I N terms of ‘plot’, it is no more than a party given to celebrate what looks like an Australian Labor Party election victory, and the play traces the collapse of such hopes in tandem with the emergence of personal failures and frustrations. Perhaps the imminence of another federal election in which the ALP appears more clearly in the ascendant than for a decade helps to account for the play’s continuing freshness and ‘relevance’. It was also instructive to re-view the film, thirty-odd years after its appearance – and heartening to note that it retains its lethal edge. My concern here is the film, but it has a complex intertextuality which for people of a certain age will include the play itself; the recent Melbourne production means that the demographic in the know in this respect is larger than it might have been.

THE PLAY

According to Williamson:

The genesis of the play was simply a recollection that the last two election-night parties I’d been to were pretty dramatic and funny. Also, I was a fan of ongoing real-time action at that time ... and thought a party would be an interesting thing to put on the stage. 

Those in left-wing circles were generally dissatisfied with twenty years of conservative government, with a middle-class deference to Britain and the United States (some would say that the latter deference is still in place), with a relegation of women to subordinate roles, and with the Vietnam War still in full swing. In Williamson’s words, ‘The political and social climate of the time, in Carlton, was an anti-elitist left-wing orthodoxy.’ And Melbourne’s suburb of Carlton was crucial to the birth of Don’s Party, described in 1976 as ‘probably the most famous Australian play since Ray Lawler’s Summer of the Seventeenth Doll’.

Don’s Party was first performed at the Pram Factory in Carlton, by the Australian Performing Group (APG) on 11 August, 1971. The Pram Factory was a key element in the revitalization of Australian drama in the late 1960s, along with La Mama – another, smaller Carlton theatre. The APG was a politically oriented theatrical company, disinterested in the conventions of middle-class, realistic theatre. Wilfred Last, the first ‘Don’, recalled:

It had taken its lead from American developments such as the Living Theatre and the Performance Group, from which it took its name, and was also influenced [inter alia] by Brechtian theatre and ideas. The Pram
Don's Party parallels work to highlight the shibboleths of these middle-class lives, the affluence of which doesn’t paper over the cracks through which seep myriad discontents.
The NFSA recognizes were all produced in that year. For further details, see National Film, Video and Lending Educational bodies can access Dolby playback. These new materials have allowed NFSA balance and presence.

The Devil's Playground were penned by David Williamson. For the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), Don's Party is important from a number of perspectives:

Don's Party was made by a significant Australian director, it encapsulates significant ideas and debates in relation to being Australian and has an important place in the renaissance of Australian filmmaking.

So says David Noakes, project manager of the Atlab/Kodak Cinema Collection at the NFSA.

Plus 1976 was a watershed year for the Australian film industry as significant films like The Devil’s Playground (Fred Schepisi), Caddie (Donald Crombie), Storm Boy (Henri Safran), and the less known but influential Pure Shit (Bert Deling) and Queensland (John Ruane) were all produced in that year.

The NFSA recognizes Don’s Party as part of a strong post-1970 stable of Australian stage adaptations to film, many of which were penned by David Williamson.

Working with Atlab Australia, the NFSA created a new intermediate on Kodak Polyester stock. This allowed us to capture the images before the acceleration of fading which overcomes all film stock,” says Noakes. Atlab also re-mastered the mono sound mix to Dolby (mono), ensuring respect for the original sound balance and presence.

These new materials have allowed NFSA to create new prints that have stabilized the fade and allowed the film to be screened on modern projectors with Dolby playback.

Educational bodies can access Don’s Party and other films through the National Film, Video and Lending Service collection that is managed by the NFSA. For further details, see <http://www.nfsa.gov.au/nnfsa>. Clips from Don’s Party and study notes can be found on the australianscreen website: <http://www.australianscreen.com.au>.

The script continued to develop, in particular the political content of the play which Williamson uses so effectively both to mirror the declining personal hopes of his characters and to create an accurate sense of time and place. Clark goes on to say: ‘Yet when the final text of the play emerged, it was as precise, formal and finely orchestrated as a piece of music.’ This comment, in view of the shifting pairs and groups throughout the running time of play or film, makes one think that, in a tiny homage to Anthony Powell, it might be subtitled ‘A Dance to the Music of [a Very Short] Time’. Its sinuous windings as it focuses its attention first on this, then on another character, and on their uneasy, even volatile dealings with each other, suggest both recurring musical motifs and the patternings of dance.

