUDD
Barbara Stephens	JESSICA SQUIRES
Babs McMillan	MONICA JUDD

Director, Wayne Harrison  
Designer, John Senczuk  
Lighting Designer, Nick Schlieper  
Assistant Director, Marion Potts  
Composer, Tony David Cray  
Choreographer, Tony Bartuccio

## **CHARACTERS**

ANGELA JUDD, 19, a university student

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

GRANT SWAIN, a university lecturer

MELISSA, 19, Angela's friend and fellow student

STEVE, a student

COL JUDD, 77, Angela's grandfather

GRACE JUDD, 74, Angela's grandmother

MARTIN JUDD, 48, Angela's father

SARAH JUDD, 46, Angela's mother

JESSICA SQUIRES, 46, Angela's aunt

MONICA JUDD, 44, Angela's aunt

## **SETTING**

The action takes place on the campus of New West University and in the Judd home.

## ACT ONE

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### ANGELA'S ROOM

ANGELA JUDD, *an engaging young woman with a sharp mind, sits reading a volume of Shakespeare's plays. She looks up.* WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE *materialises, looking around him, puzzled at the modernity of the furnishings.* ANGELA *walks up to him nervously.*

ANGELA: Mr Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE *looks up and smiles.*

I hope I'm not interrupting, but I just felt I had to say—how much I admire your work.

SHAKESPEARE: I thank you.

ANGELA: How is it that you know—so much about us?

SHAKESPEARE *is just about to answer when a MAN in his thirties, dressed in fashionable casual clothes, appears behind him.*

MAN: He doesn't, you know.

*The MAN pulls out a pistol and shoots SHAKESPEARE dead. ANGELA looks at the MAN, horrified.*

MAN: [*smiling*] Hi.

ANGELA: Why did you do that?

MAN: These are exciting times Angela. Dangerous and exciting times. You must know your enemies.

*The MAN leaves. ANGELA is left staring at the body of SHAKESPEARE.*

### LECTURE THEATRE—NEW WEST UNIVERSITY

*The MAN who just shot SHAKESPEARE stands at a lectern smiling at us. He is charismatic, articulate and animated by the intense certainty that he has a supremely important message to communicate and that he is enormously well equipped to deliver it.*

SWAIN: My name is Dr Grant Swain. Welcome to the English and Cultural Studies Department and to my course, Literary Theory 1A. Most of you have always assumed that there are certain eternal ‘truths’ about ‘human nature’, that perceptive writers reveal to us. This course will show you that there are no absolute ‘truths’, that there is no fixed ‘human nature’ and that what we think of as ‘reality’ is always and only a manufactured reality. There are in fact as many ‘realities’ out there as there are *ideologies* which construct them. Christian ideology constructs a ‘reality’ which includes a gentleman called God ticking off your good deeds and your bad. Conservative ideology constructs a ‘reality’ which includes the belief that most humans are inherently dishonest and lazy. As a prerequisite to entry to this course I asked you to write a short paragraph on what you regard as the essential ‘thinking’ you. I have selected one of these to read to you.

SWAIN *takes a sheet of paper in his hands and reads.*

‘I am sceptical of all ideologies, and try to weigh all the available evidence in order to make informed choices.’ Would you indicate if you wrote that passage or wrote something that contained significant elements of that passage?

SWAIN *notes the hands.*

A lot of you. That statement, in fact, was written by me. It sounds as if it is a credo that warns against ideology, but in fact it is the defining statement of liberal humanism, one of the most powerful ideologies to have ever appeared in Western thought, liberal humanism. Liberal humanism, pictures you, the individual, as rational and free. Free to make your own choices. Free to control your lives.

But the fact is none of us are free, or can ever be, free of ideology. All of us are conditioned by inbuilt and often unconscious mind sets to act in certain predictable ways. Our life scripts, in fact, are written for us. By whom?

SWAIN *looks closely at his audience.*

Largely by legions of well paid ‘experts’—economists, politicians, journalists and so on, who tell us the ‘Truth’ about ‘The World’, but it’s not really ‘Truth’ we’re being given, it’s a series of ideological assertions. And the vast bulk of these assertions support the aims of

the Western world's dominant ideology, the patriarchal corporate state. The project of patriarchal corporate ideology is simple. Keep corporate profits high and women in their place. Liberal humanism, in naively depicting us as capable of free and rational choice, is in fact the ideological handmaiden of the patriarchal corporate state. In encouraging us to believe we *are* in control of our lives it prevents us questioning the massive injustices to which most of us are subject. It is the aim of this course to show you how complicit the 'masterpieces' of liberal humanist literature have been in the process of depriving women, people of colour, people of non normative sexual orientation, and people of the non industrialised world, of power. The issues we will face go to the very heart of our understanding of ourselves and of the world. They are perhaps the most critical issues of our times.

### *OUTSIDE THE LECTURE THEATRE*

ANGELA *talks to her friend* MELISSA DOHERTY, *who is extremely attractive, knows it and flaunts it.*

MELISSA: Do you believe any of that rubbish?

ANGELA: It made me think.

MELISSA: What? That you haven't got a free will, that you are totally manipulated by the evil patriarchy?

ANGELA: The patriarchy's real. My mother has to fight it every day. And I wrote that Liberal humanist credo almost word for word. I thought at first it was mine he read out.

MELISSA *looks over her shoulder and turns excitedly back to*  
ANGELA.

MELISSA: Those guys over there are talking about us.

