

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 11

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



DAVID WILLIAMSON

WRITER



DAVID WILLIAMSON (1942 -)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** (Series 11) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories – of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Born in 1942, writer David Williamson studied mechanical engineering, then lectured in thermodynamics and studied social psychology before discarding academic life. After his early successes in Melbourne, he moved to Sydney and rose to prominence in the 1970s, becoming Australia's most successful playwright.

David's prolific work encompasses film, television and the theatre and focuses on themes of politics, loyalty and family in contemporary urban Australia. After writing a play every year for 35 years, in 2005, he announced his retirement from main-stage productions.

He was recently instrumental in the founding of a cultural festival in Noosa, Queensland, where he now spends most of his time.

In this interview he describes the journey from engineer to teacher to playwright, his obsession with writing, the themes and ideas which fascinate him and the way in which he draws on life for his stories and characters.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media, History and SOSE/HSIE.

Childhood, adolescence and parents

David Williamson's memories about growing up in the large country town of Bairnsdale, in south-eastern Victoria, suggest that his experiences and observations during these years have had a marked influence on his later life both as an adult in general and as a writer for theatre and film.

- Discuss in class, then write your own notes on the relationship between David's parents, and the effect this had on him during his childhood and early teenage years. As an example, David refers to an incident where he spies on his mother secretly laughing after an argument with her husband, as 'my first lesson in subtext'. What does he mean by this? (See website references for information about subtexts.)
- Following from the previous activity, suggest one or two films or TV programs you have seen, or novels and short stories you have read, that may include an element of subtext. Describe what you think the subtext is, in each case. (Example: The 2006 TV adventure series, **Robin Hood**, set in the 12th century, has been argued to contain a subtext, using the Christian Crusades in the Holy Land as a means of evoking the early 21st century war in Iraq.)
- David depicts the temperament of his father as being very different from that of his mother, leading to a form of emotional conflict and stress between them. In pairs, plan and write a short drama scene where two people of different temperament come into emotional conflict over a relatively minor aspect of domestic life, such as paying a bill on time, or inviting a friend or relative to dinner or going shopping. (You may wish to incorporate a subtext into the scene; discuss in class how this could be achieved.)
- David says that while growing up he wanted to be a novelist, but that in Australia in the late 1950s it was 'madness' to even think of such a thing. Discuss in class the possible reasons for this, and whether you think the situation for those wanting to pursue creative writing as a life career has changed many decades later, in the early years of the 21st century. Why would anyone want to be a writer (or a cartoonist, an actor, a musician, an artist)—and is it a socially useful activity or a self-indulgence? Is it still both necessary and wise today to acquire a formal education for a 'real' job first, before trying to follow such a dream?
- Write a short fiction story drawing on David's memories of his visit to a vocational guidance officer while at school and his mother's reaction to the report of that meeting. (In writing fiction you may, as David says during the program, 'amplify', exaggerate and alter these basic events for effect.)
- Growing up, David was physically much taller than his peers, and most other people in general. Discuss in class why you think he was ridiculed for this difference. Is it hurtful? Does the 'joke' wear thin? What are the coping measures you might develop for dealing with other people's comments and reactions? Does being 'excessively' tall place burdens on you that others don't have to endure? Are tall girls regarded in similar fashion to tall boys, or is there a difference in attitude to them, in comparison to the situation for tall boys? Does social convention demand unfairly and unreasonably that a boy's girlfriend should not be taller than him?

After discussion, write, edit and desktop publish a 500-word discursive magazine column article (a form of essay) in any way you wish, humorous or otherwise, on the topic, 'Being tall'.

Education, employment and creative expression

After leaving school David Williamson embarked on a university degree in mechanical engineering, despite having little interest in it; the idea of being a writer still tugged at him. In this situation is it possible to follow conflicting paths at once, or is one eventually going to suffer at the

hands of the other? Or can they, somehow, be reconciled?

