

Derham Groves

The Doll Theatre Project: designing a theatre for Ray Lawler's Doll Trilogy

THE FIRST COHORT of undergraduate students to do the newly restructured 'Melbourne Model' Bachelor of Environments degree at the University of Melbourne completed it in Semester Two of 2010. For the 183 students who were majoring in architecture that year, Architectural Design Studio 4, which I coordinated, was their 'capstone' or final design subject. As an educational exercise only and not a real project, they were required to design a theatre exclusively for performances of the three classic Australian plays, 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' (1955), 'Kid Stakes' (1975) and 'Other Times' (1976), collectively known as the Doll Trilogy, all written by the Melbourne playwright Ray Lawler (born in 1921).¹ The Doll Theatre Project ran for three hours per week for 12 weeks.

The story running through the Doll Trilogy unfolds over a period of 17 years, from 1937 to 1953. While 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' was written first, it actually takes place after 'Kid Stakes' and 'Other Times'. Since there was only a limited time for the Doll Theatre Project, and given that 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' is the best known and also arguably the most important of the three plays, the vast majority of architecture students focused on this play more than the other two.

The structure of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' is relatively simple. Its plot, however, is complex, revolving around the lives of the Northern Queensland sugarcane-cutters and best friends, 'Roo' (short for Reuben) Webber and Barney Ibbot, and their girlfriends, the Melbourne barmaids and best friends, Olive Leech and Nancy Wells, the latter an absent – almost ghostlike – figure in the play. For the previous 16 years, Roo and Olive and Barney and Nancy had spent the five-months-long cane-cutting 'lay off' or off season each year happily living together in a boarding house run by Olive's cantankerous mother, Emma Leech, in the inner Melbourne suburb of Carlton. However, this cosy arrangement is unexpectedly upset when Nancy finally turns her back on Barney – a real scallywag when it comes to women – and marries another far more responsible man, which forces Olive to hastily find Barney a replacement girlfriend. Enter Pearl Cunningham, a widowed barmaid (with an 18-year old daughter), who is rather prudish and highly sceptical of the now 17-year ménage that she has been suddenly invited to join.

'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' mainly focuses on Roo's relationships with Olive and Barney as middle age sneaks up on all three of them. Roo had been in charge of a crack team of sugarcane-cutters in Northern Queensland. 'I saw [him] as a man with a great pride in being a top ganger, relishing his ability to cope with all the demands of the job, and enable his team to make a success of every season', explained Ray Lawler. 'It

is a post that demands both authority and a sense of responsibility, and for Roo to shape a relationship with Olive in 'Kid Stakes', cope with military demands in 'Other Times', and face the loss of his world in 'Summer of the Seventeen Doll'.² Regarding the latter chain of events, in 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' it is revealed that, for the very first time, Roo had been struggling to deal with the physical stresses of his back-breaking job, which adversely effects his self image and ultimately leads to a dramatic and emotional break-up with both Olive and Barney.

Discussing Roo and Olive's relationship from her point of view, Ray Lawler said:

[Her] employment in the male chauvinistic pub life covered by the seventeen years of the Doll Trilogy would have been both a refuge and a protection. The morality of the times, particularly in the 1930s, had a much stricter sense of what was acceptable in terms of public relationships, a Housewives' Union mentality that saw marriage as the only real and lasting union between a man and a woman. Olive would have been aware of the disapproving attitude of the majority of women in her neighbourhood towards the lay off, and would have been even more aware of discrimination if her daily employment had taken her among other females in the workplace. But the totally male clientele of the public bar created a swaggering masculine atmosphere, in which rumours of a barmaid's racy lifestyle would have a jovial acceptance, even be the subject of a certain amount of knowing and good-natured banter across the bar. This would be a help in easing any sense of community rejection on Olive's part, and also play its part in confirming her fierce belief in the lay off as an alternative to what she regards as the hum-drum round of suburban married life. When Roo blindly offers Olive marriage towards the end of the trilogy, to her it is a shattering of the lay off idyll, and an embracing of values that seem a total betrayal of their relationship.³

When Ray Lawler wrote 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' in the early 1950s, Australian society was in a state of flux, which was both stimulating and unsettling for many people. Under the conservative leadership of Prime Minister Robert Menzies (1894–1978), the country was experiencing a post-war economic boom in tandem with an aggressive pro-white European immigration campaign to quickly boost the workforce, in particular with Greeks and Italians who became generally known as 'New Australians'. Consequently, the traditional Anglo-centric make-up of the population began to change, along with the accepted view of what it meant to be an Australian. At the same time, Australian artists like Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) and Arthur Boyd (1920–1999) and writers such as Patrick White (1912–1990) and Frank Hardy (1917–1994) were coming into their own and starting to be noticed; people anticipated that the forthcoming 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games would put Australia on the map; and the imminent introduction of television threatened to change almost every aspect of Australian family life.

