‘A Comfortable Society’
The 1950s and Opera in Australia

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Opera has a long history of performance in Australia and there is a small but thriving output of contemporary operatic works. Three operas which had their first performances during the last fifteen years explore the struggle to establish a national identity in different, yet revealing ways. Two are based on seminal works in Australian literature: the opera Voss, by Richard Meale and David Malouf, is based on Patrick White’s novel, Voss; and The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, by Richard Mills and Peter Goldsworthy, had Ray Lawler’s play of the same name as its source. The third opera, The Eighth Wonder, by Alan Johns and Dennis Watkins, has the building of the Sydney Opera House as its subject matter. This building is one of the most recognisable icons of Australia and is perhaps the most potent symbol of the desire for tangible evidence of the emerging Australian nation. All three operas reflect Australian society of the 1950s as refracted through contemporary political and cultural concerns, and suggest differing strategies as to how a coherent national identity might be achieved.

The last decade has seen the growth of a strong republican movement in Australia which, according to many polls and most commentators, appeared to have a majority of popular support but which was defeated in a referendum in 1999. The main reason for this defeat was apparently the ambiguity surrounding the method of election and powers of the president, but this public ambivalence reflects a more general distrust of politics and a pervasive uncertainty concerning national identity. At the time, the common view was that three events in particular would be the catalyst for substantial political change: the approaching millennium, the 2000 Olympic Games, and the Centenary of Federation in 2001. All would be symbolic watersheds when Australia would finally cast off its colonial links with Britain and take its place as a mature nation among equals. However, this change in status seems to have been deferred: the republican debate has almost completely subsided for the moment, and the political status quo remains intact. Questions of restitution and reconciliation with the indigenous inhabitants of Australia, while still in the forefront of public consciousness, have essentially been put on hold by the present government.
The prime minister, John Howard, has spoken of his view of Australia as a ‘comfortable society’, and a wide range of political commentators have compared his political attitudes and aspirations to those of Sir Robert Menzies, who first came to power in the 1950s. Howard’s personal formative years were the ’50s, and despite the great social upheavals of the ’60s and ’70s, it is the ’50s which, in many ways, still exert a strong hold on Australia’s political and cultural attitudes. In Australia, as elsewhere, one cannot separate politics and culture, and the 1950s are still a potent presence in contemporary Australia (cf. Bennett 109, Alomes 136). It was an era of postwar affluence and mass immigration and set in train the still continuing development of a multicultural nation (cf. Carroll 104-105). As Katherine Brisbane has argued, it was “a crucial period in the development of the Australian identity”, a time when “the refinements of life began to surface after long absence” (ix). Opera was one of those refinements.

In this paper I will examine three recent operas, two of which are based on works from the 1950s, the third of which is initially set in the ’50s. It has been argued that the playwrights and novelists of the 1950s reveal the “insecurities of a generation who had no clear alternatives about national identity to pose in place of the old Australianist ones” (Carroll 105). Nonetheless, the operas drawn from some of these works offer a varied and contrasting perspective on the construction of a national identity in Australia. The opera, *Voss*, with music by Richard Meale, and libretto by David Malouf, based on the novel by Nobel Prize winner, Patrick White (1957), was premiered to great acclaim in Adelaide in 1986, and received subsequent performances in Melbourne and Sydney. *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, with words by Peter Goldsworthy and music by Richard Mills, based on the seminal play by Ray Lawler (1955), was premiered in Melbourne in 1996, and received performances in both Melbourne and Sydney in 2000\(^1\). *The Eighth Wonder*, with music by Richard Mills and libretto by Alan Johns and Dennis Watkins, took as its subject the almost operatic controversies surrounding the building of the Sydney Opera House, and enjoyed considerable success at its premiere in 1995 –

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\(^1\) Both White’s novel and Lawler’s play were also made into what are regarded as rather unsuccessful films, not particularly faithful to the spirit of their sources.