



ALANA VALENTINE'S work for theatre engages with the authentic real-life stories and voices of Australian communities. Her Currency Press published play *Grounded* won three Australian Writer's Guild Awards in 2013 – in Youth and Community Theatre, the David Williamson Award for Excellence in Theatre Writing, and the Major AWGIE. In 2012, her play *Ear to the Edge of Time* won the International STAGE Script Competition for best new play about science and technology, judged by an esteemed panel of judges that included Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winning authors. *Parramatta Girls* was nominated for two Helpmann Awards – best new Australian work and best play in 2007. It has been on the HSC syllabus for Drama since 2010 and is based on the testimony of former inmates of GTS, Parramatta. The play was remounted by Riverside Theatre in Parramatta in 2014. In 2015 her play about Afghan Australian women, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, also published by Currency, will go onto the NSW English syllabus. In 2013 the Australia Council for the Arts awarded Alana a Creative Leadership Fellowship to investigate and write about how to gather research material from especially sensitive subjects and she has written about this and her other plays in a memoir called *Writing the Real*. Alana is also the recipient of a NSW Premier's Award, a Queensland Premier's Award, two other AWGIE awards, a Churchill Fellowship and a Centenary of Federation medal.

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*Annie Byron as Gayle in the 2007 Company B production in Sydney.
(Photo: Heidrun Löhr)*

Parramatta Girls and Eyes to the Floor

Alana Valentine



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Front cover shows Roxanne McDonald as Coral and Jeanette Cronin as Melanie in the 2007 Company B production of *Parramatta Girls*. (Photograph: Heidrun Löhr) Back cover is from the 2008 Outback Theatre production of *Eyes to the Floor*. (Photograph: James Edwards)

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Parramatta Girls

Alana Valentine

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For all those adults who, with great courage and inspirational determination, have survived the experience of childhood in an Australian institution, and especially for those who were incarcerated at GTS Parramatta.

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And for my grandmother, Joyce Wainwright, whose love was the light of my own childhood years.

Home Girls Have Their Say

Rosalie Higson

Until the 1970s, rebellious or high-spirited teenagers chafed under the threat of being sent to a home for delinquents. For girls, crimes and misdemeanours—playing truant, running off with a boyfriend or mixing with the wrong crowd—could result in a charge of being in moral danger.

Young women from dysfunctional families, which usually meant those with alcoholic parents, were also put away. Thousands between the ages of twelve and eighteen were sentenced and carried the shame of being branded a home girl.

Award-winning writer Alana Valentine has spent four years researching and writing *Parramatta Girls*. The play, written for Company B, is based on the stories of some of the women who served time at the most notorious juvenile centre, the Girls Training School at Parramatta.

The GTS, better known as the Parramatta Girls Home, was closed down in 1974. Its conditions were widely recognised as being even harsher than those adult prisoners endured. Girls frequently rioted because of the punitive, Borstal-like mentality whereby they were kept under surveillance at all times. They scrubbed floors for hours. By the sixties, sentences were usually six to nine months, but in earlier times a girl could spend all her teenage years in the facility.

Sexual and psychological abuse and emotional neglect were commonplace. Drugs such as Valium and Largactil were used to subdue difficult girls, who were frequently placed in isolation, or solitary confinement, for long periods, barefoot, wearing a sack and fed only bread and water.

Valentine, who wrote *Run Rabbit Run* about the supporters of the South Sydney rugby league club, finds great satisfaction in working with real stories.

‘I think audiences like that, too,’ she says. ‘Because everything is so

filtered. People want to hear stories about their lives, their back yard, their country.' She first heard about the Parramatta Girls Home in 2003 on an ABC television program that showed some of the former inmates holding a reunion at the old building. 'What has been amazing is that as I researched, I realised that women in the generation above me were all threatened with Parramatta,' Valentine says. 'They'd all heard of it, men and women alike. That astonished me. It's a story that's been waiting to be told for thirty years.'

Over the years, Valentine has come to know some of the women well and says she feels a responsibility to not only make a good drama but to tell the story truthfully, without inflicting any more pain.