The world premiere of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' at the Union Theatre in Melbourne on 28 November 1955 marked a turning point in Australian theatre history. For decades, foreign plays and actors had dominated Australian theatres, but all of a sudden an Australian audience was presented with an Australian story, told in vernacular

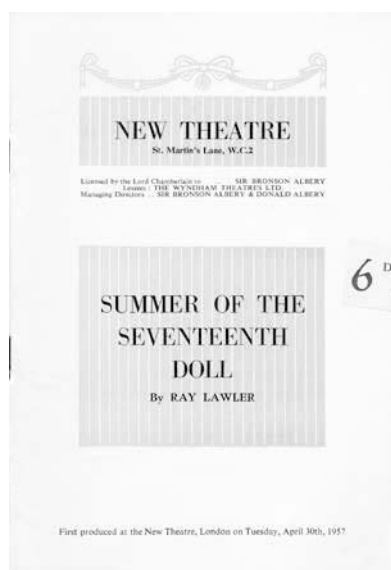
language and familiar accents with uncharacteristic Australian urban – as opposed to stereotypical Australian bush – references. Unlike so many Australian plays that preceded it, 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' was not a shallow appeal to patriotism or stereotypes, but instead dealt with universal concerns in an Australian context, which presented Australians on stage in a realistic manner for almost the first time.

'The point about the play is that, first of all, it is good by any standards', wrote Dorothy Drain in her column in the *Australian Women's Weekly*. 'Its emotions are universal. It wrings your heart, and, in the next breath, is very, very funny. Its theme could be translated to any country. But, equally, it has a genuine Australian flavour, not the sort of flavour that is added as an afterthought, but one that is there in the basic ingredients of language and character'.⁴

Biddy Allen was also full of praise for the play in the Melbourne daily, the *Argus*. 'Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* scored a stunning success last night at the Union Theatre', she wrote. 'He has written a play so superbly true to Australian thought and the Australian scene, that theatrical conventions disappear. 'Barney' [played by Lawler himself], 'Roo' [played by Noel Ferrier (1930–1997), who was replaced two months later by Lloyd Berrell (1926–1957)], 'Pearl' [played by Roma Johnson] and 'Emma' [played by Ethel Gabriel (1888–1967)] are real people. We know their faces, their voices – we share their dreams, we understand their failures'.⁵ For some reason, Allen did not mention Olive, who was played by June Jago (1926–2010).

On the other hand, not everyone was impressed by 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', and on the eve of the cast's departure for England in 1957 to perform the play over there, Dorothy Drain reported that 'a few people have telephoned or written to the Elizabethan Theatre Trust (which is jointly sponsoring the venture with Sir Laurence Olivier) saying that the play will "give a poor impression of Australia"'.⁶ Indeed, one of her own magazine's readers wrote: 'There is apparently much jubilation because the Australian play "The Summer of the 17th Doll" [sic] is to have a London season. At one time people overseas imagined Australia to be populated by Dads, Daves, and Mabels – those outback characters in Steele Rudd's books. Now we will be judged by the raucous voices and the vulgar expressions of the typical (?) Australian characters in the play'.⁷

Despite some people's concerns about what the English might make of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', it was a big hit in the United Kingdom. The play had a try out for a week at the Theatre Royal in Nottingham before opening on 30 April 1957 at the New Theatre in London, where it had a record-breaking seven-month season.⁸ Describing the audience's reaction to the play's opening night at the Theatre Royal, Betty Best wrote in the *Australian Women's Weekly*: 'From the first entrance line the audience was with it all the way. Their quick response to the earthy Australian humour was wholehearted. Their complete silence as the tragedy of the story came through was even more of a tribute. By the first-act curtain, many people round me were weeping unashamedly . . . When June Jago [who played Olive] sank to the floor cuddling the tinsel doll and sobbing at the second-act curtain, the silence in the auditorium lasted several seconds before



The cover of the theatre program for the 1957 English production of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' at the New Theatre in London. (Derham Groves collection)

the applause broke out. Then it came in wave after wave, and we knew the play was an assured success.⁹

When the London season of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' ended, the Polish-Australian actor who had played Johnnie Dowd, Roo's younger and stronger rival on the Northern Queensland sugarcane fields, returned to Australia, gave up acting to join his family's paper recycling business, and went on to become Australia's fourth-richest man with a personal fortune of five-and-a-half billion dollars.¹⁰ Richard Pratt (1934–2009) never forgot his theatrical roots however, and always generously donated to the performing arts. Indeed, I suggested to the architecture students that Pratt's company Visy Industries might be interested in sponsoring a real-life Doll Theatre, however no one designed a recycled cardboard building! (This is not as silly as it perhaps sounds. The Japanese architect Shigeru Ban (born in 1957) has designed some outstanding buildings made from industrial paper tubes.)

Following the Australian play's English triumph, 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' received a disappointingly lukewarm reception when it opened at the Coronet Theatre in New York on 22 January 1958. 'Probably the trouble is the language', commented the *New York Times* theatre critic Brooks Atkinson: 'Since the Australians speak English and so do we, we assume that Summer of the Seventeenth Doll says the same thing to us that it does to Australians. But . . . this theatregoer felt that the real quality was escaping him.'¹¹

The *New York Herald Tribune* theatre critic Walter Kerr was also disappointed with the play for different reasons: 'The difficulty is, I think, that the party is really over – not only for them, but for us. Somehow we have missed the moment of attachment: We have come in for the deflated recriminations and the moral!'¹²

'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' closed in New York after only five weeks.¹³ However, Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, an award-winning independent film production company, which was jointly owned by the American producers Harold Hecht (1907–1985) and James Hill (1916–2001) and the American actor Burt Lancaster (1913–1994), purchased the film rights to the play for 134,000 Australian pounds.¹⁴ 'In Hollywood where there was heavy bidding for the film rights, it was regarded as the plum of the year, and the script was regarded as a plum too', said John Dighton (1909–1989), who was commissioned by Hecht-Hill-Lancaster to write the screenplay. 'It has a fresh story,



