

# What I Wrote

Jack Hibberd



# Introduction

This study guide to accompany *What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd* has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

*What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd* is a short film about Australian playwright Jack Hibberd. Dr Tess Brady interviews Hibberd and provides a critical introduction to *White With Wire Wheels* (1967), *Dimboola* (1969), and *A Stretch of the Imagination* (1972). *What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd* also includes an investigation of Hibberd's approach to writing for the stage.

*What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd* is one title from a series spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the playwrights have to say about their work. Other titles available in the *What I Wrote* series include:

## Series 1:

What I Wrote: Matt Cameron  
What I Wrote: Louis Nowra  
What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson  
What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson

## Series 2:

What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith  
What I Wrote: David Williamson  
What I Wrote: Debra Oswald  
What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell

## Series 3:

What I Wrote: Ray Lawler

Further information about the series and film trailers can be found at: [www.whatiwrote.com.au](http://www.whatiwrote.com.au) or [www.snodger.com.au/shop](http://www.snodger.com.au/shop)

The play scripts are available from Currency Press: [www.currency.com.au](http://www.currency.com.au)

## About the Filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady *Presenter*

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady *Director*

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary maker. Her documentaries are about a variety of subjects and for a variety of media. Recently Catherine has divided her

focus between documentaries that focus on the arts, especially Australian writers and visual artists, and works which look at the relationship of philosophical movements to the global realpolitik. You can find out more about her by visiting [www.snodger.com.au/catherine/](http://www.snodger.com.au/catherine/)





## About Jack Hibberd

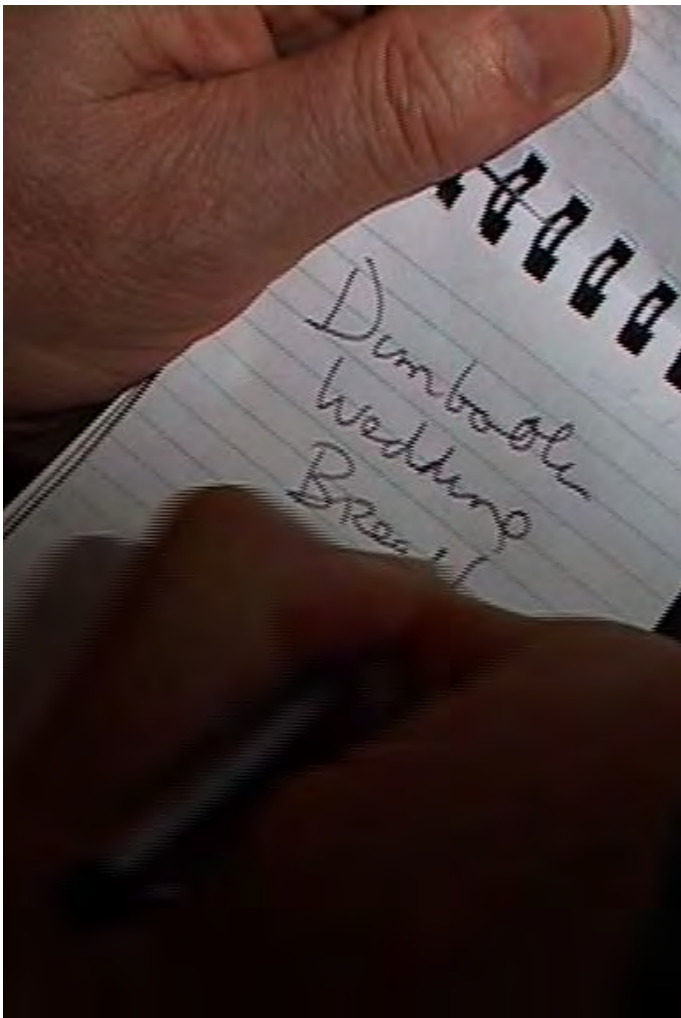
Jack Hibberd was born in Victoria in 1940. He studied at the University of Melbourne and completed a degree in medicine. At the time, Melbourne University, and its surrounding environment, was lively with student and cultural activities.

Hibberd became engaged with modernist forms of theatre, particularly the theatre of the absurd and the theatre of cruelty. He, and fellow enthusiasts, set up their own theatre space to explore these new ideas. He was a co-founder of the influential Australian Performing Group (APG), and was a member for ten

years. The APG at La Mama and the Pram Factory theatres oversaw the birth of a new wave of Australian theatre. Playwrights as diverse as David Williamson and Jack Hibberd cut their teeth there. It was Williamson who directed the first professional performance of *Dimboola*.