'Much of writing the play has been about noticing things, the (lingering) effects of the institution. That's what interested me as much as the raw facts: how they had dealt with that legacy. Lots of people had a tough childhood, and (the incarcerated girls) had a particularly tough childhood: but that's not enough, that's not a play, that's a report.'

Although some people may be empowered by telling their stories, documentary filmmakers and other writers dealing with people's painful memories face ethical questions. 'A lot of (the women) lack self-confidence, have self-esteem issues,' Valentine says. 'They've internalised the idea that they're a bad girl and will never do any good.'

'Some women have certainly risen above what they were handed, and we love stories like that, but a lot of them haven't: they are still very damaged. When I was talking to them, they would become that twelve-year-old child. So I had to be very careful.'

When phone calls came from women who wanted to talk about their experiences after forty years of silence, Valentine listened, but did no more interviews. She preferred to talk at length to those who were already part of the informal network of Parramatta girls, so that if they had nightmares, they had other women they could ring and talk to: 'You can't just open up these people and then say, "See ya", because it's really serious stuff.'

With her particular brand of verbatim theatre, Valentine says the trick is to not get seduced by the plot. 'As a dramatist you try and find the things that can't be answered, that can't be resolved. Because that's what life's like. Obviously stuff happens, because it's drama, but small realisations, small understandings, small confessions are huge to

these women. It's hopeful because they're so funny, and they deal with their pain in that very Australian way of being very rough and very funny with each other. But ultimately they're making the attempt to understand it.'

As the work developed there were two public readings. At the first, actors read transcripts of the women's stories. 'For the girls the biggest thing was truth-telling,' Valentine says. 'They felt they'd never been heard and never been believed. And I found it hard to get my head around the fact that half the time they didn't know the words for what had happened to them, for what incest was, say. They knew they didn't like it... so the first reading was truth-telling.'

'Then we had another reading and I included guard characters and family characters, and Neil Armfield (Artistic Director of Company B) came up to me and said, "We're not interested in other people, we're interested in the women."'

'I thought that was right. A play about why people are sadistic, malicious bastards is another play altogether.'

Anyone who has seen the old buildings in Parramatta will know how intimidating and depressing they are: 'The place has a long history, beginning with the Female Factory just next door to the girls home, which was originally an orphanage,' Valentine says. 'They would take the babies when they were three and put them in the orphanage. In 1887 it became an industrial school for girls and remained a home through to 1974. Now it's the Norma Parker Detention Centre for Women.'

'This is the site of almost continuous female incarceration in Australia, since the first white people came here. So what is the philosophy behind incarcerating girls? Girls shouldn't step outside the norm, shouldn't be oversexed, they have to be taught how to be a proper woman.'

Juvenile detention statistics show that the boys and girls are overwhelmingly from poor backgrounds. Some of the women Valentine met were from middle-class families, but they were the exception that proves the rule, she says. 'The women are mostly what I would call battlers, and they continue to be that. Again, that's an indictment. Why, when those girls are uncontrollable, do we lock them up and make them scrub floors? Is it because that's what they're going to do later?'

Some of the women Valentine met had got through their time at

Parramatta fairly unscathed: 'It was hard, but it was okay,' they said. Valentine told them, 'Look, I'm not just going for the salacious kind of headlines; I want to know the full thing.' That involved being addressed by their numbers rather than their names, horrible haircuts, being forced to scrub and perform other domestic duties and, for many decades, missing out on education.

Early in her research Valentine attended hearings at Parramatta of a Senate inquiry, called 'Forgotten Australians', that investigated the experiences of those who were in institutional or out-of-home care as children. The notorious Parramatta Girls Home had lived up to its reputation.

'The thing that shocked me the most was the routine physical examination when girls entered the home, to determine whether or not they were virgins. That could have nothing to do with why they were in there: even if they were charged with neglect, or being uncontrollable, or had alcoholic parents, they were given the examination. At the Senate inquiry I saw a doctor who said he had to do it and resented being used by the State in this way.'

The Senate report estimated that 500,000 children were put in care in the past century in this country, Valentine says. 'And that means that every person is related to, lives next door to or has some relationship to a child who was put into care.'