- Place yourself into this scenario: you are a student at senior secondary level, and it is expected that you will complete the course, sit for your exams and perhaps embark on a tertiary degree. At the same time you have a major interest in another activity that could have the potential to develop into an alternative career; for example you may be a budding sports star, with talent scouts from important and leading clubs making overtures to you, or perhaps you are a member of a local music band or an amateur acting group. Write a set of diary entries about coping (or not coping) with these conflicts.
- Examine the section in the program where David speaks of the tensions that developed between he and Carol, his first wife, concerning his failed attempts to be a writer. Drawing on this situation, write two monologues of about 250-300 words each. The first should be from one character's viewpoint; the second should be from the other character's viewpoint. With another student (male or female, depending on the roles played) practise your monologues out loud then record them for playback as a computer sound file or as video for playback on television.
- David tells us he wrote for the engineering faculty's student magazine. Does your school have a student magazine? If not, should it? Discuss in class, then write an argumentative essay of about 400-500 words on the value and purpose of a student magazine, how it ought to be funded, the range and types of items that you think should be in such a magazine, and whether teachers should be involved in its production and editing, including their powers of veto and censorship of material.
- Imagine you are David Williamson, working for a year as a design engineer of hand-brakes at the car production plant. Write a letter (or an email) to a friend about your experiences in this employment, including the meeting where you are told by your superiors that you are not showing leadership. How do you feel about this?
- As a class, view the archival film clip from 1970 of David promoting the study of engineering at Swinburne College of Technology. Why do you think the clip has been inserted into the program precisely at this point? (Listen carefully, for instance, to what David says immediately prior to the clip.)

To make engineering sound interesting, relevant and even exciting to potential students, discuss how you would then develop and extend this promotional clip over, say, the next 60 seconds of running time. Work in pairs or small groups to develop your own short film script of this.

- View David's comments as to why he enrolled in a psychology course while teaching Engineering. Discuss in class the possibilities first, then plan and write a short fiction story where a character's own dramatic family experiences when growing up have influenced either their choice of later education course or their employment. (Your story may require 'flashback' memory scenes.)

The cult of the writer

Writers who have achieved fame for their works are often lauded and respected by the popular mass media and the public for their genius, their imaginative powers and literary skills, giving rise to what has been called 'the cult of the writer', where the writer is the acknowledged centre of creativity. One may think, for example, of the extreme fame and celebrity surrounding J.K. Rowling. But is this concept totally accurate? As we see in the program, when David Williamson began his writing career at La Mama theatre, his status as the creator was, if not undermined, certainly placed under critical scrutiny.

- Discuss in class the concept of what David refers to as 'group-devised' and 'improvised' theatrical plays, and the importance and relevance of the role of the writer in these activities. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of scripts developed in this way, as compared to more traditional methods of stage writing?
- In pairs, carry out research on the history and development of Melbourne's La Mama theatre group and its location, then prepare, write and desktop format an illustrated magazine article, or related collection of articles, about the history of the theatre company, its purpose, its differences, if any, from other types of theatre groups, its methods and styles of script developments and productions, its long-lasting influences and importance.
- David speaks of his first-performed play, **The Coming of Stork**, as being written 'backwards'. Plan and draft only the final scene for a short play. Make copies of the scene for distribution to a class group in which you will be included, of four or five students. As a group, read through the script, make changes if necessary, and devise a script for the rest of the story, leading up to the final scene. Carry out play readings and alter the entire script as required, reaching group consensus on the final result. You may wish to do a play reading to the class.

Some examples of final scenes are:

- a worker is sacked, or suddenly resigns from his or her job at a fast food restaurant (or location of your choice)
- a clown is arrested in a library by a police detective
- an actor has a bad audition for a role in a film, and is told, 'Don't ring us, we'll ring you'
- Clark Kent reveals his identity to Lois Lane and Perry White
- or a scenario in consultation with your teacher
- View the section of the program where David speaks about how the character of Stork was an 'exaggerated version of himself'. Write a fiction short story of 500-600 words using this approach, in which you are the central character. (You are permitted to make fun of yourself, but not to be cruel and hurtful to other people you know, who may also appear in the story.)

David Williamson's writing career

David Williamson is principally known for his satirical stage plays which depict middle-class Australians in conflict, but as the program indicates, many of his plays have been adapted and produced as film versions, and he has also written film and TV scripts that have not derived from stage drama.

- Carry out research, then on poster paper create a timeline to the present day of when David's plays were first professionally staged in Australia, films that have been produced which were scripted by him, and any other adaptations of his plays into films which he didn't script. Ensure that the timeline has a title heading. You may include relevant pictorial material, such as photographs, illustrations and

'stills' from plays or films, as required.

- If your school has a set of any of David's plays, the class is to carry out a play reading. All students should participate, with roles being evenly shared. At various points, as though you were actors taking part in a rehearsal reading, you may wish to discuss what you think the play is about, its level of dramatic and comedic points, and how it could be visualised, interpreted and performed to keep and hold an audience's attention.

After the play reading, discuss then write a commentary on the play's themes and characterisations. Include an examination as to whether there is anything specifically Australian and/or class-based about the play's content, language, characters and settings, and whether the play is purely of its time (for example, the 1970s), whether it's likely to become outdated, or whether it may retain its appeal or relevance perhaps decades later. Would it be understood and appreciated if performed outside Australia?