Hibberd has maintained his interest in modernist forms of theatre. He is also a published novelist, poet and nonfiction writer.





space in which new art, such as art-house cinema could be seen, often for the first time in Australia. It was within this environment that Hibberd shaped his ideas and began exploring non-naturalistic theatre and the haunting potency of the existential clown.

- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shaped Hibberd's work as a playwright. Discuss your findings with others in the class.
- Drawing on one of Hibberd's plays, determine how Hibberd's attitudes to the world in which he lived have influenced the construction of that text. Work in a small group to complete the analysis. Develop a PowerPoint presentation to communicate this information to the class.
- Hibberd is a well read and classically educated playwright. Take the play *A Stretch of the Imagination* and, working in groups, make a list of writers, philosophers, theorist etc that the character of Monk refers to in the play. Take a few of them and becoming familiar with the writers, discuss in class why Hibberd might have referred to them in this play.
- Watch the section of the DVD about the development of theatre in the 1970s at the Pram Factory and La Mama. What surprised you? What lessons are there for students wishing to write for or act in Australian theatre?

## The Writer's Context

Hibberd wrote his most influential plays during the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time of cultural explosion, especially in youth culture. It saw the rise of The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, the growing unpopularity of the Vietnam War and the overriding mass power of the peace movement.

Previously fixed ideas of society were questioned, e.g. that one would study or learn a trade, get a job, a car, marry, buy a house in the suburbs, have a family, tend the back yard. Buckminster Fuller, with his geodesic dome, questioned *the idea* of a house; Marshall McLuhan's theories questioned *the idea* of art.

In Europe the great modernist movements were flourishing. The boundaries between performance and visual art were blurring, performance art was embraced. Modernist story-telling, particularly its use of distortion, was flourishing in European art-cinema, particularly in the work of Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, Agnes Varda and Ingmar Bergman.

The clubs at the University of Melbourne created a



# Views and Values

An aspect of modernism is that it has an underlying value base. At the core is the idea that the world is slowly changing for the better. This can be called the grand narrative. In order to progress, to engage the grand narrative, we need to re-think, re-look, re-imagine the world around us. For these reasons modernists avoid traditional linear narratives and favour ones that interrupt, distort, stretch or disrupt a story line. Postmodernism, on the other hand, shuns the grand narrative and tries to tell a story in a value-free way.

- Take one of Jack Hibberd's plays and illustrate the development, or lack thereof, of a value which he is upholding and drawing his audience towards. Share your findings with the class.
- Drawing on *What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd* and your knowledge of Hibberd's plays, make a list of the ideas and issues that he has brought to audiences' attention.
- Hibberd is fascinated with rituals as they are played out in families or in groups of friends. As you view *What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd* compile a list of statements that explain Hibberd's interest in this aspect of humanity.
- Why do you think Hibberd uses comedy as a platform to explore darker aspects of human existence?
- Do you think Hibberd's plays have the power to move the audience into a deeper understanding of themselves and others? Do we identify with the characters or is it the situation, or the stagecraft which captures our imagination, or all three? Discuss in class.



## Analytical Responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- "Jack's boisterous attack on British good taste and a desire to celebrate and satirise the reality of Australian life was long overdue." (David Williamson, *The Australian*, March 22, 2008) Discuss.
- "Monk encourages us all to 'stretch our imaginations' and come to new ways of thinking about ourselves and the country in which we live." (Q Theatre, performance note, March 2009) Discuss.
- "The play [*White With Wire Wheels*] deals with a certain inadequacy in the Australian male, which makes them unable to have a mature relationship with a woman." (Jack Hibberd *Farrago* 1971) Discuss.
- "The appeal of the play is timeless. More Australians have seen *Dimboola* than any other stage musical, comedy or straight play." (*The Australian*, March 22, 2008) Discuss.



# Critical Perspectives

- All plays are about change. Is Hibberd more interested in personal rather than social change? Discuss.
- After attending a live performance of a play, write, in point form, the kind of review you think would be helpful to other students. Discuss what you would include and leave out of the review if you were only allowed three points.
- Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Hibberd's writing. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?
- Jack Hibberd played a critical role in the resurgence of Australian theatre in the 1970s. Discuss.



## From Script to Stage

- Create and present a short solo performance from one of Hibberd's plays. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.
- Are you surprised to learn how Hibberd wants his plays to be interpreted in performance? Form teams and debate: *A play is never finished.*
- "Naturalism is a nineteenth century aberration", Hibberd. Discuss.
- Hibberd has very strong ideas about the rehearsal process, dubbing one method as the 'theatre of arthritis'. Make a list of his ideas about rehearsal. Do you agree with all or some of these? Discuss in class.
- Explore the relationship between the audience, the actors and the play. Is it a static or fluid relationship? On what does it depend?