ANGELA *glances over her shoulder.*

ANGELA: They're talking about you.

MELISSA: Don't always put yourself down Angela. You've got that fresh sort of beauty you don't need to spend time on.

ANGELA: How come *guys* don't seem to want to spend time on it either.

MELISSA: You look fine. It's just you scare them off.

ANGELA: How?

MELISSA: Frankly Angela, you're not good on signals of availability. Relax.

ANGELA *looks over her shoulder again, more carefully this time. A particular young man, STEVE, who's not conventionally handsome but who is appealing in a run down sort of way, waves at her. ANGELA quickly looks away.*

He's cute.

ANGELA: Melissa, he's *hopeless*.

MELISSA: He's cute.

ANGELA: Would you go out with him?

MELISSA: Aren't you interested in men at all?

ANGELA: Yes, but formed men, mature men, intelligent men.

MELISSA: Angela, even *I* can't get one like that. Come and we'll chat him up.

ANGELA: No, Melissa. No.

MELISSA: Check the body on that one.

ANGELA: The one picking his nose?

MELISSA: You'll never get anyone Angela.

### *DR SWAIN'S TUTORIAL*

SWAIN, ANGELA, MELISSA *and* STEVE *are present and we assume a few others are too.*

MELISSA: But literature *must* contain truths about human nature, otherwise why would people bother reading it?

SWAIN: Because they *think* they *are* learning 'truths' about 'human nature', but all they're really getting is the version of 'human nature' that accords with the power interests of its author.

ANGELA: Literature has *no* wisdom to offer?

SWAIN: Literature is *never* about wisdom, Angela. At its base it is always about power. At base as Foucault, Althusser and Eagleton have shown us, all communication is ideological.

ANGELA: Surely we can step outside ideology?

SWAIN: Into what Angela?

STEVE: Reality.

SWAIN: Which particular version of reality Steve? Patriarchal ideology constructs a reality in which women can only feel normal if they're married and heterosexual, radical feminist ideology constructs a reality in which women can only feel normal as separatist lesbians.

MELISSA: No one 'constructs' my reality. I'm not becoming a lesbian and if I get married it'll be because I *choose* to be.

SWAIN: Your free liberal humanist autonomous self will make that choice?

MELISSA: Yes.

SWAIN: Why have you already ruled out the lesbian option?

MELISSA: Because I'm not attracted to women.

SWAIN: Could that possibly be because the dominant patriarchal ideology has constructed you to feel guilt and disgust at the very thought.

MELISSA: No one has 'constructed' me. I'm not a puppet!

SWAIN: Is it also possible that the dominant ideology has also constructed a female gender stereotype which includes words like 'emotional', 'tactful', 'unassertive', 'caring' and 'supportive', which it just so happens prepares females *extremely* well for heterosexual marriage.

ANGELA: Are you saying that all that's left for us is to choose our ideology?

SWAIN: Most people don't even have that luxury. They accept the dominant ideology as their 'reality'.

STEVE: By what criteria do you 'choose' an ideology?

SWAIN: On the basis of its social implications. I don't support radical feminism because its project is separatism, and I don't support the dominant ideology because its project privileges white middle class anglo celtic males.

ANGELA: Which ideology *do* you support?

SWAIN: My current subject position is non essentialist feminism and multiculturalism. Its project is the equal coexistence of us all.

### *COL AND GRACE JUDD'S LIVING ROOM*

*Three generations of the Judd family are gathered. ANGELA is there together with her grandfather and grandmother COL and GRACE JUDD, her father and mother MARTIN and SARAH JUDD, her aunts, JESSICA*



SQUIRES, and MONICA JUDD. *It is meant to be a birthday celebration for COL's seventy-seventh birthday but, apart from a party hat that sits forlornly on COL's head, there seems to be little in the way of celebration going on. MONICA has tears in her eyes.*

GRACE: Why did you ever believe him Monica?

JESSICA: Because she's a fool.

MONICA: He was going to leave her. He really was.

SARAH: Monica, I have to say that I think it's absolutely tragic that you spent eighteen years waiting around for a bastard who by the sound of it never had any intention of leaving his wife.

MONICA: He did.

SARAH: Twenty years ago you were on top of the world. I'd just got you reading Shulamith Firestone and you were starting to understand the feminist agenda, when you went and—

MONICA: I fell in love Sarah.

JESSICA: You're not a schoolgirl! If I ever hear one more woman, let alone my sister, say 'I fell in love,' as an excuse for some life wrecking piece of total insanity, I will vomit! Will you stop that wailing!

SARAH: Jessica, I know empathy is not one of your psychic priorities, but your sister is in some pain.

JESSICA: When has she ever *not* been in pain. I grew up with her. She pursues pain like a pig after truffles!

MONICA: You think I wanted this to happen?

JESSICA: Monica, anyone who wasn't deeply masochistic could have seen this disaster coming seventeen and three quarter years ago.

MONICA: Someone like you with a heart made out of nickel alloy might've, but some of us do fall in love!

JESSICA: Fine, then you had eighteen years of wild illicit passion, so think yourself lucky and *move on!*

MONICA: We aren't all emotionally equipped to dump our husbands and have a new lover every month like some people around here.  
[*Bitterly*] Pig after truffles.

JESSICA: It was just a figure of speech.

MONICA: Why that one?

JESSICA: Monica, it was just—

MONICA: Because I'm fat and ugly and I was lucky to hang onto him for eighteen years, even as a part time mistress, eh?