

The Plays of John Naish

Brief synopses by **Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui (Historian and Historical Consultant)**

One-act plays of the social-realism model

Deuteronomy 24-1 (The First Mrs Peters) is set in Tim Peters' hut in the outback where three friends are playing poker. It is a humorous piece in which Tim Peters presents a "bill a' divorcement" to his ninth 'wife' Bella because, in his view, she has failed to keep her "side of the bargain". He sees "no sense in liv'n' in hate." This is a published play and was performed once in Fiji as *Deuteronomy 24-1* and twice in north Queensland as *The First Mrs Peters* by little theatre groups. It has been described as a "clever" play, beautifully crafted with realistic characters.

Picture Night is set in a "decaying" country town called Greenvale. It is a gritty little play about small town prejudices and expectations where the central character Shirley Fuller has to choose between leaving town with the travelling showman Robert Perkins aka Rob Van Rommani or settling down with bank clerk Ben Jenkins, a choice "between the hard life and security." She chooses the latter. The play is a scathing indictment of small-town prejudices, narrowness, fear of the 'other' and complacency "inertia made to look busy". *Picture Night* and *The Factory* share a common theme of the duplicity of women and men, and feature women characters who want more but settle for less. The man questions whether he is good enough, or refined enough for the woman he loves while sensing that while he toils daily to provide her "with everything a normal woman could desire" it is not enough.

The Factory is set in the lounge room of a factory owner's home. The factory is a metaphor for marriage, a state in which women lose their freedom and identity becoming cans of jam "functionally similar as the cans that come off those conveyor belts", expected to "move and live and behave exactly as planned" by the men that marry them. As Charles Parkes connives to leave his wife Sophia for Stella who is prepared to sacrifice her career as his private secretary for the life of "a can of sweet, domestic, jam", Parkes' wife Sophia is planning to leave him, wanting to stand on her

own two feet and to be herself once again, not just Mrs Parkes. Parkes' plan is foiled when his wife abandons her plan.

One-act plays of the social-realism model: Sugar country plays

Naish's sugar country plays are all set in the cane fields of north Queensland and focus with first-hand realism on the brutality of cutting cane by hand. Both one-act plays—*The Claw* and *The Maoris*—have cane cutters and their wives as protagonists. They also share the thematic thrust of failed dreams. There is the recurring theme of female duplicity. Both plays emphasise the physical toll of cane cutting.

The Claw is set in Cairns, north Queensland. The cane cutter Jack Williams aspires to be first a writer and then an artist, but Jack's wife Veronica does not tell him that she knows his paintings are of no artistic merit because, unbeknownst to him, she has studied art before their marriage. She has also contrived with her literary critic brother to have Jack's stories and poems rejected, even though, as it turns out they do have literary merit. She never enlightens him of that fact but rather rips up his work. The claw in *The Claw* is William's calloused hand from cane cutting.

In *The Maoris* cane cutter Jeff Craig mourns the loss of the single life, the "old times" and feels entrapped by marriage, children and responsibility, the life of the "maori" [married life]. Craig suspects his wife Betty and brash fellow cane cutter Mark Westcott of mocking him behind his back because Craig married Betty when she was pregnant with Westcott's baby. Mark as a result, continues to live the free 'singalese' life. Meanwhile, Craig has a double hernia and refuses to go to a doctor because he fears letting the gang down and losing his retention money (the money held back as incentive to finish the season). *The Maoris* won the Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association Playwriting Competition of 1962. It was described as a deceptively simple play, with a taut and alive dialogue. The role of the female lead, Betty, was said to be an attractive if challenging one.

Three-act and four-act plays of the social-realism model: Sugar country plays

The Maoris and *Strange Black Creatures* (*Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*) were precursors of Naish's first novel *The Cruel Field*. *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes* was the name Naish chose for his novel but it was ultimately published with the title *The Cruel Field*. The four-act play *That Men should Fear* is a precursor of Naish's second novel of the same name.

The Strange Black Creatures (or Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes)

The Strange Black Creatures and *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes* follow the trajectory of the novel *The Cruel Field*. They are authentic accounts of a lived experience. The plays, like the novel are set in 1951 the fictional town of Nagonda, located somewhere between Babinda and Mossman. The plays' main two protagonists are Mark Wescott, an Australian rough diamond, and Emery Carroll, British immigrant and aspiring playwright (Naish's alter-ego). In the 1951 harvest season they sign-up to cut cane in the same gang for the mercenary Italian farmer Peter. The brutal work under a relentless tropical sun takes its toll on both experienced and inexperienced canecutters. Where *The Maoris* ends with the ill Jeff not wanting to give up on his contract *The Strange Black Creatures* and *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes* end where the novel does with Jeff's wife Betty setting the cane on fire to force an early end to the season with tragic consequence.