## The Writing Process

- What, for Hibberd, are the key elements of his writing process?
- Structure is central for Hibberd and he explains various methods he uses: from cards to using the natural structure of a day. Apply this to an idea for a play. Use a story board to work out your structure. Share your findings with the class.
- What does Hibberd mean when he says, 'What you leave out of a play is more important than what you leave in'?
- Why does Hibberd ask playwrights to 'attend to their language' and what is the importance of verbs? Discuss in class.
- Working individually or in groups, take a scene you or your class mates have written and apply Hibberd's ideas to it. Is it funny? Is the language electric? Have you explained anything? What can you cut? Does this help the play? Discuss in class.





## Adaptation

Jack Hibberd often adapts short stories into plays. In the DVD he discusses his methods for doing this.

- Hibberd claims that theatricalising the story requires him to make it 'a bigger statement'. Watch this section of the DVD and make a list of the things Hibberd leaves out and the additions he is likely to make and why.
- Hibberd says he must have an empathy with the

character of a story. Choose a short story you think could be adapted for the theatre. In a small group work on a story board of the adaptation and outline what you would add and take away. Explain the reasons for these choices.





## White With Wire Wheels

The play was first performed at the University of Melbourne in 1967.

Mal, Rod and Simon are flatmates and in the early stage of their careers. Their lives are full of women as sexual objects, drinking beer, cars and their work.

Mal is dating Sue but will not commit to her and so she leaves him. Rod is dating Anne but decides they are getting too close and breaks it off before it becomes too serious. Simon is trying to date Cath but she doesn't want to have sex with him.

Mal is buying a new car, a white valiant with wire wheels.

A new girl, Helen, moves into the flat upstairs. From the very beginning she is presented as attractive and enigmatic. She recognises the shallowness of the men and sets them up to all date her at once. One by one she takes them upstairs and they return quiet and uncommunicative. We never know what she said/did to them but they return emasculated and defeated. The play ends with them all driving in separate cars to an out-of-town pub.

About half way through, in scene eight, the play changes form. We are asked to 'flip the coin' and naturalism is stripped away.

For Malcolm, Rod and Simon are  
Not simply the blacker side of white  
Please flip the coin tonight. (p46)

Helen becomes an everywoman, the embodiment of the

adult, and perhaps of power.

We are told three times in this scene that each man is in crisis. Each of them separately visits Helen, presenting her with a part of a car, and begs to stay with her because he is afraid of the dark, of his dreams, of himself.

Each say:

My head is not exactly clear,  
I don't know what I'm doing  
My dreams are thick with fear,  
I'm frightened  
And unenlightened,  
I think there's something brewing. (pp 47, 48, 49)

When the scene finishes, we are back in a naturalistic mode. But we have the taste of something else in our mouth and nothing will be the same again. The understanding we reached in scene eight colours the way we see the rest of the play.

### Discussion

- In *White With Wire Wheels* Hibberd requests that all the female parts are played by one actor. Consider this theatrical device and sketch out how you would either play this part or direct it. Would you play the women as very different characters or parts of the same one?
- In class do a reading of scenes from the play. What was your favourite scene? Why?
- Hibberd refers to the ending of the play as giving a tribute to Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Why would he do that? What do the plays have in common?
- Hibberd says, 'There is no answer to what happens upstairs. It is left to the audiences' imagination.' Working in small groups, devise a short scene which uses this device of showing the consequences of a situation rather than the situation. In class discuss the pros and cons of using such a device. Does it depend upon the situation?
- Using a storyboard design either the set or the program for the play. Explain how your designs enhance the themes of the play.
- What, if anything would you adjust in the staging of the play to give it a contemporary feel? Apply your ideas to a short passage of your choice. Explain your ideas to the class.





## Dimboola

First performed in 1969, the play is set at a wedding reception of two families, one Catholic and the other Protestant. Such a marriage was referred to as a 'mixed marriage'. At the time, marrying outside a religion was problematic because religion was intertwined with class, cultural heritage and social grouping. Maureen is the catholic bride and Morris the protestant groom. A Catholic priest is presiding.

As an audience we are invited into the wedding reception, and in the best performances of the play, the audience takes part, and is served a meal as the play is performed.