The ‘dance’ was performed at London’s Royal Court Theatre in 1976, cast mainly with Australians, including Ray Barrett and Veronica Lang – both of whom would later appear in the film. Barrett, who admired the play’s ‘vigour and frankness’, reports how, after a slow start, there ‘was standing room only for the last few performances’.

The play’s development and its reception into Australia’s cultural consciousness offer fascinating ground for more detailed exploration than there is space for here. However, it is important at least to advert to the play’s place in recent theatrical history: when the film was made five years after that first Carlton performance, the play was still very much in the minds of the film’s audiences. As H.G. Kippax noted in his Preface to the first edition of the play, ‘Don’s Party is not a political play … Nevertheless, the play has political interest. Its sociological themes sketch some of the elements of change in the electorate.’ When the play was revived in 2007, its structure, of which Peter Fitzpatrick has given a subtle and persuasive account, emerges as theatrically sturdy, and the play’s issues, partly though not wholly because of the political shifts in the air in 2007, retained much of their bite and relevance. The play, and the sociopolitical circumstances in which it had its being and its success, are significant intertextual influences on the film to which we now turn.

THE FILM

PRODUCTION DRAMAS

JACK LEE

The first name to note in the production history of the film version of Don’s Party (Bruce Beresford, 1976) is that of English director Jack Lee. He had been a reasonably successful director in Britain, his career really beginning when he joined the GPO (later Crown) Film Unit in 1938,
and winning a reputation as a documentary filmmaker. Post-war, he moved into features, enjoying major commercial hits with *The Wooden Horse* (1950) and *A Town Like Alice* (1956). As noted in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography:

In 1963 he went to Australia to live, and continued to work in documentaries, the best-known being *From the Tropics to the Snow* (1964), a send-up of tourist travelogues. From 1976 to 1981, he was Chairman of the South Australian Film Corporation, in which role he helped foster the careers of such directors as Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir.¹⁰

Lee was interested in directing a film of *Don’s Party*, and approached producer Phillip Adams with this in mind; Lee confirmed this when I interviewed him for another purpose in Sydney in October 1990, when he showed no bitterness at the outcome of his approaches.¹¹

**Don’s Party** depicts certain ocker characteristics, but not in a mode of celebration or indulgence. The guzzling, groping men in *Don’s Party* are not reclaimed for intrinsic lovability: the view of them we take away is apt to be as their women see them, and it’s not a pretty picture.

**PHILLIP ADAMS**

Adams recalls that Lee ‘wanted to reactivate his career, but wasn’t sure how to go about this in the new Australian industry’. Adams persuaded him that the film couldn’t be got up with him on board, that the industry was too interested in its own new people. ‘And he just drifted off the project, except he remained co-owner of the property. He was never involved in the production.’¹² While the industry at the time may well have been protective of its own burgeoning talents, it is also likely that the sixty-year-old Englishman might have found himself somewhat at sea with the intensely Australian cultural mores of this ‘ocker’ would-be-radicalism. Though Lee’s name does not appear on the final film, it is encrypted there in the credit which reads ‘Double Head Productions’, which essentially comprised Adams and Lee. As was customary with Australian films then, the majority of the production finance was provided by the Australian Film Commission with additional funding from Twentieth Century Fox. Adams now needed to find another director and canvassed several new talents of the local scene, including Ken Hannam, who had directed *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), but ‘was out of sympathy with the urban characters … [and] found the dialogue too aggressive, too ugly’.¹³

**BRUCE BERESFORD**

‘I was told it was offered to various other Australian directors before it came to me …’¹⁴

Beresford’s first feature film as director was *The Devil to Pay*, made at Sydney University in 1961. After several shorts and documentaries, he directed the ‘ocker’ comedies, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972, produced by Adams) and sequel *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (1974). Commercially popular, these were critically excoriated, and, as Adams said in *Crashing the Party*, ‘Bruce did need something redemptive’ after them. Peter Coleman records the vituperative responses of the local critics:

[The] attacks continued relentlessly despite the [first ‘Bazza’] film’s success, and Beresford’s career seemed finished … He simply could not find work as a director of feature films in Australia at a time when production was beginning to boom.¹⁵

If Adams initially hesitated about Beresford as director of *Don’s Party*, it was because:

I didn’t think he was sophisticated enough for it, but, as we considered the scene at the time, I came to think he was the best prospect. He’s very bright intellectually, probably the smartest of his generation.