That Men Should Fear

The play *That Men Should Fear* is derived from the novel of the same name. The chief protagonists are members of the Vaughan family, and James Pearce and his mother Grace, housekeeper and partner of William Vaughan the farmer. The entire action of the play takes place in front of Rhondda, homestead on the farm of William Vaughan in Vaughan's Pocket, north Queensland. The action of the play revolves around the hereditary curse of Huntington's chorea disease and the choices individuals make when they are faced with the prospect of having inherited the disease. Subthemes are black-white relations in north Queensland, suicide and the effects of dogmatic religious adherence. The play ends tragically with the banishment of James and his mother from the farm, the suicide of the afflicted son Robert and suicide-murder of son David Vaughan and his pregnant mixed-race wife. William Vaughan's medical doctor daughter Mary assumes the management of the farm and waits with a loaded gun for evidence that she too is afflicted.

One-act plays of the non-realism model

The Paul Davis Affair, *Peace Colony* and *The Lease of Life* were all experiments in finding an alternative voice, one of non-realism rather than authentic realism. In the futuristic settings Naish employed a pattern of speech which Eunice Hanger, university lecturer, playwright, actor and collector of plays identified as "verse, rhymed and repetitive, patterned to stress tensions and conflicts."

The Lease of Life, is the second act of *The Paul Davis Affair*. The way the act is constructed means that it can stand alone as a one-act play. The action takes place in a bar. In *The Lease of Life* the power of money, bosses, big business and the military

machine are derided. Those who are not magnates or generals are slaves and paupers. The press and yes-men are responsible for mouthing the propaganda that keeps the masses in ignorance and fear. In this play we hear the voice of Naish, the anarchist.

Three-act plays of the non-realism model

The Paul Davis Affair is set in a suicide-centre in a futuristic dictatorship. Paul Davis has come to Centre 32 Male seeking a speedy death—“the only freedom”—by legalized suicide. Despite having lived “a full life” he finds it intolerable that “we are not a free people: we are slaves and semi-slaves struggling under two codes of laws, each code vying with the other for stupidity and brutality.” Naish identifies the codes as “Man’s police code. God’s Jungle code” with the play being an indictment of both. In this play we see the forces that Naish would later grapple with as he contemplated suicide. Amongst those is the understanding that outside of legalised suicide the alternative is messy: “phone calls, ambulances, funerals, people held on suspicion, inquests, post-mortems, trouble with the newspapers. In the case of his own suicide the statement is prophetic.

Two-act plays of the non-realism model

Peace Polony moves between scenes and acts from reality to nightmare and back to reality. Humour rarely features in Naish’s work so it is rather surprising to find some playful dialogue in this characteristically cynical play. Naish himself described the play as “A derivative Absurdity in Two Acts with Serious Overtones”. The world-weary tone evident in *The Paul Davis Affair* also colours *Peace Polony* as does the criticism of “the uppercrust: Executives, organisers, secretaries, bosses” as “a gang of swindlers and exploiters-”. The play is set in England, and action revolves around Welshman Ron [Goronwy Jones] who involved in promoting protests to ‘ban the bomb’. Nightmare becomes reality in a closing twist of the plot when the nightmare account of the character Mr Bull finding his wife in bed with another man is played out when Ron’s ‘wife’ Hope is revealed to be Bull’s wife and Ron is shot by Bull.

A radio play – perhaps?

Oliver in Aden. A Play for Voices was clearly designed to be a radio play though the sights and scenes encountered by Oliver North lend themselves to a short cinematic representation. This play cannot be identified as purely surrealistic, in fact it is brutally realistic despite the use of the disembodied voice of ‘Comfort’. The play does though, employ repetitive language, patterned to stress tensions and conflicts similar to *The Paul Davis Affair*. The play is set on the ship the *Fairsky* and in the port of Aden. The ship is on its way to Australia. This is the most confronting of Naish’s plays and the tragic ending with Oliver North’s murder, genuinely moving. Of Naish’s fictional characters North resembles him the most from being a £10 Pom, the sense of failing to live up to

parent's expectations, to a tank accident that resulted in burnt legs, to unfulfilled ambitions and ultimately death. It is impossible not to feel sympathy for Oliver North's predicament as he observes the poverty and child exploitation in the streets of Aden and his feeling of helplessness and disorientation.