

Monday 6 September, 2010  
Focus – Module A [Related text/s]

## Paradise Road Review

by Adam Joyce  
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PARADISE ROAD  
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For the women in this film paradise is freedom, and the road to freedom is a long and arduous one along which many will fall.

As the sun set over Singapore on the 10th February 1942, all women and children were ordered to evacuate before the fall of Singapore to the Japanese. They were packed onto undersized marine vessels destined for Australia and England, many of these were sunk by Japanese bombers as they headed south. This was the fate of those aboard the Prince Albert in Bruce Beresford's 'Paradise Road', and those who managed to swim to the shores of Sumatra could be considered by some as less fortunate than those who did not.

'Paradise Road' is based on the true story of a group of women and children who were captured and taken to a Japanese POW camp after swimming to the shores of Sumatra from their sinking ship. It follows the hardships they face in a squaller of a camp in which the Japanese soldiers seem to have no compassion, and in which the women are treated worse than animals. As a means of defiance some of the women form a choir. It is the uniting power of music that gives many of the women the strength to continue, and is of such beauty that even the Japanese guards refuse to stop it. Bruce Beresford, as the writer and director of 'Paradise Road' has managed to capture the despair and desolation which the women feel, and despite the death which surrounds them, hope is ever present in those with the will. He has also provided a contrast to the despair with humour, which is drawn from the situation in which the women find themselves. This has been done particularly well, and the audience finds themselves laughing one minute and crying the next, being carried with the story, and empathising strongly with the characters.

There are plenty of actors who will be recognised by Australian audiences in 'Paradise Road'. Glenn Close plays the lead character, Adrienne Pargiter, a British wife of a tea planter, who with a musical background becomes the conductor of the women's choir. Her leadership in this position is representative of her role throughout the film, her courage and determination inspiring many of the other women not to give up. Pauline Collins plays a British missionary, Margaret Drummond, who with Adrienne forms, to use Margaret's very apt description, 'a vocal orchestra'. Frances McDormand, who has a remarkable ability to take on extraordinarily different characters plays Dr Verstak, a German Jew, who in McDormand's unique style is somewhat odd, but quite charismatic. Australian Cate Blanchett makes her big screen debut playing Susan Macarthy, an Australian nursing sister. After this performance there can be little doubt that we will see her again in feature films. These actors are in addition to many other faces which will light a spark of recognition in audiences. The cinematography, especially the shots filmed in Penang, are spectacular. The mountains which surround the camp provide a stunningly beautiful and tranquil backdrop, which is a startling contrast to the filthy camp and the graphic violence of the Japanese guards, which is particularly disturbing. The vocal orchestra brings the women together, despite their different backgrounds. Although death surrounds them like a sheaf, this only provides them with more reason to shine through in the face of adversity. It is quite difficult to believe that the sound of a group of singing women could be powerful enough to prevent typically aggressive

guards from breaking up a prohibited gathering. But the singing literally passes right through you, sending shivers up your spine. It has to be heard to be believed. See, feel and hear 'Paradise Road' for yourself

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<http://www.hsc.csu.edu.au/english/standard/language/elect2/shoehorn/hist.html>:

### ***Historical context***

John Misto's play, *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, was inspired by the real-life experiences of Australian nurses taken prisoner by the Japanese Army after the fall of Singapore in 1942, during World War 2.

From 1942 to the end of the war in August 1945, they lived in primitive, at times desperate conditions. Only 24 out of an original 65 were eventually brought back to Australia in October, 1945. Many had drowned or been shot dead as they were being evacuated from Singapore when the Japanese forces captured it. Others died of malnutrition and illness in the prison camps. Supplies sent to them by the Red Cross, including food and necessary medicines, were almost always withheld by their captors.

The writer, John Misto, wanted to make Australians aware of the heroism of these nurses. He believed that it was disgraceful that, fifty years after that war had ended, Australia had still not set up any memorial to its army nurses, even though many of the Australian troops owed their lives to their care. Misto handed over all the prize money he won with this play in 1995 to the fund to build such a memorial.

### **Sources of information**

His play is itself a touching memorial to them. It was inspired by the most famous account of their experiences, the diary of Betty Jeffrey of the Australian Army Nursing Service, published as *White Coolies* in 1954 (reprinted 1999, Angus and Robertson). Misto read this book when he was a teenager, and has said he could not forget it. Many years later, he interviewed many of the surviving women as he researched the background for his play. In his Author's Note (p.16) he tells us:

"Although the characters of Bridie and Sheila are fictional, every incident they describe is true and occurred between 1942 and 1995. There was even a Shoe-Horn..."

*The same book, White Coolies, formed the basis for the movie Paradise Road, written and directed by Australian Bruce Beresford, and released in 1997. He too did further research into these events and experiences, and found hours of tapes prepared by Norah Chambers for the BBC before her death. An English woman with a 'glorious voice', she organised a voice orchestra; the parts for the 'instruments' in the orchestra were written out by an interned missionary teacher, Margaret Dryburgh. Betty Jeffrey was a member of this group.*

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## **The Shoe-Horn Sonata**

**by John Misto**

Currency Press, Sydney, 1996 (reprinted 2000)

This unit was prepared by Pauline Byrne

### **Getting ready to face the examiner**

Scoring well in the HSC examination is not a matter of luck. It's more like playing in the finals of any sport. Training is crucial, and if you've done your training as thoroughly as you can, you can feel relaxed and confident.

Training has two main parts

- Getting to know what you'll have to do
- Practising doing it.

