



Photo: Jamie Dunbar

ALANA VALENTINE's writing has been awarded the 2003 NSW Writer's Fellowship, the 2002 Rodney Seaborn Playwrights' Award and an International Writing Fellowship at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. She also received a 2001 commendation for the Louis Esson Prize, a 1999 AWGIE Award, a residency at the Banff Playwrights' Conference in Canada, the ANPC/New Dramatists Award in New York City, a Churchill Fellowship for England and Ireland and a NSW Premier's Award.

Her stage plays include *Swimming the Globe* (1996), *The Conjurers* (1997), *Ozone* and *Spool Time* (1998), *Row of Tents* and *The Prospectors* (2001), *The Story of Anger Lee Bredenza* and *The Mapmaker's Brother* (2002), *Radio Silence*, *Savage Grace* and *Titania's Boy* (2003) and *Run Rabbit Run* (2004).

RUN RABBIT RUN

Alana Valentine



Currency Press, Sydney

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Front cover photo shows Julie Hamilton as Barbara Selby and Josef Ber as Mark Courtney in the 2004 Company B production in Sydney. (Photo: Heidrun Lühr.)



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FOREWORD

To find myself writing this foreword to the published edition of Alana Valentine's compelling script for *Run Rabbit Run* is curious indeed.

I was just another fan when South Sydney was so unceremoniously dumped from the competition on 15 October 1999. Five days later, through a combination of luck and perseverance, I was given the task of leading the legal challenge aimed at securing the Club's reinstatement. And now, almost five years later, with Souths' place in the competition again secure, I look back upon those times and wonder just what could have happened had not a community risen, almost as one, to stop a great wrong.

I think now of the sacrifices George Piggins and others around him made while the legal battle dragged on. I think of those thousands of faceless fans who gave from their pockets and from their hearts to see preserved something that they rightly felt should not be taken away. And I think of those many more people beyond the world of Rugby League who were moved by a story that symbolised in eloquent terms the struggle of community against big business.

The South Sydney story, its many twists and turns, is beautifully evoked in Alana's skilful interweaving of the contemporary dialogue of the various participants. Upon first viewing, I was struck just how 'close to the bone' the drama became, as Alana deftly moved her spotlight from character to character. From the impassioned pleas of contrasting celebrities Andrew Denton and Alan Jones, to the defiant expressions of outrage from feisty Norm Lipson and Jimmy Lahood, the events of those manic days come to life.

And connecting it all are the wonderful words of the common fan—people like Mark Courtney, Phillip Pike, Greg Wilkinson, Eileen McLaughlin, Barbara Selby and her daughter Marcia. It is they, along with many others, who were the lifeblood of the fightback, and they constitute the cement that binds together this engaging playscript.

There are many lessons to be learned from this story—one only hopes that those who need to learn most are reading on...

Nicholas Pappas
Chairman, South Sydney Rabbitohs



*for my grandmother, Joyce Wainwright,
who took me to my first football match*



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PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

All the words in *Run Rabbit Run* are verbatim from interviews with the people in this story, or from transcripts on the public record—from court transcripts, newspapers and annual reports. This play is a drama which takes what these people said, and how they said it, so capturing the rhythms and music of the Australian vernacular.

It is also very much my version of the events, arranged and edited to elucidate the themes that I think this story evokes and explores. It is not a definitive history of the politics of sport, it is certainly not a definitive history of the politics of the South Sydney Rugby League Club. It was not my priority to write about whether Souths are a good team, whether they deserved to be in the NRL, or even what their struggle says about the corporatisation of sport. It was my ambition to look at the aspects of our Australian nature that the story reveals—the contradictions, the obsessions, the passions and the pain—and to draw from them a story for which the struggle around Souths is simply the lens through which we might view something infinitely more complex and confronting about ourselves.

Neil Armfield, in introducing the 2003 Belvoir season, wrote about ‘the complications of empathy: perhaps the most valuable of all human capacities’. It is my hope that this play will make the audience and the reader—passionate sports fans and those who have never been to a Rugby League game in their life (and even secretly detest all sport) alike—empathise with people who may be their most unlikely soul mates ever.