Anne Baxter who played Olive, Ernest Borgnine who played Roo, Angela Lansbury who played Pearl and John Mills who played Barney in the 1959 film version of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'. (Derham Groves collection)

the characters are real and intriguing, and the play offers much more scope as a film than most plays do. Even though I say this, I think it will be a better film than a play'.¹⁵

The unenthusiastic response to the New York production of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' may have prompted Hecht-Hill-Lancaster to make a number of changes to the script. 'The two barmaids and the old woman [i.e. Emma] are good characters, but a little more colour is needed in the development of the relationship between the two cane-cutters', said John Dighton. 'In its construction [Ray] Lawler's play runs downhill all the way. This, I feel, was a weakness. I intend to give the film version what I regard as a necessary build-up to a dramatic peak in the middle. The Australian slang is perfectly obvious when followed in its context, but some terms like "Up there, Cazaly" which have only regional meaning even in Australia, will come out. . . I want to get the film, which we plan to make this year, into the fresh air as much as possible, so I shall probably recommend that the film be made in Sydney, because of its colour, harbour, beaches, and the cane country somewhere near Cairns, because I want mountain backdrops for the cameras'.¹⁶

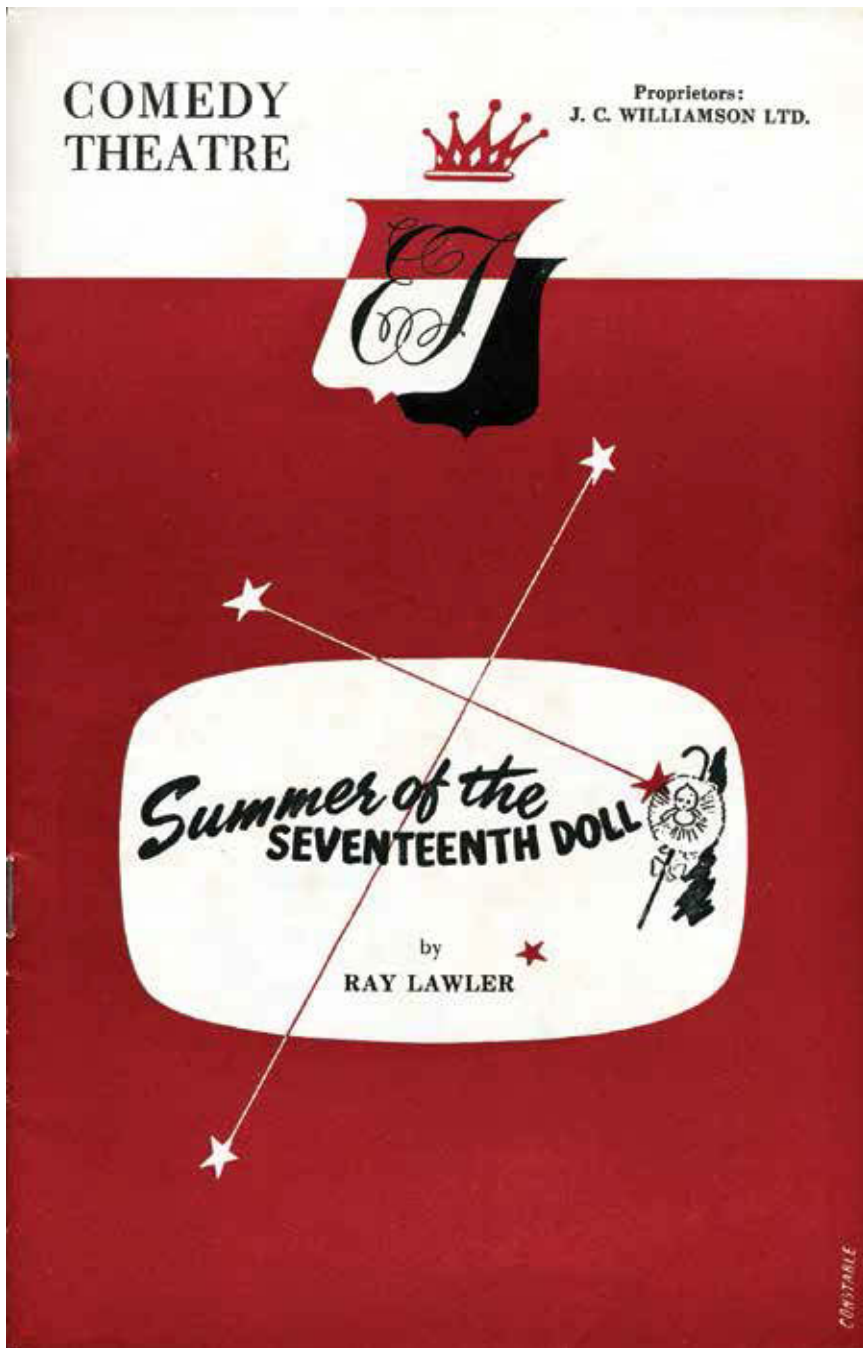
The English director Leslie Norman (1911–1993) was given the task of turning Ray Lawler's play into a film. 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' was Norman's sixth feature film. His others had included 'The Shiralee' (1957), an outback drama starring the Australian actor Peter Finch (1916–1977), and 'Dunkirk' (1958), a World War Two drama starring the English actor John Mills (1908–2005). In Norman's film of 'Summer