Along with the usual characters at the wedding are two clowns, Mutton and Bayonet, who are the uninvited guests. They are joined by the uncle of the groom, Horace, who arrives intoxicated. Other notable characters include Aggie, an uptight spinster and Radish, a pompous and somewhat righteous journalist. Radish enters towards the end of the play with a different rhythm, his speeches are full of long paragraphs in what is essentially a play of one-liners.

This is a very theatrical play and the action occurs on and off the stage. The play appears to be easy to perform, the characters simple to portray. It feels as if the play is a caricature of the kind of wedding reception we all know. However a closer look at the play reveals complexity. The movement between the performance space

and the audience requires careful choreography. The seemingly random one-liners and disruptions similarly requires impeccable timing.

It is the most often performed play in Australia possibly because of its deceptive simplicity. And yet, as the action takes hold and we move through the play we laugh at ourselves and at our own society as much as at the characters.

### Discussion

- *Dimboola* is a complex and clever piece of theatre which, in a fast pace, weaves its way through a common social ritual. Using a PowerPoint presentation and working in groups map out the movement between the performance space and audience in your production. What use would you make of technical devices such as lighting?
- In the video interviews Hibberd suggests that at the core of the play is a 'clash of clans'. Select one character and trace their relationship to the members of their own clan and to the rival clan. How does this differ when the journalist, Radish, arrives?
- Using a story board develop ideas for costumes for two characters, one from each family group. Would you make the differences subtle or overt? Why?
- In a theatrical world dominated by naturalism why do you think *Dimboola*, an example of vaudeville, is so often performed in Australia? Discuss.
- Since this play was first performed Christian religions have come closer together. But, at the time, Protestantism and Catholicism were seen opposing forces. How would you contemporize the play, what two factional camps would you have the families coming from? Take one small section and re-write it using your ideas.
- Select a scene from the play and give a rehearsed reading of it. Explain why you selected that scene. Use a storyboard to show possible staging, design and lighting for the scene.
- Besides weddings, what other ritualised gatherings do we play out in our society? Take one of these and using only one-liners write a short scene involving three or more characters.



## A Stretch of the Imagination

This play was first performed in 1972.

Monk O'Neill is alone in a bush shack. He is, we presume, towards the end of his life. We see him over a day separated by a seasonal change in the weather, from hot to cold. But, it could be as if no more time has past than between morning and afternoon.

As he goes through this 'day' he recalls aspects of his life.

Various characters from his past, near and distant, appear in his imagination. Memory is an important theme in this play. Monk mixes the immediate past with the long term past. It is difficult to know how much is fabricated or embellished.

While the play uses the vernacular and bawdy type jokes of belching, urinating, farting etc, it is erudite, scholarly and is populated with classical and learned references. They include Stravinsky, Proust, Baudelaire, Pythagoras, Wittgenstein, Shakespeare, the Greek gods Cyclops and Mars, and the character of Gulliver, to name just a few.

Central to the play is a clock, which, in the first half, keeps time. It sets the pace of the action. In the second half it stops, a forewarning of Monk's life ending. Death is always present in this play.

### Discussion

- "We do not move forward. We merely mark time. All progress is an illusion. Our advance into a vacuum is also an illusion." (p128) Has time stopped for Monk? Discuss.
- The nature of memory is an integral component of this play. Like Monk, most of us remember incidents in our own past in a way that either excuses our actions or creates us as heroes. Using a report in a newspaper, write a short monologue from the central character's point of view as they remember this incident, but from a distance of ten or more years. Perform this to the class. What did you embellish or change? Did it feel credible?
- Make a list of as many classical references from the play that you can recognise. Using Wikipedia look these up. Choose any one of these and discuss why Hibberd might have evoked this reference. What did it add to the play?
- This is an existential play. Hibberd on the DVD says of existentialism 'You are tossed into the world without a sense of self', and you must create your own self. Brady talks about it as 'the act of becoming'. Divide the class into small groups and explore existentialism, in theatre, literature, art, music, philosophy. Share your findings. Is there a place for existentialism today?
- Take a scene where Monk is relating to a character from his memory. Working in actor-director teams, devise a reading/performance of this scene. Show your work to the class. Discuss how 'visible' would you make the unseen character and why.
- In teams, debate Hibberd's claim that Monk is a multifaceted character.
- Brady asks you to think about the archetype of the clown in much of Hibberd's work but in particular in this play. Using the internet and other sources and looking at historical, contemporary, classical and pop manifestations make a power point presentation on the clown in all its aspects from the benign to the horrifying.
- Design a costume for Monk. Does it change over the duration of the play?
- What is the importance of Monk reading and changing his last will and testament and why does Hibberd have Monk claim it is his birthday? Discuss.

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