I wish to thank the interviewees—George Piggins, Nicholas Pappas, Mark Courtney, Andrew Denton, Norm Lipson, Jimmy Lahood, Nolene Piggins, Helen Grasswill, Alan Jones, John Hartigan, Robert Corra, Josh Kemp, Eileen McLaughlin, Father Brian Rayner, Roger Harvey, Marcia Seebacher, Barbara Selby, Eric Simms, Denis Fitzgerald, Ian Heads, Anya Courtney, Bronte Courtney, Freya Courtney, Cindy Hawkey, Greg Wilkinson, Robert Taylor, Tasha Lawrence, Peter Macourt and Phillip Pike—for their time and generosity in allowing

me to use their words in my play. I must also thank all the copyright holders for their permissions and generosity.

My thanks go to Neil and Rachel and all at Company B for their encouragement and enthusiasm for this project and its premiere season, to everyone who assisted my research, to Chris Mead and Kate Gaul for their incredible work to bring the play to the stage, and to Sharne MacDonald and Vicki Gordon for their consistent genius in Valentine-wrangling. And, finally, thank you to the people of South Sydney, and all the many other places where Souths fans lurk, for enacting a contemporary miracle on Belvoir's doorstep.

*Alana Valentine
June 2004*

Run Rabbit Run was first produced by Company B at the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney, on 7 January 2004, with the following cast:

MARK COURTNEY, NORMAN NICHOLAS, PETER MACCOURT	Josef Ber
GEORGE PIGGINS, ALAN JONES, ROBERT TAYLOR, JUSTICE FINN, PHILLIP PIKE	Roy Billing
NICHOLAS PAPPAS, DANNY MUNK, ERIC SIMMS, ALAN CATT	Wayne Blair
ANDREW DENTON, ROGER HARVEY, JOHN HARTIGAN, TOM COCKING	Tyler Coppin
BARBARA SELBY, EILEEN MCLAUGHLIN, MIKE GIBSON, FREYA COURTNEY	Julie Hamilton
MARCIA SEEBACHER, JOSH KEMP, BRONTE COURTNEY	Jody Kennedy
DENIS FITZGERALD, NORM LIPSON, ALAN JONES, GREG WILKINSON	Russell Kiefel
NOLENE PIGGINS, CAROLINE JONES, RUPERT MURDOCH, P. GERAGHTY	Eliza Logan
HELEN GRASSWILL, CINDY HAWKEY, RUPERT MURDOCH, JEFF COOK, NATASHA (TASHA) LAWRENCE	Georgina Naidu
JIMMY LAHOOD, IAN HEADS, BRIAN RAYNOR, ROBERT CORRA, BARRY MURRAY, ANYA COURTNEY	Alex Sideratos

Director, Kate Gaul
Set Design, Brian Thomson
Costume Design, Genevieve Dugard
Lighting Design, Mark Howett
Sound Design, Jeremy Silver

TIME-LINE

- 10 October 1999 'Reclaim the Game' downtown Sydney rally draws 40,000 supporters onto the streets in the biggest political sporting rally in history.
- 15 October 1999 Souths receive news that they have been culled from the Rugby League Premiership after 92 seasons.
- 8 December 1999 Justice Peter Hely dismisses Souths' application for an injunction for readmission to the 2000 Premiership.
- June / July 2000 Souths allege in the Federal Court of Australia that News Limited has contravened the Trade Practices Act and engaged in 'misleading and deceptive conduct'.
- August 2000 Kerry Stokes pledges \$3 million to South Sydney to satisfy Justice Finn's desire for Souths to prove long-term financial backing.
- October 2000 In a 181-page judgement Justice Paul Finn rejects Souths' claims that News Limited has breached the Trade Practices Act.
- 12 November 2000 80,000 people respond to Finn's decision in an emotional public display of the 'Red and Green Army' and their supporters.
- May 2001 Souths appeal to the Full Bench of the Federal Court on the grounds that Justice Finn had 'erred nine times in his November judgement'.
- 6 July 2001 After almost two years and \$2 million in court costs, the Full Bench of the Federal Court vote two to one to support Souths' appeal. Soon after, the NRL invites Souths to rejoin the 2002 competition.

- August 2001 News Limited serve Souths with papers, indicating their intention to appeal the Federal Court decision in the High Court of Australia.
- December 2001 SSRLFC boast some 20,000 members, a number unprecedented in the history of the game.
- March 2002 Souths run onto the field at the SCG in the resurrected Charity Shield match against St George/Illawarra (and retain the shield in a draw) and subsequently begin participation in the 2002 NRL Premiership League.
- August 2003 Four of five judges in the High Court overturn the Federal Court ruling that Souths' exclusion from the NRL competition breached the Trade Practices Act. News Limited meet all costs for the hearing.