Beresford had returned to England to make the disastrous *Side by Side* (1975), dismissed by one reviewer as ‘this abysmal comedy’ without even the ‘exuberant vulgarity’ of the ‘Bazza’ films.¹⁶ Of the telephone conversation in which Adams asked Beresford if he would like to direct *Don’s Party*, Beresford reported succinctly: ‘Phillip Adams saved my life.’¹⁷

**PROBLEMS AND DECISIONS**

Adams claimed the film had ‘a tormented production history’. Certainly there were major problems and challenges to be addressed before the the cameras could roll.
LOCATION
One of the first issues to be decided was where the film was to be set. Though the play began life as a “Carlton” piece, William had originally set it in Lower Plenty, a less distinctive north-eastern Melbourne suburb, in which it was reasonable to locate lower-middle-class aspirants to professional affluence. For the film, the production moved to Sydney, where, Adams felt, “…it would be easier to handle financially, and to cast it”. Williamson was amenable to this, possibly recalling how Sydney audiences had ‘stamped the floor on opening night’. In a 1976 production report on the film, Adams said: “…we are filming on location in a New South Welsh version of Lower Plenty, but the domestic details are identical – down to the mandatory Breughel print.” The fact of moving to Sydney did not prove a serious problem but a more demanding locational challenge was the result of Beresford’s wish to film the action in a real suburban house. The decision ‘not to build a set but to borrow a house in Westleigh, Sydney … to the suburban action of the play should be resolved was the extent to which the setting and action of the play should be ‘opened out’ for the film. So often, such opening out looks like mere tokenism, no more than a gesture to film’s greater mobil- ity in place and time. Take two prestigious films derived from notable American plays: Lumet’s Long Day’s Journey into Night (Sidney Woolf; Mike Nichols, 1966), Lumet clung uncomromisingly to Eugene O’Neill’s claustrophobic setting, its characters locked in mortal love and combat; Nichols dissipated a potentially similar power by a fatuous mid-film break when the four characters are meaninglessly transported to a roadhouse.

OPENING OUT?
One of the earliest production issues to be resolved was the extent to which the focus of the evening. Both play and film, despite dispiriting results on both personal and political party levels, depend on a kind of vigour and brazen, over-age laddishness that the characters would have found hard to sustain so soon after the dashing of their hopes, however trendily held.

There were negotiations with David about updating it, even perhaps providing a happy ending with the Whitlam government coming to power. David was always very good about such discussions, open to ideas.

There seems never to have been any aesthetic regret at largely confining the setting and action of the play should be ‘opened out’ for the film. So often, such opening out looks like mere tokenism, no more than a gesture to film’s greater mobil- ity in place and time. Take two prestigious films derived from notable American plays: Lumet’s Long Day’s Journey into Night (Sidney Woolf; Mike Nichols, 1966), Lumet clung uncomromisingly to Eugene O’Neill’s claustrophobic setting, its characters locked in mortal love and combat; Nichols dissipated a potentially similar power by a fatuous mid-film break when the four characters are meaninglessly transported to a roadhouse.

Apart from one or two small matters, such as house prices being at a slightly higher level for 1976, there is little evidence of updating for the film version.

