



KATE MULVANY is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. Her new play, *The Rasputin Affair*, was shortlisted for the Griffin New Play Award and the Patrick White Award and will premiere at Ensemble Theatre in 2017. *Jasper Jones*, her adaptation of Craig Silvey's novel, premiered at Belvoir in 2016 to a sell out season and was subsequently produced by Melbourne Theatre Company that same year. It returned to Belvoir in 2017 to another sell-out season. In 2015, she penned *Masquerade*, a reimagining of the much-loved children's book by Kit Williams, which was performed at the 2015 Sydney Festival, the State Theatre Company of South Australia and the Melbourne Festival. Her autobiographical play, *The Seed*, commissioned by Belvoir, won the Sydney Theatre Award for Best Independent Production in 2007 and is currently being developed into a feature film. Kate's *Medea*, created with Anne-Louise Sarkis and produced by Belvoir in 2012, won a number of awards including an AWGIE and five Sydney Theatre Awards. It completed hugely successful seasons at London's Gate Theatre and Auckland's Silo Theatre. She's also currently under commission at Sydney Theatre Company. Kate's other plays and musicals include *The Danger Age* (Deckchair Theatre/La Boite); *Blood and Bone* (The Stables/Naked Theatre Company); *The Web* (Hothouse/Black Swan State Theatre Company); *Somewhere* (co-written with Tim Minchin for the Joan Sutherland PAC); and *Storytime* (Old Fitzroy Theatre), which won Kate the 2004 Philip Parsons Award. Kate is also an award-winning stage and screen actor, whose credits include *The Seed*, *Buried Child* (Belvoir); *Blasted* (B Sharp/Sheedy Productions); *Tartuffe*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* (Bell Shakespeare); *The Crucible*, *Proof*, *A Man With Five Children*, *King Lear*, *Rabbit* (Sydney Theatre Company); *The Beast* (Melbourne Theatre Company); *The Literati*, *Mr Bailey's Minder* (Griffin Theatre Company); and the feature films *The Little Death* and *The Great Gatsby*.

The Seed

Kate Mulvany



Currency Press, Sydney

CURRENCY PLAYS

First published in 2008

by Currency Press Pty Ltd,

PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia

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www.currency.com.au

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Reprinted 2015, 2017

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CIP data for this title is available from the National Library of Australia website: www.nla.gov.au.

Typeset by Dean Nottle for Currency Press.

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

Cover design by Laura McLean, Currency Press.

Front cover shows Martin Vaughan as Brian and Kate Mulvany as Rose in the 2007 Mimmam / B Sharp production. Back cover shows Danny Adcock as Danny, Kate Mulvany as Rose and Martin Vaughan as Brian in the 2007 Mimmam / B Sharp production. (Photos: Brett Boardman)

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The Making of a Really Great Play

Eamon Flack

I want to tell you how this play came about, because it's a terrific story of Australian playwriting.

When Kate Mulvany was twenty-something, living in Sydney and acting and writing plays, she decided it was time to piece together the story of her family. She began to write a novel.

Kate's from Geraldton on the coast of Western Australia. If you haven't been there you might know a bit about it from reading Tim Winton's novels. It's a long, dry coast. In summertime, weeks can pass with barely a single cloud in the sky. The beaches are often surfless, and the sea can be incredibly calm and clear and somehow seem unusually wide. Instead of a mountainous hinterland you step off the dunes onto baked desert and low, rocky scrubland. Every now and then along the length of the coast, sometimes hundreds of kilometres apart, there's a small seaside town, humble and quiet, though maybe seething underneath. Tim Winton often peoples these towns with squinty-eyed thinkers, churning up inside and peering out at the world for a bit of sense. They're usually fleeing in one direction or another—either setting up a new life on the coast, or gathering up enough old life to get out and begin again somewhere else. There's a lot of solitary looking for peace out on the sea in Winton's work—skimming along in boats, fishing, swimming.

This was the place Kate grew up, and it was the poetic world of her planned novel. She worked away at it for months, struggling to make something from the stories she'd heard as a kid and filling in the gaps from her imagination. She got down pages and pages. But then her laptop was stolen and with it went the novel. All that survived were a few scraps about crayfishing with her dad. She didn't have the heart to reconstruct it, and decided to let it slide. Maybe one day she'd come back to it.