CHARACTERS

JIMMY LAHOOD, Australian-Lebanese doctor, currently Souths
Board member

GEORGE PIGGINS, ex-South Sydney Rugby League Football Club
Chairman, public face of the fightback campaign

DENIS FITZGERALD, CEO Parramatta Rugby League Football Club
and Leagues Club, public rival of George Piggins

NOLENE PIGGINS, wife of Souths ex-Chairman, George Piggins

DANNY MUNK, CEO Balmain Leagues and Football Club

JOSH KEMP, 25-year-old factory worker, co-ordinates Souths fan
and volunteer clubs

NICHOLAS PAPPAS, Australian-Greek solicitor, now Souths RLFC
Chairman

ANDREW DENTON, television and radio personality

NORM LIPSON, feisty Australian-Jewish journalist, ex-Media
Manager at Souths

ALAN JONES, radio broadcaster and former Souths Football Club
Manager

IAN HEADS, journalist and author, resigned over *Telegraph*
treatment of Souths

ROGER HARVEY, Souths supporter, blind

MARK COURTNEY, Souths supporter, author of *Moving the
Goalposts*

MARCIA SEEBACHER, supporter who organised merchandise during
the fightback

BARBARA SELBY, Marcia's mother, also organised merchandise

NORMAN NICHOLAS, Souths supporter

ERIC SIMMS, former Souths player (1965–75), indigenous heritage

NATASHA (TASHA) LAWRENCE, ex-Leagues Club employee,
indigenous heritage

JOHN HARTIGAN, CEO of News Limited

PHILLIP PIKE, Souths fan and volunteer

MIKE GIBSON, *Telegraph* columnist
HELEN GRASSWILL, *ABC Australian Story* television journalist
PETER MACCOURT, Chief Operating Officer, News Limited
RUPERT MURDOCH, Chairman and Chief Executive, News Corporation
EILEEN McLAUGHLIN, salt-of-the-earth Australian-Irish volunteer
FATHER BRYAN RAYNER, Catholic priest, Maroubra parish
TOM COCKING, Souths Leagues Club Manager
JUSTICE PAUL FINN, judge of Federal Court
ALAN CATT, letter writer
P. GERAGHTY, letter writer
JEFF COOK, letter writer
BARRY MURRAY, Souths fan
CINDY HAWKEY, wife of Mark, mother of Anya, Bronte and Freya
ANYA COURTNEY, aged 11, daughter of Mark and Cindy
BRONTE COURTNEY, aged 9, daughter of Mark and Cindy
FREYA COURTNEY, aged 7, daughter of Mark and Cindy
GREG WILKINSON, Souths fan, friend of Mark Courtney
CAROLINE JONES, television presenter and author
ROBERT TAYLOR, Juniors referee, indigenous heritage
ROBERT CORRA, 2SER-FM *View from the Hill* broadcaster

PLAYER, can be played by any member of the cast

ACT ONE

ONE: ELIMINATION

JIMMY LAHOOD: I was on my way here. I got in the lift. I went up the lift to meet George. The lift doors opened. George was walking back to the lift to come down and tell everyone else and he looked at me.

GEORGE PIGGINS: The bastards have shot us out, Jimmy.

JIMMY: That's when I found out.

PLAYER: Dr Jimmy Lahood.

JIMMY: I was in disbelief. George and I had thought all along when push came to shove they wouldn't take on such a powerful public sentiment against it. But George just looked at me and his look sort of said, 'Shit. The war's begun.'

DENIS FITZGERALD: Tradition doesn't turn a balance sheet from red to black.

PLAYER: Denis Fitzgerald.

DENIS: Souths fans kept hammering the tradition and past success of the club, but a line was drawn in the sand in December 1997 and the only tradition was the same for all clubs—that was, the last two years of competition.

NOLENE PIGGINS: I was at home.

PLAYER: Nolene Piggins.

NOLENE: I was expecting that news, but when I actually heard it... probably there's always a little bit of hope... you know what's going to be, but then you're hoping that it won't be. So it was very sad... I felt very empty.