**This section looks at drama questions from the viewpoint of the HSC markers. What do they hope to see in your answer and what will they reward with good marks?**

### **1. You have to show them that you know this play thoroughly.**

You do this by referring **closely** to what happens in the play, including **actions**, **projected images** and **sound effects** as well as the spoken **dialogue**.

- How do you get ready to do this?

You have to find out what works for you. Some students make tapes of important speeches, and play them over and over again till they know them well. Others put important speeches on wall charts. You can make a chart of all the photographic images, linking them to what is revealed in the play at the point they're shown. See more details in Activities and writing tasks. Play some of the songs over several times to get the emotional tone of them.

It is vital to make your own diagram of the action of the play, identifying the 'spine' of each scene: the crucial happening that propels the action forward, the major confrontation

in each scene. As this play has only two main characters, Bridie and Sheila, the revelation of their earlier relationship and the development of their relationship during the timespan of the play are the main dramatic focus. For the modern audience, also, the play reveals to us the nature of war for captives.

## **2. You have to deal with a playscript as an example of the genre we call drama.**

You have to make it clear to the marker that you recognise the particular characteristics of dramatic form.

Students who refer to *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* as a 'novel' are suggesting to the markers that they have not achieved one of the most vital Syllabus outcomes: to "learn about the ways language forms and features, and structures of texts shape meaning and influence responses" (H4)

The task of the playwright is **to manipulate the emotions of the audience** and students have to be able to explain how the particular play they are studying does this. It has to be clear to the marker that you understand that this is a playscript, that it is a 'recipe for performance'. In other words, a play is constructed to happen ideally on a stage in front of a receptive audience-it is not like a novel or poem designed to provide an imaginative experience that takes place primarily in the mind and emotions of a solitary responder.

**The composer of a play aims to influence the responses of a collective group.**

- How do you show the marker that you do recognise the genre of drama?

As you write about the play, make clear that you know it is NOT static. It moves through time, one thing happens after another, and may be the consequence of another. There are causal connections and links; as the play proceeds, feelings and past events are revealed and characters clash, change and develop. You need to write about these developments. It helps to visualise important scenes in your imagination as you write. Think about how these scenes would make the audience respond.

Be sure to know in detail, and to refer to, **specific scenes**. If you find it hard to recall the numbers (e.g. Act 1, Scene 8), give each scene a tag or nickname by which you remember it. A good answer is usually supported by reference to three or four important scenes.

[Do NOT stick to scenes from the first quarter of the play only unless you are explicitly asked to do so. A play moves forward towards a destination, and you want to show the examiner that you're aware of this progression.]

## **3. You must answer the precise question given to you.**

First, check whether you've been asked to give a **critical response** or a **creative response**. Then craft your answer in the appropriate form. A critical response is structured as an argument or debate and follows a case line. This is the type of response you would give to the question on the Board of Studies specimen HSC paper:

How does John Misto present Bridie and Sheila as much more than tragic victims of war?

An imaginative response requires you to create a situation, based on the text, or to write in a particular form, or to do both. For instance, you could be given this task:

Imagine you are a journalist preparing a feature article to be published in a weekend newspaper before Rick's documentary program goes to air. Interview either Bridie or Sheila about her reactions to doing this program.

You will be expected to show accurate knowledge of the play, but also to write in the form of a newspaper feature article. It is important to stick closely to the facts of the character's life and emotions as revealed in the play. You could where appropriate use direct quotations from the play's dialogue.

Read the question very carefully and make certain you answer **every part** of it.

#### **4. Your supporting references to the play need to be accurate.**

You need to spell the names of characters and places correctly. You need to remember the order in which things happen, because this is how the playwright has built up suspense or added surprise. When you quote, get it right-when a marker sees hundreds of exam scripts, the student who seems to be making up the quotations and has no idea of accuracy looks very obvious. If you are not sure of the exact words used but you are sure of the meaning, use a paraphrase. (That means, you express the meaning in your own words in reported speech as in, "She told him that...")

**Warning: be very careful not to confuse the storylines.** Each of these three writers bases the text on the similar historical facts and personal experiences, but presents the stories of the characters from different angles. Misto's main characters (the protagonists, Sheila and Bridie) are fictional, but the play refers also to real people.

A very easy-to-read account of Australian soldiers living as prisoners of the Japanese - including working on the infamous Thai-Burma railroad - is given in the diary of Stan Arneil, *One Man's War*, found in many school and public libraries. (now out of print). A young man from Sydney, he was only 21 when he began to keep it. Other accounts are listed on page 15 of the play text.

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<http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/P01691.003>

#### Description

MALAYA, 1941. GROUP PORTRAIT OF AUSTRALIAN ARMY NURSING SERVICE (AANS) NURSES OF 2/4TH CASUALTY CLEARING STATION (CCS). LEFT TO RIGHT: SISTER E. MAVIS HANNAH; SISTER E. ("MILLIE") DORSCH; SISTER ELAINE BALFOUR-OGILVY; UNKNOWN (PARTLY OBSCURED); UNKNOWN; ? SISTER DORA S. GARDAM; UNKNOWN; ? SISTER PEGGY FARMANER; SISTER BESSIE WILMOTT. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SISTER HANNAH, ALL OF THE NURSING

STAFF OF 2/4TH CCS LOST THEIR LIVES WHILE PRISONERS-OF-WAR  
(POWS) OF THE JAPANESE. (DONOR: W. CONNELL)