of the *Seventeenth Doll*, Roo was played by the American actor Ernest Borgnine (1917–2012), who had won the 1955 Academy Award for Best Actor in *'Marty'* (1955), another Hecht-Hill-Lancaster film that had also won the 1955 Academy Awards for Best Motion Picture, Best Director and Best Writing/Adapted Screenplay, as well as the 1955 Palm d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Olive was played by the American actress Anne Baxter (1923–1985); Barney was played by Mills, who had worked with Norman on *'Dunkirk'* during the previous year; Pearl was played by the English actress Angela Lansbury (born in 1925); and Australian actors and actresses played the supporting characters, including Ethel Gabriel as the cunning old coot Emma, whom she had played on stage in Australia, England and America and had made the role her own. In Australia the film was released in 1959, while in America it was released the following year and also given a spicier title – *'Season of Passion'*.

According to Anne Baxter, making the film in Sydney at the height of summer was a rather trying experience. 'The heat had been unbearable', she recalled in her autobiography *Intermission: a true story* (1976). 'Angela Lansbury and I had wilted in it. So had John Mills and Ernest Borgnine. The sets were steam baths. The perspiration poured off us but the beer wouldn't come out of the tap in the pub scenes. Too hot. The spigot just foamed at its mouth. I hoped that the picture was good. "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" was thought provoking and dealt with people who could but would not grow up. I thought that it had captured the raunchy, seamy side of Australian life. We'd shot in cramped little tenements and a squalid amusement park; filmed a three-night-long sequence on the greasy harbour ferry, and had quickly become steeped in the beery, brawling side of Sydney.'¹⁷

The film was widely panned by viewers and critics alike. 'The filmmakers have made . . . a hash of . . . "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll"', wrote Dorothy Drain. 'When an author sells film rights he must take what comfort he can from the money he gets.'¹⁸ In Ray Lawler's case, his share was 80,000 Australian pounds,¹⁹ which was a princely sum at the time. 'Even so, he could be pardoned for hoping that the resultant film might be a good one'. Drain continued: "'The Doll' sounds and looks as if its makers had cut up a script of the play into small snippets, stirred the bits up in a basin, picked out half and stuck them together at random with sticky tape. The producer moved the setting of the play from Melbourne to Sydney, thus obtaining some pretty pictures of the Harbour and Bondi Beach. (It is a wonder, by the way, that he resisted the temptation of koalas at the Zoo).'²⁰ Actually, what the film producer did was quite similar to this: A penniless Roo takes a part-time job at a paint factory in the play, whereas it is a factory that makes toy kangaroos in the film! A disgusted Drain concluded her critical review of the movie by saying: 'The best thing that could be done with the result is to chop out all the dialogue and turn the film into a five-minute newsreel.'²¹

Noel Ferrier, the actor who first played Roo in 1955, was equally scathing about the four Hollywood leads in Leslie Norman's film, writing in his autobiography *The Memoirs of Noel Ferrier: there goes whatsisname* (1985): 'Ernest Borgnine played Roo



The cover of the theatre program for the 1956 Australian production of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' at the Comedy Theatre in Melbourne. Note the television screen-inspired cover (Derham Groves collection)

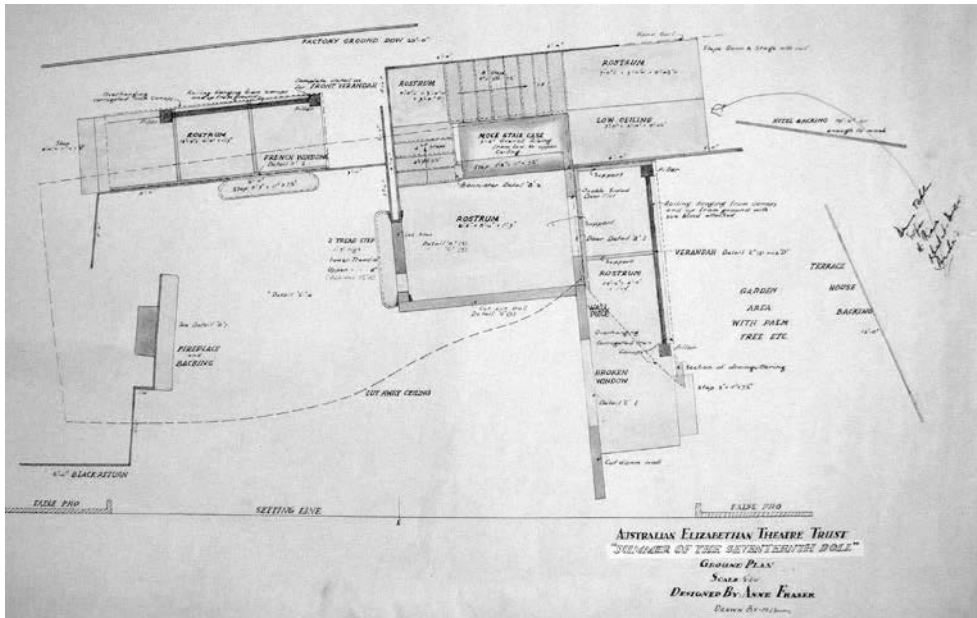
like something out of Damon Runyon, John Mills played Barney like something out of Terrance Rattigan, Anne Baxter played Pearl like something out of Neil Simon and Angela Lansbury played Pearl like something out of a Ray Cooney farce. They were all dreadful and the exercise surely proved, once and for all, that only Australians can master the Australian idiom.²²

