Chapter 2

Fists, boots and blues

In his lectures on *The Making of the Australian Theatre*, the inaugural director of the AETT, Hugh Hunt, lapsed uncharacteristically into the local vernacular in declaring his frustration with the state of Australian playwriting:

Conflict and emotions are at the heart of all drama, but conflict can only be expressed by articulate people. When realism descends to the inhabitants of the backyard, conflict has to be couched in monosyllables and emotions have to take the form of physical violence. It is difficult to think of any Australian play which does not end up with a ‘blue’. Passionate expression almost inevitably takes the form of fists and boots in a drama which cannot make full use of language. (Hunt 1960: 17)

Hunt shared with Australian dramatists of the 1950s a conviction that emotional conflict was the key to effective drama, but he expected that conflict to be articulated in eloquent language. A failure to express emotion through language may also be regarded as a masculine character trait, in which the force of emotion is channelled instead into acts of physical violence. Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1957) epitomises Hunt’s observation that physical violence substituted for eloquent expression in Australian theatre. Yet, in looking closely at stage directions in the play script and actual footage from productions, we can see how such acts as the “blue” between Roo and Barney or Roo’s smashing of the doll were occasions that were not simply where language gave way to inarticulate violence, but where male performers also engaged new techniques of realist acting for expressing emotion.

Our focus in this chapter shifts from musical theatre to realist plays. We begin by considering an articulation of masculinity and nationality through the concept of the stereotype which informed the production and reception of Australian theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. We then analyse some scenes of violent action scripted for male actors
in the realist plays first staged at this time, including Richard Beynon’s *The Shifting Heart* (1958), John Hepworth’s *The Beast in View* (1961) and Ru Pullan’s *Bird with a Medal* (1961). Our analyses reveal how theatre came to be used in Australia as a kind of laboratory for experiments in performing the *masculinity* of the national character. These were dramaturgical experiments in which playwrights varied the mix of actions and words in attempts at scripting characterisations resonant with national preconceptions about Australian men. The chapter may be read as a case study in a broader field of research on acting, emotion and gender (Tait 2002), although our approach to articulating the emotional aspect of theatrical sources—play scripts, prompt copies, production photographs, film footage and so on—derives its understanding of emotion from first-hand respondents such as Hunt, who found the theatrical expression of emotion a particular problem in productions of Australian plays. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Debra Oswald’s *Gary’s House* (1996), a more recent play which critically re-dramatises the emotional inarticulacy of an Australian man.

**The Australian character as masculine stereotype**

The life and character of the nation were topics of lively discussion in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s. A raft of publications contributed to these discussions, including A.A. Phillips’ *The Australian Tradition* (1958), Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), J.D. Pringle’s *Australian Accent* (1958), Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* (1964), and Peter Coleman’s anthology *Australian Civilization: A Symposium* (1962). A notable feature of these books is their rehearsal of the character traits of the typical Australian, even if this was often undertaken in order to reveal the national character as a familiar yet inaccurate caricature. Although not the most well known, here is one such rehearsal of the national character, presented with some justification of its plausibility:

There is a common and well preserved belief that the people who make up any particular nation have certain typical characteristics that arise by virtue of their national background, their cultural tradition, conditions of life and, very often, their biological heritage. These beliefs about national characteristics are seldom valid for the majority of the population and they therefore represent only stereotypes. In Australia these stereotypes are given more than usual