CASTING
By 1976, there were scarcely any ‘names’ associated with Australian cinema, and Adams wanted to ensure a bit of box-office attractiveness by casting television personalities. Not necessarily known for their acting skills, these names could help to sell the film, in Australia at least. He wanted to cast Mike Willesee, the television compère, who, at 24, in 1966 was already a political correspondent and interviewer for TV’s This Day Tonight, and Germaine Greer, a very high-profile name by 1975. But nothing came of either of these. Adams also tried to negotiate for Paul Hogan, fresh from the Harbour Bridge, to play the lascivious Cooley, but his manager, John Cornell, ‘was worried that it might hurt their franchise. All that bad language and so on.’ Beresford remembered Hogan as ‘wanting a fee more than the whole budget’. Finally, Graham Kennedy, then a hugely popular TV personality with a genius for ad-libbing and holding a talk-show together, was signed to play Mack, who gets his kicks from watching (and photographing) other people engaged in intercourse with his
wife. Kennedy was Adams’ choice; indeed, Beresford said: ‘I must have been the only person in Australia who hadn’t heard of Graham Kennedy.’23 His hypothyroid eyes and sexually ambiguous persona made him apt and touching as Mack.

And speaking of sexuality, there were other casting problems in this regard. Beresford worried whether John Hargreaves’ gay sexuality would ‘show’, but Adams was confident Hargreaves could play Don as convincingly heterosexual. Adams and Beresford had wanted to cast Barry Crocker, star of the ‘Bazza’ films, as Don, but Crocker injured his back and had to withdraw at the last minute. Harold Hopkins, who finally played Cooley, recalled in Crashing the Party that he felt Beresford ‘had a thing about gay people’.25 Whether or not that is mere speculation, Adams also claims that homosexuality among the actors created problems and tensions in the confinement of the location-shooting in the suburban house, recalling that Kennedy ‘came in for some homophobia.

One of the actors, who’d probably had too much to drink, turned on Kennedy and called him a “screaming little queen”’. Kennedy’s biographer, Graeme Blundell, records that there was tension between Kennedy and Ray Barrett (playing Mal):

[At first] they appeared to get along well … But as the film shoot cranked along, the rooms in the house at Westleigh growing increasingly hot and humid, Graham began to find Barrett’s jokiness, his old-style repertory theatre bonhomie tedious.26

Finally, according to Blundell, ‘Graham suddenly looked up and in a loud voice said, “Look, fuck off, Ray.”’27 Arguably, such tensions fed into the film’s increasingly acrimonious exchanges, and help to make the film such an invigorating experience, even though it – like the play – is about two ‘party’ failures.

Kennedy himself was modest about his acting capacities. Expecting to be surrounded by other television names that fell by the wayside, he recalled: ‘So it left me with all these proper actors. And I was horrified and frightened beyond words.’28 Adams’ choice of Kennedy was vindicated in the reviews which habitually singled him out in regard to ‘returning’ actors. Barrett had played Cooley in the London production of the play, but was too old for this role in the film, in which he is brilliantly cast as Mal, but Veronica Lang, Jody in the London production, repeated her role in the film.

The only actor from the Australian productions of the play who also appeared in the film was Pat Bishop, who had played Kath in Sydney in 1972 and plays Mal’s angry, dispirited wife Jenny in the film. Jeanie Drynan was cast as the film’s Kath as a result of Beresford’s having serendipitously seen her in an episode of The Class of ’74, while staying at a motel in Arizona. Adams wanted Wendy Hughes for the sophisticated artist, Kerry, but later praised the ‘forensic fierceness and precision’ that Candy Raymond brought to the role.29 And Graeme Blundell, who had directed the first production of the play in Melbourne, plays Liberal-voting Simon, for whom the party is an ordeal. Despite the fits and starts and the production difficulties, a fine ensemble was achieved.

FINANCE

There is a good deal of casual talk about how much the film cost and it is always hard to be certain about the financing of films. Cinema Papers reported that the ‘entire film is being made on location in Sydney, and with a budget of $275,000’.30 In a subsequent issue, the journal gave $300,000 as the figure.31 This was apparently the publicly listed budget, and is confirmed by David Stratton in his account of the 1970s revival.32 Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper’s landmark chronicling of Australian film production to 1977 has this to say:

Private investors in the $270,000 production included several independent exhibitors … and the remainder of the production cost was covered by the Australian Film Commission and a small investment from Twentieth-Century-Fox [sic].33