Besides, by then her career as an actor was taking off. Kate's a theatre animal. She was one of a small army of actors and techies who started out at Curtin Uni in Perth doing a bit of everything—writing, directing, acting, rigging lights, building sets, selling tickets. Many of them have come east in the last ten years and they've been a distinctly playful and humble presence in Sydney's theatres, both on stage and backstage.

Kate's stage presence is a mix of brawn, warmth and understated elegance. Her eyes can twinkle (she has a tireless sense of humour) but she also has that vulnerable Winton-esque squint: taking a good hard look at the world outside at the same time as sorting through the mire of thoughts inside. There's a good-humoured roguery about the way she tackles a role. She has an inner musketeer, hands on hips, head thrown back, ready to take on the world. One of the trademark weapons in Kate's stage armoury is a wrinkled nose and a delighted, foghorn scoff at the stupidities of life. She seems to find our Australian capacity for idiocy ridiculous and fascinatingly funny. And underpinning all her work on stage is a palpable sense of goodwill towards humanity, even the idiots.

These qualities have been given plenty of time and space to come alive over ten-odd years of acting and rehearsing, often back-to-back. It's a pretty fantastic education for a playwright, to have Kate's acting career. And she kept writing the whole time—nine produced plays at last count, both professionally and in the indie scene. They include *Embalmer*; *The Musical*, based on her experiences working in a funeral home in Perth, and *The Danger Age*, a coming-of-age story about life, race and national destiny set in Kalbarri. It was *The Danger Age* which got her shortlisted for the Philip Parsons Young Playwrights Award in 2004.

Philip Parsons was the co-founder of Currency Press back in 1971 and one of Australian drama's great champions. The NSW Ministry for the Arts set up the award after his death in 1993. From 2003 it has been in the hands of Company B's B Sharp program, a curated season of independent theatre in the Downstairs Theatre. B Sharp doubled the prize-money and turned it into a commission. The judging process goes like this: any NSW-based writer under 35 can submit a play that has been produced in the previous year. Company B announces a shortlist from these submissions, and asks the shortlisted writers what they

most want to write. The award is given to the most exciting project. So instead of being a prize for an existing work, the Parsons Award requires the winner to write a new play. It's a bit unorthodox but the joy of it is that it funds new work and gives it a home to find its feet.

When Kate got shortlisted she was in country NSW on tour with Chris Hurrell's production for Griffin of Debra Oswald's *Mr Bailey's Minder*. Lyn Wallis, then Director of B Sharp, rang and asked Kate what she'd most like to write for Company B. The brief was to think big, not to be limited by cast size or scale, and get back to Lyn with a pitch and a few sample scenes. She had two weeks. Put on the spot and inspired by the chance to think big (a rare opportunity for Australian playwrights today), Kate's mind drifted back to the abandoned novel. Her friend Nick Enright, one of the great midwives of Australian theatrical talent, had read the surviving scraps about crayfishing and said there was a play in there. At the time Kate was too stung by her loss to take up the idea, but now the moment seemed right. She reworked the passages about crayfishing and sent them off. A few weeks later, David Hare delivered the annual Parsons Lecture at Belvoir St Theatre. It was entitled 'Why Fabulate?' At the end of it he presented Kate with the 2004 Philip Parsons Young Playwright's Award.

So Kate tucked herself away and fabulated a draft. Then, egged on by Company B's Literary Manager, Anthony Weigh, she refabulated. And refabulated and refabulated. Two years later I followed Anthony into the Literary Manager job and Kate sent me Draft Four of *The Seed*.

There's a strange kind of life cycle to a good play that's hard to describe: you want a play to perform for you, you need to be able to imagine it 'doing its thing'. And if it can't find its motion pretty quickly after the writing begins, there's a good chance it never will.

Draft Four had dance. What had begun as an epic spread across decades and continents now took place in a single town in the UK on a single evening with three characters—an Irishman, an Englishman and an Australian. And, yes, it was funny, but it was also terribly moving. We talked it through, Kate did another draft, then three wonderful actors—Danny Adcock (for whom Kate had written the role of Danny), Belinda Bromilow and Tony Phelan—did a reading in front of a small invited audience. The applause at the end was big and heartfelt but it was the talk in the pub that confirmed our hopes: somehow, Kate had

turned a troubled work-in-progress about a real family's knotted rope of stories into a genuinely moving new Australian play with a need to be performed.