*This article first appeared in The Australian
19 March 2007.*

Parramatta Girls was first produced by Company B at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, on 17 March 2007, with the following cast:

LYNETTE	Valerie Bader
GAYLE	Annie Byron
MELANIE	Jeanette Cronin
KERRY	Lisa Flanagan
MAREE	Genevieve Hegney
CORAL	Roxanne McDonald
MARLENE	Leah Purcell
JUDI	Carole Skinner

Director, Wesley Enoch
Set Designer, Ralph Myers
Costume Designer, Alice Babidge
Lighting Designer, Rachel Burke
Sound Designer, Steve Francis

CHARACTERS

MARLENE, 13/57, indigenous
JUDI, 16/59, non-indigenous
MELANIE, 15/58, non-indigenous
LYNETTE, 14/57, non-indigenous
KERRY, 15/58, indigenous
GAYLE, 16/59, non-indigenous
MAREE, 14, non-indigenous
CORAL, 16/58, indigenous

SETTING

The play is set in 2003, and the remembered past.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

MAREE, *dressed in a Parramatta Girls uniform, sits on stage, amongst the pile of detritus. She exits when JUDY enters.*

JUDI *addresses the audience.*

JUDI: Me and my brother used to build billycarts. You know, just basically a board with wheels on it that we'd nick off old prams or so. One time we used the wheels off of a shopping trolley. And we'd fix them onto the board and there you had your billycart. Once we got some black and painted the board and we called that bugger, it was a big bugger too, we called that the hearse. And, see, we lived up the top of a hill. So the biggest thrill we could get was to get on the cart and just career down the hill. Just fly. I can remember just flyin' down the road, arms out, the wind makin' my eyes water, laughin' and screamin' with everyone watchin' ya. Now, at the bottom of the hill was a main road. Which was fine because you'd just, you know, use the rope attached to the front wheels to pull the wheels to the side. Which could be hard when you were at, you know, top speed, but you just pulled hard on one side and spun around to avoid any car that might be coming. So you'd belt down the hill, yank the rope and kinda skid around on a one-eighty at the bottom.

And that was fine, all part of the thrill, you know. And, look, your elbows used to take a bit of a battering and this was before they invented, what are they called, the elbow pads, [*tapping her own forehead*] thank you. So you used to scrape your elbows a bit, pretty regular. Scrape off a bit of skin, bit of blood. That's all right, all part of bein' a kid, isn't it? But after a while I kinda found that the wounds on my elbows wouldn't heal. And we didn't have the money to go to the doctor even if I'd ever thought of asking to, which I didn't, and I just thought it would heal, you know. But as time went on they just kinda stayed a little bit wet and open, and they didn't get infected at all, they just sort of stayed raw and

painful. And eventually when I got put in the home, they put this stuff on them and they healed a bit. But if we had to do scrubbing or stuff, or laundry, or all the work we had to do because they made us work really hard in there, every now and then they'd just start up bleeding again and I'd have to put this sorta white powder on them which stang, you know.

And eventually they healed, I mean, I still have to be careful with them. Like, they're healed, but if I knock them or something I get... bloody, I dunno what I get... I guess, I wonder if this time they won't... you know... this time they won't heal up. Like, I never knew, I never knew that elbows could just never heal up. Ya just rely on things ta scab up, don't you? And you don't realise how much you use your elbows until you've got something like this and if you use them the scab breaks all over again.

She rolls up her sleeves and shows her bandaged elbows.

Now you can laugh, this is funny, you can laugh that I've taped up my elbows today. As if anyone is going to knock them. I mean, they haven't been bad for years, for forty years, which is about how long since I've been back to the place. For forty years they've been fine. Common or garden variety elbows. I check them all the time and it's just stupid. *[Beat.]* I just don't want to be sittin' there, drinkin' me tea with these girls, and suddenly have wet elbows. You know, someone might say, 'What's that?', and I just don't know that I want to have to explain it. These weird, weeping elbows, you know. 'Bloody hell, she's a queer one.'

So, I'll go today, and geez I'm looking forward to seeing them girls. But I have strapped up my elbows, just in case.