The apparent miscasting of the film could have been a lot worse than it was though, because initial reports suggested that James Cagney (1899–1986), the American actor best known for playing gangsters in movies like *'The Public Enemy'* (1931) and *'Angels with Dirty Faces'* (1938), was being considered to play Barney.²³ In my opinion, Cagney would have been an even poorer choice for the part than John Mills turned out to be. Other overseas stars who were also being considered for roles early on were Burt Lancaster as Roo,²⁴ Rita Hayworth (1919–1987) as Olive²⁵ and Mills' daughter Juliet (born in 1941) as Kathie 'Bubba' Ryan, the Leech's vivacious 22-year old next door neighbour.²⁶ But for whatever reasons, they all missed out on these parts.

In response to my questions about the film version of *'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'*, Ray Lawler surprisingly confessed: 'This [film] I have purposely never seen. I was invited to collaborate on the writing of the script, but I was warned that it was being made for a world market, with an international cast, and Hecht-Hill-Lancaster (the makers) had no interest in the Australian content and flavour of the original, and moreover they wanted the possibility of a happy ending. This I knew meant that any contribution I had to make would be less than minimal, and I could have foretold the title you mentioned, "Season of Passion", from that moment. I think the four imported stars – Ernest Borgnine, Anne Baxter, John Mills and Angela Lansbury – were good and decent performers in their own right, and I would say their difficulty was that they were a mixed nationality lot attempting to make sense of what was essentially a grass roots play far from their own pastures. And not helped by a sanitized script and the bland intentions of the producers.'²⁷

The idea of designing a theatre specifically for Ray Lawler's *v*came to me after reading about Agatha Christie's remarkably enduring mystery play *'The Mousetrap'*, which has been running on stage in London continuously since 1952 (until 1974 at the New Ambassadors Theatre, and since then at St Martins Theatre). This year (2012) is the 60th anniversary of Christie's play, yet the end of its record-breaking season is still not in sight.²⁸ I wondered whether there was possibly a home-grown equivalent to *'The Mousetrap'*, and in the end decided that no other Australian play warranted multiple viewings more than Ray Lawler's *'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'* – an opinion shared by a number of people besides me, including the inimitable Dorothy Drain: 'I saw the *'Doll'* twice, and came away the second time feeling as I did about the film *'Carmen Jones'* [(1954)] – that I could quite happily go to it every night for a week', she wrote.²⁹

Furthermore, I also discovered the existence of several composer-specific/playwright-specific theatres around the world, including the Bayreuth Festival Theatre in Bayreuth, Germany, which is only for Richard Wagner's operas; the Globe Theatre



The plan of the original 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' set designed by Anne Fraser (1928 – 2005). (Drawing in the University of Melbourne Archives, photographed by Derham Groves)

in London, which is only for William Shakespeare's plays; and the Wrestling School in London, which is only for Howard Barker's plays. These overseas venues helped me to validate the concept of a Doll Theatre in my own mind.

But most importantly, the Doll Trilogy is very interesting from an architectural point of view, because 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', 'Kid Stakes' and 'Other Times' are all concerned with the concept of place. 'Emma's Carlton boarding house is the background of all three plays', explained Ray Lawler.

It is the sort of suburban establishment that offers full board on a weekly service. Qualities likely to attract the sort of steady lodger looking for a home away from home, who could be relied on to settle in for a comfortably long stay and promptly pay their board on time. It was a highly competitive field in the Great Depression days of the 1930s, and any loss of reputation would soon see a boarding house depending on short term lodgers, and shady characters likely to fly by night, leaving unpaid bills. Emma's fall from grace as the proprietor of a well run boarding house is inevitable once she accepts the lay off situation, and the relationships of those involved. But it is a loss on a much more personal level, once she abandons her strongly held notions of urban morality, she loses what she believes to be a proper future for her daughter. Life after that is a matter of compromise, making the best of a bad job – which for all of her love of Olive and innate respect for Roo, is how she eventually regards the seventeen years course of their relationship.³⁰

The cluttered eclectic interior of Emma's boarding house is described both colour-



The house in Glen Street, Milsons Point, New South Wales, chosen by the producers of the film 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' to be Emma Leech's Carlton, Victoria, boarding house. (Photograph by Keith Barlow for the *Australian Women's Weekly*)



The Doll Theatre designed by Matthew Denier, which reflected Carlton's terrace houses. (Image courtesy of Matthew Denier)

The Doll Theatre Project: designing a theatre for Ray Lawler's Doll Trilogy



The Doll Theatre designed by Quinland Yip, which was clad in an orange-coloured 'dress'.
(Image courtesy of Quinland Yip)



The Doll Theatre designed by Sarah Skillington consisted of an eclectic assemblage of boxes.
(Image courtesy of Sarah Skillington)