For those still following or caring about these figures, it should be noted that an exhaustive 1987 study claims that the film’s budget was $300,000 (adjusted to 1982 figures, $538,500), and that by January 1980 it had earned $279,139 in rentals.34 Whichever figure is nearest the mark, Don’s Party wasn’t a very expensive film to make, but of course this could be said for most Australian films of the period. Even so, it was inexpensive as compared with several other films shot in the same or following year (dates refer to year of shooting, not of release): Eliza Fraser (Tim Burstall, 1976, $1,200,000), The Picture Show Man (John Power, 1976, $600,000), The Mango Tree (Kevin James Dobson, 1977, $800,000), The Last Wave (Peter Weir, 1977, $860,000), Newsfront (Philip Noyce, 1977, $600,000) and the next Adams–Beresford collaboration, The Getting of Wisdom (1977, $575,000). It is easy to see why Don’s Party was comparatively cheap: it didn’t depend on imported stars or special effects or multiple locations.

It makes its modest budget work hard in the interests of what matters; the money is there on the screen in performance and cinematography and fluidly intelligent direction.

CONTEXTS

No film exists in a vacuum. It will be produced in a particular industrial climate, within the parameters of filmmaking practice at the time, and in a particular sociopolitical frame of reference. Such extra-textual matters will, to varying degree, bear on the finished film: it will be a different film because of the influence of such factors. We may respond differently to the film of Don’s Party, made in 1976, from how we would have it if it had been made ten years later.

POLITICS AND ALL THAT

The election of October 1969 is clearly a significant element in the film’s fabric. If you are too young to remember this election, and are keen to come to terms with this film, it would be helpful to find out what the anticipatory feeling was, and to try to imagine how much this might have been in the minds of the theatre-going public at the time of the play’s first appearance. A major starting point for the film is the growing dissatisfaction among middle-class, educated voters with the twenty-year Liberal dominance – the Liberal Party holding its ascendancy partly because the Catholic-based Democratic Labor Party gave its preferences to the Coalition. There seemed to be a palpable swing towards the ALP in the lead-up to the election. The protagonists were ALP leader Gough Whitlam and Liberal leader John Gorton. Of the
two men, Phillip Adams said: ‘Gough, with his patrician air, always looked as if he’d strayed in from the Liberal Party, whereas Gorton looked like a scruff.’

It [the setting] was a year before … The Female Eunuch was published … the women couldn’t articulate the anger they were feeling as the women’s movement wasn’t fully underway. The sexual mores of the late 60s in the US had filtered through to Australia, and the short-lived idea that sex could be treated as a game or sport was still current. Feminists were soon to declare that this was just another method of male exploitation.

As the votes are counted and the tally-room reports come through during the evening of the play/film, it is clear that Labor is not going to win, and the more or less affluent left-wingers, at first loudly proclaiming their political allegiance, become more and more despondent. It also becomes clear that their apparent political disappointments matter less to them than their personal failures, professional and sexual. As Kippax wrote: ‘David Williamson’s play reflects the hopes and frustrations of Labor supporters on that night of suspense.’ So does the film, resisting the temptation to update the action. And, in the light of the imminent election as I write, many people, according to opinion polls, are hoping for a similar change of government (after only a decade in this case), giving the film, and the recent Melbourne production of the play, a special piquancy.

In more broadly ‘political’ – perhaps more accurately ‘cultural’ – contexts, one might draw attention to other changes occurring in Australian society that make their influence felt in the film. The play’s setting is 1969, a year before Germaine Greer’s groundbreaking book The Female Eunuch appeared, but the play itself was first performed in 1971. It would therefore have been difficult for a politically aware audience, confronted with various kinds of justified female discontent, not to have contextualized this in the broader dissatisfaction with ‘the systematic denial and misrepresentation of female sexuality by a male-dominated society’. The women in the play are in varying degrees exasperated with being put-upon in the interests of husbands’ careers or are determined to assert their sexual independence. The film reviewer who claimed that ‘behind it all Williamson is pin-pointing a staleness in marriage, class snobbery, the permissive age, problems of on-coming middle-age and unfulfilled pipedreams’, was properly alert to the kind of malaise disturbing the educated middle classes, and those who’d made their way from the lower-middle. Especially, though, in relation to women: Williamson may not have had the imminent ‘women’s movement’ consciously in mind when he wrote the play, but in 2007 he said:

When one considers the way the film represents the women, it is interesting to see whether the five years separating the film from the play’s inception have, without conscious ‘updating’, nevertheless registered the potent seething of women’s discontent during the intervening years. About the original play script, Blundell wrote in 1976 that “time was also spent attempting to fill out the women’s roles as it was generally felt … that they were something what one-dimensional and unconvincing.” By the time the film appeared, though the male roles still occupy the foreground most of the time, the women make very strong impressions. Adams is right to say: ‘They were often moving; there’s real pain in their attacks on the men.’ These are women tired of maintaining houses and bringing up children, as if that was meant to be enough to satisfy their aspirations; or they are women demanding autonomy over their own bodies.

There is not the space here – or need – to do more than refer to the climate of burgeoning hopefulness in Australia’s film industry at the time Don’s Party was made, but a couple of points should be made.

(1) JOHN GORTON

Adams insists that when it came to the revival of Australian cinema, ‘the accolades to Gough Whitlam were misplaced’. For Adams, ‘The revival wasn’t a matter of continuity with earlier agitation: it grew directly out of Gorton’s response to the idea that we were losing the chance of an industry.’ Gorton, who became prime minister in December 1967, sent Adams, university lecturer Barry Jones and Liberal politician Peter Coleman (later Beresford’s biographer) on a world trip to study government-funded film and television industries. Following their Interim Report, Gorton promptly announced an allocation of $300,000 to establish the

Experimental Film and Television Fund (EFTF) and an Interim Council for the Film School. A full account of the processes surrounding the industrial revival can be found elsewhere. The cameo given to Gorton in the early polling-booth scene in Don’s Party earns its place on grounds of verisimilitude; it is also a tribute to his crucial role in instigating the revival, and a graceful acknowledgment of a major viewing context for the film.

One of the definitive features of the early days of the ‘revival’ was the commercial success of the ‘ocker’ comedies. Two 1971 films, Walkabout (Britain’s Nicolas Roeg) and Wake in Fright (Canadian Ted Kotcheff), were both so skilfully made that they might have launched the revival, but were respectively too poetic and too abrasive to command wide audiences. Instead, a series of comedies built around variations on the ‘ocker’ image of the Aussie male, as irreverent, beer-swilling, with a leery eye for the sheilas, caught the popular fancy. These films, generally deplored by the critics who were holding out for something more tasteful, were Stork (Tim Burstall, 1971), The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, Alvin Purple (Tim Burstall, 1973), Alvin Rides Again (David Bilcock, Robin Coppinger, 1974) and Barry McKenzie Holds His Own.

All these ‘ocker’ films made money, sometimes more than twice their budgets. Whatever their aesthetic merits, they undeniably created and supplied a local market for indigenous product. As Adams found when he came to place Don’s Party, this was not something that followed as the night the day. Don’s Party depicts certain ocker characteristics, but not in a mode of celebration or indulgence. The grizzled, grogging men in Don’s Party are not reclaimed for intrinsic lovlability: the view of them we take away is apt to be as their women see them, and it’s not a pretty picture. The film is sometimes grouped with the ocker comedies but this seems a failure to note its point of view: insofar as the ocker comedies are an important contextual element, it is a matter of satirical deconstruction, not a continuation of the japes. In the context of Beresford’s career, it is a watershed between his work on the ocker comedies and the tougher assignments that followed – including The Getting of Wisdom (1977), Money Movers
encounters so that the overall length was substantially reduced but the content remained the same.\(^{12}\) at a dance, the TV is heard to announce ‘a marked swing to Labor’. As if buoyed up by the larger optimism, Mack moves to Kerry. ‘Certain men are going to offer themselves to you tonight’, he tells her. After her discouraging reply, Mackcedes to Mal who begins his pitch: ‘Your physical beauty could cause trouble … It could place your marriage under strain’. During this unequal colloquy the camera slyly sidles round the room. Kerry drifts off, leaving Mack to crow at Mal, ‘You can’t win ’em all.’