JUDI remains on stage, as lights come up on the courtyard of the Parramatta Girls Home. There is the shadow of a large, ironwork gate on stage. Women wait to enter the home for a reunion. It is the first time many of them have been inside the home since they were incarcerated here as teenagers. The mood is agitated, expectant. Some women are pacing.

GAYLE: Hi.

JUDI: Hello.

There is an uncomfortable silence.

GAYLE: So when were you here?

JUDI: 1961. You?

GAYLE: 1961. *[Pause.]* It'll be smaller than we remember.

JUDI: Reckon it will be.

GAYLE: Do you think the dungeons will still be there?

JUDI: You mean the isolation block?

GAYLE: No, the dungeons.

Behind her, MELANIE is greeting CORAL with hello and a hug.

JUDI: There were never any dungeons.

GAYLE: Well, I remember them.

JUDI: It was never that bad. *[Beat.]* It was harsh but it wasn't all bad.

They look at each other. There is another uncomfortable silence.

GAYLE moves away. MELANIE speaks to CORAL.

MELANIE: You nervous about going in today, Coral?

CORAL: No. *[Beat.]* But I put extra glue in me dentures anyway, Melanie.

CORAL laughs, nervous.

MELANIE: What'd they put you in here for, Coral?

CORAL: Uncontrollable.

CORAL & MELANIE: *[together]* Exposed to moral danger.

MELANIE: Still. Ya musta done something ta end up in here.

CORAL: What?

MELANIE: *[ironically]* Ya musta deserved it.

CORAL: Yeah, something really serious, Melanie.

MELANIE: Like skipping school.

CORAL: Like you could scratch your bum the wrong way in those days and be considered uncontrollable.

They laugh. Pause.

[Shaking her head] Uncontrollable, eh?

MELANIE: The first time I was put in here it was for being uncontrollable. Then I escaped. Hitched a ride to Woy Woy. Got involved with this bloke. Stood lookout while he did a service station. Both of us got done. They put me back here.

CORAL continues to walk around.

CORAL: Y'all right, Kerry?

KERRY: I'll be all right, Coral.

CORAL: They got counsellors here.

KERRY: Now what have I ever done to you?

CORAL: What?

KERRY: To deserve you sickening some counsellor on me.

CORAL: I'm just saying, Kerry. They're there if ya want them.

GAYLE: Who are the counsellors, then?

KERRY: That girl over there. I think she's one.

She gestures to an unseen girl across the stage.

She must be all of twenty-five.

CORAL: Maybe she can tell us who started this whole mess.

KERRY: Nah, she wasn't even born when they thought of this place.

MELANIE: None of us were.

They all look up at the gate. Another woman, MARLENE, joins them.

MARLENE: Burramatta.

GAYLE: What, Marlene?

MARLENE: The Burramattagal clan of the Dhurug. Burramatta.

CORAL: Parramatta.

Pause.

KERRY: 1796 they built a place here for the female convicts.

GAYLE: Yeah, I knew that. The Female Factory, right?

MARLENE: That's the one next door, Gayle.

KERRY: Turned that into a loony bin eventually.

CORAL: Took their convict babies away and put them in the orphanage when they turned three.

MELANIE: And that was our building. From when?

KERRY: You wanna know?

GAYLE: Yeah. I wanna know.

MARLENE: Be careful what ya ask for.

MELANIE: 'Cause Kerry'll tell ya dates.

KERRY: 1841.

CORAL: Government orphanage.

KERRY: 1844? [*Pause.*] Catholic orphanage. 1887?

MELANIE: Girls Industrial School.

KERRY: 1912.

MARLENE & CORAL: [*together*] Girls Training Home.

KERRY: 1925.

GAYLE: Parramatta Girls Home.

KERRY: 1946, Girls Training School Parramatta. 1974, Kamballa Girls Institution. 1980, Norma Parker Detention Centre for Women... to the present day.

MARLENE: And why do you think they kept changing the names, Gayle?

KERRY: Because they'd have an enquiry that would say shut it down. So they would shut it down. Technically. Just change the name and you've shut it down.