DANNY MUNK: It's a pity Souths don't realise change is necessary.

PLAYER: Danny Munk.

DANNY: They will die a lingering death.

JOSH KEMP: I was expecting the worst, y'know, everyone was.

PLAYER: Josh Kemp.

JOSH: I was working afternoon shift at the factory and I received a call from a friend. A few people at work took the opportunity to rub it in and I weren't in the best of moods. As can be expected. I didn't finish work until eleven o'clock that night so I had to quickly get changed and go into the Leagues Club and, by that time, the spirit of everyone had turned around and everyone was, all of a sudden, over their disappointment and willing to fight, and didn't care that we were kicked out. Like, they had this belief... 'No, we're not going to be beaten.' I was still down on myself because I hadn't been around everyone... I'd been at work just thinking of all the worst things, but then when I got to the club and seeing everyone like that, I felt a sense of strongness about it. I'd describe it—the spirit of South Sydney was with me.

NICHOLAS PAPPAS: I had a phone call from a very close friend that I used to go to all the Souths games with when we were young.

PLAYER: Nicholas Pappas.

NICHOLAS: It was the same guy who called me the day John Lennon died because that was our other love, the Beatles and sixties music generally and Souths, and the two went very much hand in hand, because it was a peak in music and the peak for Souths. The two worst pieces of news someone could tell me and it was the same person who rang me.

It was terrible. And it was not so much a Rugby League thing. It was your childhood, it was your old Greek grandmother who knew nothing about football, dressed in her black, asking every Sunday, 'Did Souths win?', in Greek. She'd never watched a football game in her life, but it was part of the family. Growing up in these suburbs over here. It was part of our upbringing. We knew we were up against the wall. We knew the firing squad was aiming at us, but we thought the letter would come at the last second. It's that feeling like when someone is on death row, you can't actually believe they're going to get executed, and when it happens there's just this dull thud.

ANDREW DENTON: When I got to the club, it was a bit like—I hesitate to use this word in these times—it was a bit like a war zone.

PLAYER: Andrew Denton.

ANDREW: The best way I could describe it, it was like a really civilised lynch mob. These were the people that would have lynched Rupert Murdoch, except they would have known in the end—they would have been too decent to do it.

NORM LIPSON: I was right outside this club.

PLAYER: Norm Lipson.

NORM: It was a sunny Friday afternoon and we knew the National Rugby League was meeting at the time to work out their phoney criteria which was tailored specifically to get rid of Souths. I remember the crowd going ‘Boo’, ‘No’, and the tears started flowing. I can remember Ray Hadley went to air breathlessly announcing it and he sounded quite happy and gloating about it and then I can remember the groundswell of emotion, people screaming as if they’d lost a member of their own family. And they had. They’d lost a tradition, a family tradition.

ALAN JONES: I was most probably at the radio station at 2UE.

PLAYER: Alan Jones.

ALAN: I can’t remember that. I suppose mentally I knew they’d been culled anyway. They never had a chance. It was a corrupt process.

ROGER HARVEY: Excluded from the competition? Well, I was—I was—I was here, at Lewisham Hospital, I live here because I’m blind.

PLAYER: Roger Harvey.

ROGER: I heard it on the radio. Ah... the supporters take me to the game. I’ve got the radio—and it tells me... ah... what goes on. I like the sounds of everyone shouting. That’s right. Yes. I shout myself. Yeah, yeah. Have a good time. Yeah.

MARK COURTNEY: I was en route from work to the club.

PLAYER: Mark Courtney.

MARK: It was weird really. It, it—it felt like a bit of a punch in the stomach. It was a physical reaction... um, I actually had to park—had to stop the car because I actually felt for a moment as—a bit nauseous, it was quite weird. Um... and I—I decided that it was—you know, you prepare yourself for things—I think and I think I—and you prepare yourself for things to happen at a certain time, you know, and I think that... um... [*pause*] I’d prepared myself for it to

occur at twelve-thirty or whatever the exact time was, and in fact what had happened was the League had rung George Piggins at the club and told him beforehand that this was going to occur and Souths—and George went straight down to the auditorium and had already announced it.