It still wasn't finished, though. We asked Iain Sinclair to direct it Downstairs as part of the 2007 B Sharp season. Iain has a great ear for new work and is a long-time collaborator of Kate's. He talked her through another few drafts before rehearsals began on the play in mid 2007.

Danny Adcock, who had been such a force as Danny in the reading, went out of his way to stay with *The Seed* in production. Martin Vaughan had played opposite Kate in the original season of *Mr Bailey's Minder* and now she coaxed him out of retirement to play Brian. Iain's most cunning piece of casting was to convince Kate to play Rose. The show opened in the little three-sided Downstairs Theatre at Belvoir St on a simple set, simply lit: an old couch and chair, dull carpet, a statue of Mary on a mantelpiece, and tattered 1970s wallpaper of Sherwood Forest. The performances were a revelation—loving and cruel, pitiless and delicate, and, in the closeup of that space, achingly honest.

The crayfishing story which began it all was still there (and still is). In previous drafts it had been an excerpt of Rose's writing which she read to her father; now recast as the framework of the play itself, it is in a strange way, emotionally or mythically, the real event. Danny's bittersweet moment of peace out on the sea off his adopted homeland with his daughter Rose is his triumph. Her retelling of this moment is her triumph. It's also Kate's. The story of *The Seed* really ends with the play itself.

At interval on opening night, two lifelong, hawk-eyed reviewers of Australian theatre, Katharine Brisbane and John McCallum, were overheard muttering excitedly to each other about a new work arriving on stage so ready for an audience. Katharine, the widow of Philip Parsons and the co-founder of Currency Press, is one of the most astute observers of the last half-century of Australian theatre. Like Kate she's a West Australian. *The Seed* is the first of the Parsons Award commissions to be published by the press Philip and Katharine founded; and also the first to be given a mainstage season. So in hindsight there was a quiet celebration of tradition and renewal at work that night. John McCallum hadn't come to the theatre intending to review the play, but when he

saw it he was moved to do so. He wrote in the *Australian*:

Kate Mulvany's story, her play about her story and her performance in her play are extraordinarily powerful and moving. This is an important work that deserves a long life.

The season that followed was a great success. After one performance later in the run Neil Armfield overheard someone behind him saying, 'Why isn't this on Upstairs?' and Neil thought, why indeed. *The Seed* is now the first B Sharp production to make the move into the Company B mainstage season.

There's been another rewrite of the play since that first season. (The biggest change has been to move two scenes from the pub where the fight happened and the race track into Brian's living room.) So the published edition you're holding has all the blessings a play could want: a long-simmering need to be told, a great writer with a vivid poetic world at her fingertips and a robust sense of the stage in her body, a commissioning fee, a home at a theatre, a loving director and cast, a terrific first production and a second life on the mainstage.

That's the story so far. I haven't said anything about what this play is about, I'd rather let it speak for itself. But it's nice to think of it as very Australian, in spite of the fact it happens in Nottingham. The real backdrop of the play is that great wide sea off the coast of Geraldton where a father and daughter are trying to learn how to talk about their battles and about the way the past is still here. So this is a play for any two or more people—or any family, or any country—who haven't been able to have a really good talk about what's gone on in their past.

Eamon Flack is Artistic Associate of Company B, Sydney.

The Seed was first produced by Mimmam Productions for B Sharp at the Downstairs Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, on 19 July 2007, with the following cast:

DANNY

Danny Adcock

ROSE

Kate Mulvany

BRIAN

Martin Vaughan

Director, Iain Sinclair

Set Designer, Micka Agosta

Lighting Designer, Matt Cox

CHARACTERS

DANNY, 55-60, son of Brian, father of Rose

BRIAN, 80, father of Danny, grandfather of Rose

ROSE, 30, daughter of Danny, granddaughter of Brian

SETTING

Present day setting is in Brian's living room in Nottingham, England. It is a hovel. A small, dark, dank room filled with dated furniture and ornaments, photos and junk—and many, many boxes, all taped securely. Other scenes occur at Heathrow Airport, on the footpath outside Brian's house, on a Geraldton crayboat, and on the 1950s streets of Nottingham. Across the back of the wall is a barbed-wire fence.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The soundscape suggests a boy running for his life, leaping over fences, in front of cars, over rubbish bins. All the time, the panting getting harder and faster and more frightened...

The clatter of a metal fence...