(III) THE LITERARY CYCLE

If the ocker comedies got the revival moving, it was the decorous adaptations of classic and/or popular Australian literary works, especially novels, that brought it serious réclamation. Above all, it is probably Peter Weir’s swooningly elegant version of Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975) that most people associate with the renaissance of the Australian film; and it was followed by other respectful adaptations such as The Getting of Wisdom, the Mango Tree, The Irishman (Donald Crombie, 1978) and My Brilliant Career (Gillian Armstrong, 1979). These films, along with the critically applauded original screenplay Sunday Too Far Away, offered ripostes to the ocker comedies.

Don’s Party is obviously an adaptation, and of a distinguished and popular antecedent, but it doesn’t otherwise have much in common with this literary strain: it is tonally different from them, as it is from the ocker comedies with which, superficially, it may appear to have more in common. And it is, in terms of filmmaking know-how, at some remove from the preceding Williamson adaptation, The Removalists (Tom Jeffrey, 1975), which failed to shake off its theatrical origins. One reviewer wrote that Williamson’s skill with dialogue ‘does not cancel out the difficulties associated with making a film out of a play. The Removalists still splits naturally into acts’: and that it does not ‘overcome the fact that film conditions you to want more movement than you get from two sets and a couple of street scenes.’\(^{11}\) Another reviewer claimed that ‘the film hardly escapes its theatrical origins and here the very obvious sets are much to blame’.\(^{12}\) It is worth bearing these comments in mind in relation to the film of Don’s Party, with its much publicized location-shooting in an actual house.

ON SCREEN

Around the time of the film’s release, Bruce Beresford wrote:

David Williamson was aware of the differences between the two mediums. He understood the capability of the cinema to convey nuances of behaviour and had cleverly reworked a number of dialogue

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will reveal flaws in their image quite early in the evening, and she will eventually try her charms on Mack whose real turn-on is voyeurism. In the film’s remarkably fine ensemble cast, this kind of parallelism is there in the look, and looks, of the members of each couple, the screen making use of close-ups to underscore, say, Kath’s growing anger with Don, or Jody’s rapid rising to the intrigue factor of the evening’s louche offerings.

And in another lesser set of parallels, three of the men are put to humiliating flight – Evan and Simon flinging out of the party without their wives who have found other interests, and Cooley running around in his underpants when the outraged Evan finds him with Kerry in ‘one of a man’s most intimate moments’. As for the other three men, Mack is asleep on the floor, and Mal and Don (in two utterly knowing performances of windy self-delusion by Ray Barrett and John Hargreaves) are slumped boozily on beanbags, recalling ‘great days’ of the men are put to humiliating flight – in the evening, Kath throws their clothes risies and pretensions. At this low point in the evening, Kath throws their clothes rises and pretensions. At this low point in the evening, Kath throws their clothes rises and pretensions. At this low point in the evening, Kath throws their clothes rises and pretensions. At this low point in the evening, Kath throws their clothes rises and pretensions. 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for 1976 releases. The film won five times: Director, Screenplay, Actress (Pat Bishop), Supporting Actress (Veronica Lang), Editing (William Anderson).

The film was successfully shown at the San Francisco and Berlin Festivals in 1977, and Filmnews reported that 'F.J. Holden and Don's Party were the success stories of the [Cannes 1977] festival' in the sense of racking up overseas distribution sales.48 Cinema Papers reported sales to Israel and six South American countries.49 However, its UK cinema release didn't happen until early 1979 and its US release was delayed until 1982, by which time Beresford was in a full-page ad in The Bulletin, somewhat bafflingly wrote: the acting, direction and Don McAlpine's cinematography was almost universal, particularly in relation to the film's skill in negotiating its confined setting.