- As a class, view a film either based on one of David's plays, or a film he has scripted from scratch. Discuss and then write a review of it in 400-500 words for a magazine aimed at early and mid-teenagers. Draw on your knowledge of David's life, career and writings to create an insight into the film's themes, characterisations and character relationships. Is the film relevant to us today, or has it dated? Would it appeal to non-Australian audiences? If based on a play, does it look like a stage play that has been filmed, or has it been 'opened up' cinematically, especially by taking the story away from a fixed, interior, stage-like setting? Present the review in magazine column format, with a headline, using desktop publishing software.
- Towards the end of the program David speaks of 'that sense of foreboding at the bottom of my comedies'. Drawing on extracts of scenes presented during the program, and from any of his other plays and/or films, discuss in class what you think he means by this. Write a short commentary on the importance and purpose of comedy (including satire where applicable) in his writing output.

'The nature of human nature'

David Williamson says a number of times throughout the program that he has been 'obsessive' in the way he has pursued his vocation as a writer. This drive may also be observed in his stated need to understand, and to incorporate into his writing, why people behave the way they do in their pursuit of success, praise, rewards and social status.

- From your viewing of the program, discuss in class David's 'obsessions', how they have affected his life, his health, his two marriages, his family. In what ways does the program attempt to connect events in his private life to his writing? Do you think his family has suffered as a result of his obsessiveness? Have his own childhood experiences affected his later life and his writing; has he become, in a sense, his own father? After discussion, and based on what you have observed throughout the program, write a character portrait in about 200-250 words of David Williamson the man.
- Why has David found it impossible to attend first-night performances of his new plays? Is it a result of self-doubt, fear of criticism, a personal need to be accepted? Write a short story about such an event in 500-600 words, drawing in any way you wish on these aspects of his psychological makeup.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Please note this listing is not exhaustive.

Books

Bill Gammage, David Williamson and Peter Weir, **The Story of Gallipoli: The Film About the Men who Made a Legend**, Penguin, Ringwood, 1981

Liz Jones, Betty Burstall, Helen Garner, **La Mama: The Story of a Theatre**, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Fitzroy, 1988

Brian Kiernan, **David Williamson: A Writer's Career**, Currency Press, Sydney, revised edition, 1996

A selection of plays by David Williamson (also see website reference for 'Currency Press'):

The Club, Currency Press, Sydney, 1978

Travelling North, Currency Press, Sydney, 1980

Collected Plays, Currency Press, Sydney, 1986

Brilliant Lies, Currency Press, Sydney, 1993

Dead White Males, Currency Press, Sydney, 1995

Influence and Operator, Currency Press, Sydney, 2006

Film/video/DVD

Don Featherstone (dir), **Tall Tales But True: David Williamson – Playwright**, Featherstone Productions, Sydney, 1994

Ian Walker (dir), **Voices on the Page: David Williamson, Compulsive Playwright**, Film Australia, Sydney, 1986

A selection of films scripted by David Williamson:

Bruce Beresford (dir), **Don's Party**, Shock, 1976

Bruce Beresford (dir), **The Club**, Madman, 1980

Tim Burstall (dir), **Stork**, Roadshow Home Entertainment, 1971

Richard Franklin (dir), **Brilliant Lies**, Roadshow Home Entertainment, 1996

Carl Schultz (dir), **Travelling North**, Shock, 1987

Peter Weir (dir), **Gallipoli**, Fox Home Entertainment, 1981

Peter Weir (dir), **The Year of Living Dangerously**, Warner Home Video, 1982

Simon Wincer (dir), **Phar Lap**, Roadshow Home Entertainment, 1983

Websites

Cult of the writer:

www.sequart.com/columns/?col=2&column=227

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auteur>

www.metafilter.com/32586/What-Makes-A-Writer-A-Writer

Currency Press (play and films scripts; study guides):

www.currency.com.au

David Williamson:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Williamson

abc.net.au/rn/bigidea/stories/s1046583.htm

abc.net.au/gnt/profiles/Transcripts/s1196118.htm

Definitions and examples of 'subtext':

www.vcu.edu/arts/playwriting/subtext.html

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subtext>

www.tigeraspect.co.uk/in-production-prog.asp?id=593

Highlights in Australian theatre history:

www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/theatre

La Mama:

www.lamama.com.au

Revival of **Don's Party** — sample reviews:

www.messenger.net.au/pulse/htm/dons3605.htm

<http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com/2007/01/review-dons-party.html>

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A Film Australia National Interest Program

Director/Producer: Rod Freedman

Writer/Interviewer: Robin Hughes

Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn

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