DANNY's young English voice calls out...

DANNY: Fuck off, pig!

ROSE, lit, speaks to the audience.

ROSE: Nottingham. November. 1957.

Another clatter.

DANNY: Fuck!

Heavier footsteps continue running, slowing down steadily.

ROSE: Danny is hanging.

Lights up on DANNY, hanging in agony from the barbed wire, his hand entangled in the mesh.

The wire has weaved a violent gash through his hand and around his fingers, that had've just pinched some cigarettes from the store on Smith Street.

The running feet of his accoster slow to a heavy stop. A cop. The footsteps stop.

DANNY: Let me down, you fat bastard.

ROSE: Perhaps not the best choice of words...

DANNY: Come on! I'm fuckin' hangin' here!

ROSE: The blood trickles from Danny's ripped palm and down his arm.

The gravel below his dangling feet is getting more speckled every time he wriggles.

DANNY wretches, terrified.

DANNY: Oh, Jesus...

ROSE: The cop treads his heavy way to Danny and places his hands on the boy's waist.

DANNY: Took your fuckin' time, you bastard.

ROSE: But the cop just puts his hand in Danny's pocket and fishes out the stolen cigarettes. He lights one, and indulges in long, luxurious inhalations as Danny twists to see the policeman behind him.

DANNY: You bastard... you fuckin' piece of shite pig... Those were for me mam and da! Get me down, fuck you, get me the fuck *down!*

ROSE: Danny catches sight of the silvery prongs noosed around and through his mangled hand. Waves of nausea weaken him and he begins to act more like the little boy he is...

DANNY: [*sobbing*] Please, sir, let me down. I'm sorry. I'm tru-truly sorry, I won't do it again. They were for me mam, sir, me da, not me.

Please, sir, it hurts. The wire, sir, it's... it's clear through me hand...

ROSE: The policeman slowly moves to the hanging Danny. Once again he puts his hands on Danny's waist, but this time suddenly twists him around, the boy now face to face with the leering policeman. The cop exhales the last of his cigarette into Danny's face and smiles with English eyes.

A man's voice speaks. It is BRIAN, entering his Nottingham apartment.

BRIAN: 'Time to come home, hey, Danny Boy?'

DANNY *screams.*

ROSE: And he tears the boy from the fence.



SCENE TWO

A young woman, ROSE, and her father, DANNY, stand side by side in an airport.

DANNY: Where are they?

ROSE: Dad, we only landed half an hour ago.

DANNY: I could do it faster. [*Beat.*] Jesus, where are they?

ROSE: Go and sit down. I'll get the baggage.

DANNY: They're too heavy for you. [*Beat.*] Fuck me dead. Where the fuck are they? Fuck.

ROSE: Go and call Mum. Tell her we've arrived safe and sound. She'll be worried.

DANNY: All right.

Beat. She hands him a phone card.

What's this?

ROSE: It's an international phone card.

DANNY: When did they invent them?

ROSE: Same week as the wheel.

Beat.

DANNY: We'll call her when we get to your grandda's. [*Beat.*] Where are they?

ROSE: Go and get yourself a sandwich. You didn't eat on the plane.

DANNY: Fuckin' spaghetti.

ROSE: Noodles, actually.

DANNY: Wasn't hungry.

ROSE: Are you hungry now?

DANNY: Maybe a bucket of chips.

ROSE: Here.

She gives him some Australian money.

You'll have to go and get it exchanged. Thirty-eight p to the dollar. Don't let them trick you.

Beat.

DANNY: I'm not hungry.

Beat. ROSE takes the money back.

Where are they? We're going to miss the train to Notts.

ROSE: We'll be fine, Dad. I checked all the schedules. Plenty of time.

DANNY: Takes two hours to get there, you know.

ROSE: I know.

DANNY: On the train.

ROSE: Yes.

DANNY: To Nottingham. [*Beat.*] Where are they?! [*Beat.*] Never took this long before. Service standards have dropped. So busy looking out for terrorists they've forgotten about the simple things. Like giving people their fucking bags back at the end of a fucking flight.

ROSE gets out her dictaphone.

ROSE: What are your other memories of the last time you were here, Dad? At Heathrow.

DANNY: What?

ROSE: Expectation, perhaps? Anxiety? Hope.

DANNY: Rose...