GAYLE: Bloody hell!

MELANIE: Watch it, ya foul mouthed little bitch, or we'll wash your mouth out with soap.

There is a moment, then it relaxes when MELANIE pulls a face.

GAYLE: Why do you know all that?

KERRY: They're the facts.

GAYLE: But that's...

KERRY: ... what comes of not bein' believed.

GAYLE: When have you not been believed?

KERRY: Start yesterday and work backwards.

GAYLE: By who?

KERRY: No one important, really. Oh, there's the government enquiries into this place that did nothing. And you may as well throw in the courts that have never charged no one associated with this place with any crime. Just them. Unless you want to add every person who doesn't want to hear how bad it was. Yeah, if you counted all of them then I'd say this, today, is the first day I ever been listened to about this place.

MELANIE: Fancy you got yourself a bit of an 'historic occasion', Kerry. Have ya?

They laugh. Pause.

GAYLE: That what you think, Marlene?

MARLENE: Me? I just think it's an opportunity to shake hands with them ol' demons.

MARLENE *shakes hands with* MELANIE.

CORAL: Nearly every 'delinquent' girl in the history of Australia has

been through here at some time or another.

MARLENE: So it's gonna be one helluva fun reunion, eh!

They laugh. A long silence.

I really wanted to just...

GAYLE: See it.

CORAL: See it again. [*Pause.*] The first day I was here I heard a girl screaming and they told me that the other girls... that something was being done to her with a toilet brush and I shouldn't get involved.

So I didn't. And I kept my head down from then on.

GAYLE: So you were all right.

CORAL: Well. Except that that's how I then went through life.

GAYLE: You mean never... protesting, like.

CORAL: [*bitter*] Protecting myself.

Pause.

MARLENE: How long do we have to stand out here, do you think?

CORAL: Oh, they'll keep us waiting, Marlene. Just to remind us.

KERRY *goes over to the 'gate'.*

KERRY: I would have come up to about there on this.

CORAL: We was smaller then.

MARLENE: I was thirteen when I first went in.

GAYLE: I was fourteen. But I was a scrawny bugger.

JUDI: Just a little girl, really.

MELANIE: Just a pack of scrawny buggers.

KERRY: Thought I knew everything.

CORAL: I bloody did know everything.

MARLENE: I bloody still do.

They laugh.

MELANIE: Thought I could escape.

KERRY: But even if you climbed the wall, there was still the gate.

CORAL: There was.

MARLENE: Big spikes on top of it.

They all stand looking at the 'gate'.

GAYLE: Come on. They're lettin' us in.

KERRY, JUDI *and* GAYLE *and* CORAL *exit.*

The lights change. MARLENE and MELANIE huddle on stage.

MELANIE: What's your name, then?

MARLENE: Marlene.

MELANIE: We've got to get out of the car.

MARLENE: No, this place must be for you.

MELANIE: What?

MARLENE: This place.

MELANIE: Come on, she's telling us both to get out, Marlene.

MARLENE: I'm not getting out.

MELANIE: You'd better.

MELANIE stands. MARLENE stands as if wrenched to her feet.

Told you it was both.

MARLENE: But there must be a mistake.

MELANIE: Save it.

MARLENE is backing back.

MARLENE: I'm not going in there. [*She reacts as if she has been struck.*]

Ow!

MELANIE: Come on.

MARLENE: I'm not going...

MARLENE continues to struggle, reacting as if she's getting dragged along, screaming.

I want to see my mum.

The two girls exit.

The lights find LYNETTE, breathing deeply. After a moment she begins to take everything out of her bag. She is making a pile of rubbish papers, folding up receipts, sorting out her money. MAREE enters. She wears a Parramatta Girls uniform.

MAREE: Do you have to do that now?

Pause.

LYNETTE: I just thought... while we're waiting to go in... I'd...

MAREE: You shouldn't be flashing your money around.

LYNETTE: I'm not.

MAREE: You are. And you shouldn't around these sort of women.

Pause.

LYNETTE: You weren't in here with the rest of us, then?

MAREE: I was in here. That's why I'm saying it.