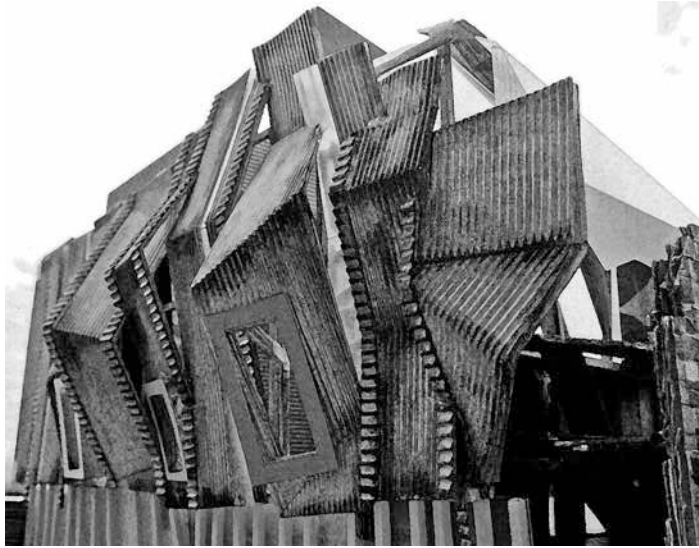
The Doll Theatre designed by architecture student Alison Dane was inspired by Olive's colourful description of Roo and Barney. (Image courtesy of Alison Dane)



Architecture student Frances Atkinson's Doll Theatre resembled the retractable hood of a pram. (Image courtesy of Frances Atkinson)

fully and precisely at the beginning of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll':

Charming and fast-vanishing relics of Victorian architecture in Australia are the double-storied brick cottages with elaborately patterned ironwork decorating their verandahs – hanging in fringes from above, and forming pale, intricate barriers down below. These are almost invariably found in the older sections of the city, and the house of the play is situated in Carlton, a now scruffy but once fashionable suburb of Melbourne. The setting is a composite study of a ground-floor front room, with adjacent hallway, staircase, and a passage leading to [a] kitchen, held between a front and a back verandah. It should be noted that, although the main scene of the action is the interior of the house, the front verandah, with a section of overgrown, palmy garden before it, should be visible either through a scrim wall or a cut-away section. . . . Narrow-leaf French windows give entrance to the room from the back verandah, and a front door lets on to the other; both verandahs are profusely decorated with green shrubbery and ferns. These, together with the wildness of garden, should make an enshrouding contrast to the interior of the house, which has a dominant note of cheerfully faded pink in its colour scheme. There is little pattern or taste evident in the furniture, ranging as it does from the heavy upright piano bought second-hand by Emma in 1919, to the chromium



Architecture student Fiorn Lee's Doll Theatre based on the vernacular buildings of Queensland.
(Image courtesy of Fiorn Lee)

smoker's stand won by Olive in a pub raffle last month. The main decorative features are the souvenirs brought down by Roo on past visits. The most notable of these are sixteen kewpie dolls, wearing tinsel head-dresses and elaborately fuzzy skirts, attached to thin black canes shaped like walking sticks. These peep coyly from behind pictures, flower in twos and threes from vases, and are crossed over the mantelpiece. They have as their companions a flight of brilliantly plumaged stuffed Northern Queensland birds, a variety of tinted coral pieces and shells from the Great Barrier Reef, and two picture frames backed with black velvet to which cling a crowd of shimmering-winged tropical butterflies. The entire effect should be a glowing interior luminously protected from the drabness outside by a light-filtered, shifting curtain of greenery.³¹

Given all of the furniture and knickknacks in the Leech's Carlton sitting room according to Ray Lawler's original stage notes, the only criticism that I had of the Sydney-based Belvoir Street Theatre's production of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' earlier this year (2012) at the Art Centre's Playhouse in Melbourne was the extremely bare and rather dull stage set designed by Ralph Myers (born 1979). This particular aspect of the otherwise excellent production directed by Neil Armfield (born in 1955) also bothered John Rickard, who mentioned it in his review of the play for the *Australian Book Review*. 'The set . . . comes as something of a shock', he remarked. 'Contained within two drab-coloured walls, the sitting room has little more furniture than a table and chairs, a chaise lounge and a piano, with a few pictures decorated with dusty kewpie dolls on the almost bare wall.'³² However, I do not accept Rickard's suggestion that Myers' set was like this



'The Shatter Theatre' designed by architecture student Jas Johnson. (Image courtesy of Jas Johnson)



Annie Harrison's Doll Theatre was like a giant doll's house. (Image courtesy of Annie Harrison)

because it was designed for the Belvoir, which is much smaller than the Playhouse. How much space does some knickknacks, a few pictures, some wallpaper and a coat of pink paint take? No, it was more about headspace than theatre space.

