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Introduction

The point of origin is not a date or a theory or a conjunction of cultural trends, but a story, the intersection of a wish and the tip of a pencil.

Michael Chabon, 2008¹

This essay—with its title carrying the potentially pejorative, and certainly multivalent, epithet ‘ethnic’—is an opportunity to explore some of our play-making practices and to begin to address directly our drifting, reactive playwriting culture. Fossicking in and around the notion of ethnicity unearths a very stark picture indeed—of stasis, good intentions and lost ways, false starts, carelessness and an ad hoc approach to prospective and real playwrights. It prompts us to ask: are we allowing, encouraging or empowering the full range of Australian voices to write scripts for our stages?

Of course, planners, impresarios and artists are always busy, everywhere—trailing this, developing that, opening new shows, raising money, talking to different audiences, to diverse communities. But can we honestly say that we have fully embraced multi-

culturalism?² What have we done to ensure access to, and equity in respect of, the theatrical means of production for everyone?

At the eighth Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM), in Adelaide last February, newly-appointed artistic director of Melbourne's Indigenous theatre company, Ilbijerri, Rachael Maza-Long, referring to Indigenous plays, asked me: 'All this talk, all this effort, but where are the new writers under commission? Where's the next generation of plays to produce? Where's the rich and varied canon? Where's the work on the shelves?' Her questions resonated deeply and are the key issues in this essay.

My title contains four knots, each of which I must at least loosen. First, what do we mean by 'an Australian play'? Is it something clearly discernible, something implicit, something that distinguishes itself from a Canadian, Brazilian, South African play? Is there something innovative about its form? Is there something particular about its subject, themes or characters? Does it define itself in terms of its relationship to this land? To distance? To history? To the suburbs? To class? To naturalism? Can we generalize or define in this way any more? Have the models shifted in the years since the New Wave trumpeted 'the new Australian play' nearly forty years ago?

This points to a second knot: is this inquiry essentially a nationalist project? Am I trying to distil an essential Australian-ness out of a fractured, splayed Australia? Is this a colonial project, an effort to define one Australia against a multitude of others? Is the culture still cringing, or worse, still trying to wash the unwashed?

What is an Australian Play?

Again, we are being pointed to another knot: what is this Australia to which we refer and how is it enriched or complicated by our various ethnicities? What is an ethnic writer? When I was younger, ‘ethnic’ was a euphemism for ‘recent migrant’, or ‘lover of colourful folksy handicrafts and comestibles’. For me, ‘ethnic’ refers to ‘particular people all related by a language or a similar cultural origin’. In which case, ethnic writing can be done by any of us. I don’t want to reduce the word to meaninglessness, rather to move through debates around authenticity and essentialism, and look at constructive processes of inclusion.

In April this year I attended the tenth New Visions/New Voices festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, where the convenor of a panel on Outreach asked why we should bother with community work. A tough question, to which people responded was that art should be irresistible, that we are ultimately political people and that, while not trying to do the government’s job for it, we are impelled to create new worlds, share experience and create new communities. This reminded me of Noongar writer Dallas Winmar’s *Aliwa*, on which I worked in 2001. What was irresistible, and quite unexpected, about this play—which *is* ‘on the shelves’³—is that its account of an Aboriginal family’s fight to stay together in the face of the Government’s efforts to part them is joyously told as a tale of triumph, an insightful way of thinking about black-armband history.

So what *is* an ‘ethnic writer’, the writer from the margins, the writer with a minority ethnicity, the title’s fourth knot? The challenges presented to, and by, other