ROSE: Is that what you're feeling again now? Now you're back? [*Beat.*]
Or maybe you're tapping into something more deep-seeded. Maybe something long forgotten. Maybe...

DANNY: Maybe a cigarette.

ROSE: Maybe some food, Dad.

DANNY: A cigarette. Definitely.

Beat. The lights fade as he leaves. He stops and looks around.

Fuckin' tourists.

ROSE watches him leave and switches off the dictaphone.



SCENE THREE

BRIAN *enters and begins to decorate the house with dismal decorations as he sings an IRA anthem. He hangs up a decoration that says, 'Happy Birthday, Easter and Christmas'. He sets up three party hats and three whiskey glasses.*

As he decorates, ROSE and DANNY stand outside. DANNY is edgy. He stands with a cigarette butt, burnt out, in his mouth. ROSE is impatient.

ROSE: Shall we knock?

DANNY: Jesus, did you notice all the Pakis.

ROSE: Dad.

DANNY: Sorry. Did you notice all the Pakistanis.

ROSE: Does it look familiar?

DANNY: I think it's familiar. I'm pretty sure it's familiar.

ROSE: Is this the house?

DANNY: Maybe it's familiar.

ROSE: It is?

DANNY: I think.

ROSE: Yes?

DANNY: Nothing's familiar. Pakis everywhere.

ROSE: Well, this is the address. Let's go in.

DANNY: See the tops of them trees? Sherwood Forest.

ROSE: That's Sherwood Forest?

DANNY: It is.

ROSE: Your backyard in Geraldton is bigger than that.

DANNY: Sherwood Forest.

ROSE: That's where Robin Hood hid with his merry men?

DANNY: It is.

ROSE: Were they dwarves?

DANNY: What?

ROSE: It's tiny!

DANNY: I lost my virginity in there. Many, many, many times. All the Nottingham boys took their girls there.

ROSE: Why?

DANNY: Sleeping in the same bed of leaves as the great man. Robin Hood.

He stood up for his class. Robbed from the rich to give to the poor.

ROSE: What happened when the poor became richer than the rich? Did he swap back over? Must've been hard to keep track.

DANNY: It was a noble act.

ROSE: A thief is a thief is a thief, Dad. Such is life.

DANNY: He won the heart of the fair Maid Marion.

ROSE: He wore green tights and hung out with a troupe of 'merry men', one of whom was a priest.

DANNY: Friar.

ROSE: Whatever. The whole thing belongs on a Mardi Gras float. [*Beat.*] I think it's time to go in, Dad.

DANNY: Laid your mother down in there. Amongst the leaves.

ROSE: Dad!

DANNY: I'll tell you another reason you should show respect to Sherwood Forest, Rosey.

ROSE: It's time to go in now.

DANNY: You were conceived in there.

Beat. ROSE looks at Sherwood Forest.

Inside, BRIAN is tidying.

BRIAN: [*singing*] Come listen to me, you gallants so fair,
All you that love mirth for to hear,
And I will tell you of a bold outlaw
That lived in Nottinghamshire...

Outside...

DANNY: You do know what he's like, don't you?

ROSE: No.

DANNY: You know what I mean. He's... eccentric. [*Beat.*] And he's... got a history.

ROSE: So have you.

DANNY: Not like this man. The things he's done.

ROSE: IRA.

DANNY: Aye. [*Beat.*] But he's a good man, your grandda. A good man.

ROSE: So let's see him. Come on.

But he does not move. ROSE again gets out her dictaphone.

How do you feel, Dad?

DANNY stares at the house.

How does it feel to come home?

He still says nothing.

You said it's not familiar anymore. You seem a bit lost.

Nothing.

Dad?

He glares at her.

DANNY: Don't talk to me like I'm one of your stories.

ROSE: You are one of my stories, Dad. My most important story.

DANNY: We're not here five minutes and you're already at me.

ROSE: You have to expect questions, Dad. It's what I do.

DANNY: Well, don't expect answers.

ROSE: You do realise I've gone to a lot of trouble to come here, Dad. A lot of expense...

DANNY: Expense? You had credit on the fucking airfares, Rose!

She clicks the dictaphone off and busies herself with the contents of her bag.

Sorry, duck.

ROSE: It's fine.

DANNY: At least you got something out of that fucking prat.

ROSE: When did you take your tablet last?

DANNY: Perth airport.

ROSE: Me too. It's time for another one.