It should be noted that when 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' was written, Carlton was a working class area and not the gentrified, fashionable, well-healed place that it has since become. During the 1950s, Carlton's colour and grit made it a favourite setting for a number of local playwrights, including Richard Beynon (born in 1927), who originally chose it for his drama 'The Shifting Heart' (1957), but later changed the location to Collingwood, another working class inner-Melbourne suburb, only because Ray Lawler had got in first; and also Gordon Kirby, a lesser-known playwright who lived in Carlton and set his play 'Theresa' (1958) there as well. 'It's a place of contrasts and surprises – pleasant and not so pleasant – a really interesting place in which to live', Kirby told Sheila McFarlane from the *Australian Women's Weekly* in 1958. 'Every household in our street would make the core of a play. The fact that Ray Lawler lived here for only six months, yet set his play here, shows how easily the place lends itself to drama.'³³

Keith Streames, a Melbourne architect who designed the highly successful Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, the author of the Doll Trilogy Ray Lawler (via a number of delightful letters) and myself jointly developed the design brief for the Doll Theatre that the Architecture Major students followed throughout the semester. The design of the new theatre building needed to allow for a wide range of possible staging formats, because one production of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' might require the focus of the action to be on the stage, whereas another one by a different director might call for the actors to spill out into the auditorium, the foyer, or even outside. As Kirsten Dehlholm, the founder and artistic director of the Danish theatre company Hotel Pro Forma, once said: 'The performance starts with the space – the place.'³⁴

The Doll Theatre was to be located on the corner of Faraday and Rathdowne Streets in the heart of Carlton, the same inner Melbourne suburb where the Doll Trilogy was set, which is only a stone's throw from the University of Melbourne. Two houses and a taxi depot occupied the 750 square-metre site. Most students elected to demolish the existing buildings and design a new building on a vacant site.

The Doll Theatre required three distinct zones that the 2010 batch of Architecture Major students had to consider in their designs. The first zone was the theatre space, which comprised a 250-seat auditorium that had a raking floor to provide the audience with good views of the stage; a nine-metre wide by nine-metre deep stage; two side wings to the stage, each four metres wide, with a 'prompt corner' at the left hand edge of the stage; a 10-metre 'tall space' or tower over the stage; an overhead lighting bar, six metres above the stage; and a three-metre wide by three-metre deep control room equipped for two technicians, located towards the rear of the auditorium.

The second zone was the back-of-house area, which comprised four dressing rooms – two 15 square metres in area and two 20 square metres in area – adjacent to the stage and at the same floor level as it; a rehearsal or 'warm-up' room, 50 square

metres in area; sufficient toilets and showers for the performers and the back-of-house staff; a technicians' office/storeroom/workshop, 50 square metres in area; a loading dock, which was adjacent to the stage and had direct access to outside of the theatre; a carpentry storeroom/workshop, 50 square metres, that was adjacent to the loading dock; a wardrobe room, 20 square metres in area, where costumes were cleaned, repaired and stored; an office, 16 square metres in area, for the theatre director; and an open-plan office, 20 square metres in area, for a touring theatre company.

The third zone was the front of house, which comprised a foyer, 180 square metres in area; a café and bar, as large as possible, which ideally could be opened when the theatre was closed; a box or ticket office; and an open-plan office for five administrative staff, 60 square metres in area; and sufficient public toilets for the theatre and café. To increase the difficulty of the students' task, I made sure that the total area of the Doll Theatre was significantly larger than the area of the site.

The Architecture Major students who did Architecture Design Studio 4 in 2010 all read 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' and also watched 'Season of Passion' (somewhat to Ray Lawler's dismay). Since many of the students were recently from China and had never seen a live theatre performance in Melbourne, I arranged for the whole class to attend the musical comedy-drama 'Sweeney Todd' (1973), which happened to be on at the time at Melbourne University's Union Theatre – the same theatre where 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' had premiered in 1955. In retrospect, given that all of the architecture students were born in the 1980s, and many of them had also grown-up overseas, I think quite a few found 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' to be rather remote.

Each Architecture Major student had to research one of 30-selected overseas theatres all designed by 'starchitects', which included the Guthrie Theatre (2006) in the United States designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel (born in 1945), the Casa de Musica (2004) in Portugal designed by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (born in 1944), and the National Theatre (1960–1981) in Brazil designed by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer (born 1907), and then give a 10-minute class presentation about the design of that theatre. The students also were required to attend a series of lectures related to the design of the Doll Theatre, which included a lecture on the basics of theatre design by Keith Streames; a backstage tour of the Union Theatre at the University of Melbourne; and a lecture by Peter Bickle from the Melbourne architectural firm ARM about its design of the new MTC Theatre in Melbourne. Because teaching is like kicking footballs into outer space, who knows whether this project has stimulated a newfound interest in theatre for some of the students? One can only hope that it has.

How do you turn an interesting story (or play) into an interesting building? This is a difficult question to answer. Sometimes only an image or a word is all that is needed to trigger an architect's imagination. A harbour side opera house that looks like some yachts – how banal is that? Yet the result is an iconic masterpiece. Just as Dr Watson was often disillusioned when Sherlock Holmes explained how simple his deductions were, so people who are unfamiliar with the design process are sometimes 'underwhelmed' when



Anne Baxter and Ernest Borgnine in a pub scene from the film version of 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'. (Derham Groves collection)

it is explained in such simple terms, which architects – including third-year architecture students – tend to do. Of course, there is a lot more to designing a building than simply making a nifty analogy. But even so, like at the conclusion of a game of 'Chinese Whispers', it is fun to discover what the starting point actually was.