Local reviewers were guarded in their praise, perhaps because the film seemed neither ocker comedy (it submits ockerism to savage scrutiny) nor respectful adaptation and/or period piece of the kind that had brought prestige to the local industry. Several reviewers compared the film with the play to the film's detriment. Sandra Hall, in The Bulletin, somewhat bafflingly wrote: one might quibble over several locutions there, but it's enough to draw attention here to the last clause, 'that the play doesn't need', to indicate that Hall hasn't made the necessary leap into understanding how Beresford's film works as a film. Cinema Papers' reviewer concluded a meandering account of the film: 'For those who have not seen the play, the film will probably be satisfying; others who have are likely to be disappointed.'50 Geraline Pascal, however, writing in The Australian, praised the film's 'success in translating the play into a movie', claiming that 'director, writer, camera and cast manage it with admirable professional skill'.51 These comments suggest that adaptation theory had a long way to go in 1976, though there is no guarantee, despite its repudiation of 'fidelity criticism' or insistence on comparative evaluations, that its advances have had the slightest effect on reviewers.

When the film was finally released in Britain, it received generally favourable notices from Monthly Film Bulletin ('Bruce Beresford orchestrates ... with enjoyable bricolage') and Films and Filming, which, in a long, analytic review, praised it for its 'sharp observation of human nature.'52 Among newspaper reviewers, Alexander Walker in the Evening Standard found it 'savagely funny', the Financial Times critic thought its 'sartorial edge [was] knife-sharp', while Patrick Gibbs in the Daily Telegraph found the people dislikeable and the taste sour but had 'no reservation' about the quality of the acting.53 In both Britain and the US, there was a sense of reviewers being startled by the boldness of the language and the men's behaviour. However, praise for intelligent, wide-ranging commentary in Wood's essay, but, as finding Beresford's later career 'unaccountable', that is open to query. Does Wood suggest that the director had an obligation to pursue a similar Marxist-feminist path or to risk the impugnation of inconsistency - or worse? Part of the interest of Beresford's work is, alongside some recurring thematic concerns, a maverick refusal to be contained by genres or ideology. His filmography of nearly three dozen titles has its share of duds (remember King David [1985]), but there is enough sense of venturesomeness, along with unpretentious craftsmanhsip, to make one forgive these as falterings in the larger picture. A man who has gone from Don's Party in 1976 to adapting Oscar Wilde's A Woman of No Importance thirty years later may not be done with surprising us.

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(NB: See endnotes for details of individual contemporary reviews and short newspaper items.)


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Endnotes

1 Interview with David Williamson, March 2007 (source of subsequent unattributed comments by DW).


3 Interview with Wilfred Last, March 2007 (source of subsequent unattributed comments by WL).

4 In Crashing the Party, a feature-length documentary accompanying the DVD of Don’s Party.


13 Quoted in Glenn and Murray, op. cit., p.341.

14 Interview with Bruce Beresford, February 2007 (source of subsequent unattributed comments by PA).

15 Peter Coleman, Bruce Beresford: Instincts of the Heart, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992, p.60.


17 Quoted in Coleman, op. cit., p.61.

18 Quoted in Glenn and Murray, op. cit., p.342.

19 Coleman, op. cit., p.65.

20 See Barrett, op. cit., p.188.

21 Blundell, in Crashing the Party.


23 Beresford in Crashing the Party.

24 ibid.

25 Harold Hopkins in ibid.


27 ibid.

28 Quoted in ibid, p.323.

29 British Television (compiled by Tise Vahigami), Oxford University Press, 1996, praised it for its ‘sharp and well-defined scripts [which] made this one of the more exciting mid-1960s drama series’, p.138.

30 Adams in Crashing the Party.


36 Kippax, op. cit., p.vii.


42 Stratton, op. cit., p.120.


45 William Shakespeare, King Lear, Act 3, Scene iv, l.96.

46 Stratton, op. cit., p.49.

47 Blundell, King, op. cit., p.326.


50 For those interested in following up the overseas reviews, the Australian Film Institute library has a prolific cuttings file on the film (and on many others).


52 Stratton, op. cit., p.48.

53 Dermody and Jacka, op. cit., p.184.

54 Tim Pulleine, Monthly Film Bulletin, February 1979, p.22.


56 See AFI cuttings file on the film. Walker and The Financial Times critic were quoted in The Sunday Telegraph (Sydney), 22 April 1979; and Gibbs were reported in both The Herald (Melbourne), 21 April 1979 and The Canberra Times, 23 April 1979.


58 Stanley, Cinema Papers, op. cit., p.266.