So before the—it might have been two-thirty I think, two-thirty p.m. was the announcement, two o'clock was the—and it was on the two o'clock news. So I was going to be there by about quarter past two... ah, and at—on the two o'clock news on whatever station they were talking about... ah, you know, fans were starting to gather at the South Sydney Leagues Club in preparation for an announcement... ah, and then they finished the news and then they had the weather or whatever and then they had a live cross. They were just going to cross live back to the South Sydney Leagues Club now... ah, and they had a reporter there who said that George Piggins had just announced to the crowd that Souths had been excluded. I just—I just felt sick.

It was like, you know, you prepare yourself for something to happen at a certain time, and I'd just—and I wasn't ready, I—if it had been two-thirty, I would have been ready somehow, but I wasn't ready. Even that—I'd been preparing for it for months and that twenty-five minutes stuffed me up completely and I actually—I felt sick and it was—it was a—it was the most weird feeling, it was like, I stopped the car, I got out of the car, and it felt like every car was going in slow motion and people were looking at me as though, you know, what's that—as though I'd—it—as though everyone could see what was happening to me, which of course wasn't true, and after a couple of minutes I got back in and went to the club.

People were, you know, walking around swearing and yelling and one guy was burning a Fox Sports logo thing and people were crying and, you know, it was weird. I stopped just at the—at the park there, there were some girl sitting there, she was about, I don't know, twenty-five, with a Souths jumper on, and she was just sitting there with her head in her hands crying, and I stopped and just talked to her and, and, you know, I was—I said to her, 'Don't worry,' you know, 'Don't worry, we'll beat them, we'll beat them'. And I had no idea what, what, you know, what the machinations were going to

be, but I just had this view that they couldn't get away with it, they just couldn't get away with it, you know, and I was talking to this girl saying, 'Don't worry, don't worry, we'll beat them', and I was really calm then.

And then as I was walking across the road, I started crying as well. I was—I remember signing the book, and I looked up and saw the [*indicating the rabbit emblem*] —and I—it was the tears just came.

DENIS FITZGERALD: Rugby League is definitely a business.

PLAYER: Denis Fitzgerald.

DENIS: There's just—sure it's a sport, but so many sports are big business, if you look at tennis and golf and British soccer and American football, basketball. I mean, oh, you just can't—cannot run anything on emotion... um, and at the end of the day it's usually the stronger or strongest financial teams or entities, companies, that—that—that still survive and so you just—you just can't have a competition based on emotion.

TWO: GLORY DAYS

BARBARA SELBY: Okay, um... I came to live in Redfern when I was two.

PLAYER: Barbara Selby.

BARBARA: My mum always said one of our first words was 'Rabbitohs', because of the rabbitoh man coming around the street.

PLAYER: Volunteer and Souths fan.

BARBARA: Mum used to buy the rabbits [*with a laugh*] —we'd have them braised or roasted and, you know, I mean, you acquired the taste for it— [*with a laugh*] and as I grew up, my dad used to say to me, 'Oh, come on, love, let's go and watch the big boys play'. We'd sit over at Redfern Oval and watch the game, and I'm sixty-seven now, so I've been around Redfern and Souths a long time.

NORMAN NICHOLAS: South Sydney was a foundation club in 1908.

PLAYER: Norman Nicholas.

NORMAN: And it's not an institution, it's a way of life.

JIMMY LAHOOD: We contributed more to Rugby League than anyone else.

PLAYER: Dr Jimmy Lahood. Board Member.

JIMMY: We contributed financially, we contributed more legends, more great players, more people who represented Australia in Rugby League. We had people working every weekend for ninety-two years coaching kids to play Rugby League. All that goodwill that Souths has fostered for the game, you can't say to us, 'Get away, you don't own any part of this game'.

NORM LIPSON: This area is full of fighters.

PLAYER: Norm Lipson.

NORM: They were unionists—they had to fight the bosses on the wharves.

PLAYER: Former Souths Media Manager.

NORM: Jimmy's cousin Peter said it, 'They picked the wrong team'. These people are used to fighting for every scrap that they've got. Every scrap of food they've got. They're used to fighting for every meagre possession they have. Pardon my expression, I don't know if I'm allowed to swear in front of you, but the general attitude was, 'You're



From left: Josef Ber as Norman Nicholas, Russell Kiefel as Norm Lipson, Julie Hamilton as Barbara Selby and Jody Kennedy as Marcia Seebacher in the 2004 Company B production. (Photo: Heidrun Löhr)