The Doll Theatre Project undoubtedly challenged the undergraduate Architecture Major students' creative and technical abilities, as it was indeed meant to do in the first place. It was certainly the most complex building they had designed up to that point. Overall, the up-and-coming young architects did an excellent job in my opinion, producing many very interesting and edgy theatre designs that were inspired by the characters and events of Ray Lawler's Doll Trilogy. Sometimes these associations were obvious in their theatre designs, but in most cases they were not. However, symbolically speaking, the objective was not to design a building with only one explanation, but rather to create a sympathetic 'framework' as it were, which was capable of being interpreted by the passing parade in many different ways. Nevertheless, architects are often damned if they do and damned if they don't. Unfortunately, only a small sample of the students' work is discussed and illustrated in this essay.³⁵

The dynamic, soaring, architectural form of the Doll Theatre designed by Alison Dane was suggested by Olive's description of Roo and Barney, who she told Pearl were

like two eagles that fly south each year for the mating season. A sculpture, three storeys tall and shaped like two intertwined tree branches, which represented Roo and Olive's 17-year relationship, occupied a void inside the building. This sculpture was covered with jagged shards of mirror, so that the theatregoers might glimpse their distorted images as they walk past and consequently consider Emma's sage advice to Roo, to take a good look at himself in the mirror.

Northern Queensland's vernacular corrugated iron buildings influenced the architecture of the Doll Theatre designed by Fiorn Lee. Her very distinctive looking building appeared to have only just survived a fierce bushfire, which was a double-reference firstly to the process of setting fire to the sugarcane prior to cutting it down, something that Roo and Barney would have done many times as part of their jobs as cane-cutters, and secondly to the fact that Roo and Olive's contented world had been 'torched' and lay in ruins.

On the other hand, a number of architecture students were inspired by the less exotic, nineteenth-century, domestic architecture of Carlton. For example, Matthew Denier chose to reflect the human scale and repetitive nature of Carlton's many charming old terrace houses in the exterior façade of his Doll Theatre, by dividing it up into terrace-house-width units. He also preserved the façades of the two existing Victorian-era houses on the site, which was a nice touch.

Architecture student Sarah Skillington wanted theatregoers to be 'affronted with familiar domestic forms that are disassembled in a garish show of raunch and plush'. The variety of human scale shapes that make up her Doll Theatre's front-of-house area truly reflects the eclectic décor of Emma's boarding house where Roo and Olive's saga plays out. 'In contrast, the theatre stands as an independent representation of Lawler's domestic tale and the evocativeness of his characters' unconventional living arrangements', said Sarah. Having studied architecture at Deakin University during the late 1970s, this building warmed the postmodern cockles of my heart.

Quite a few architecture students focused on the cheap and cheerful kewpie dolls that Roo purchased at Luna Park in the Melbourne bay side suburb of St. Kilda to give to Olive every year. (Hence the reference to the 17th doll in the title of Ray Lawler's iconic Australian play.) For example, the form of the theatre designed by Frances Atkinson was like a brand new doll's pram on Christmas morning. Architecture student Quinland Yip described the translucent, bright orange skirt that encircled the exterior of his theatre as a 'deconstructed doll's dress'. And the theatre designed by Annie Harrison had a number of cut-away, see-through walls that were similar to those in a doll's house.

Finally, according to architecture student Jas Johnson, "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" explores the splintering and destruction of the fantasies people inhabit and perceive as reality. Reality however inevitably obliterates, shattering the carefully crafted dream of urban normality, safety, certainty and conformity'. Consistent with these views of the play, Jas designed 'The Shatter Theatre' [which] presents a face of inner Melbourne urbanity, conforming to volume, geometry and scale. However this

proves to be imaginary. To perform any function this urban fantasy must be shattered, revealing the building's true reality. A reality of undefined borders, alternating entrances and changeable movement patterns controlled through a system of interactivity. This interactive shattering occurs through the faceting and breaking of the envelope that projects the fantasy of urbanity. This faceting allows the building to exist in infinite forms as the participants destroy the fantasy anew each day. Agency is given back to the audience as they have the subversive ability to influence, even in an unintentional manner, the art presented and the other functions of the building within. These notions of interactivity, where the space is defined by all users, audience, performers and staff, is juxtaposed with the planning concept of spatial simplicity, promoting malleability. These concepts converge through a shatter point that projects planes or dividing walls that create and define the programmatic spaces. The malleability of space and configuration of seating, stage and audience participation is indented to encourage directors, playwrights and actors to create innovative, unexpected and unintentional performances. The Shatter Theatre intends to foster the unknown future of Australian theatre – an evolution that began with Ray Lawler's 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'.

At the end of the 12-week Doll Theatre Project, I sent copies of a few of the architecture students' designs to Ray Lawler to look at. He was both impressed and surprised by them. 'Dear Dr Groves', he wrote. 'Thank you for allowing me to see the wide and interesting range of ideas that have come forward in response to the Doll Theatre concept. I am impressed. I had wondered if a space devoted solely to productions of the Doll Trilogy might have curbed the imagination, but the students haven't let it stymie them, and have used it as a springboard for all sorts of variations. And their ability to present these with such clarity by means of modern technology amazes me – I am of a generation that relied for theatrical visualisation in terms of sketches and a model of the set. I marvel, too, when you write that this is only the third building these students have designed – would you congratulate them for me? . . . Warmest regards Ray Lawler.'³⁶

A theatre complex devoted exclusively to performances of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is unlikely ever to be built. More importantly though, the Doll Theatre Project was a call to the architects of tomorrow to turn away from homogeneity, to engage with our popular culture and to celebrate the particular in the design and planning of our cities.

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