

Make It Australian: The Australian Performing Group, the Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre. By **Gabrielle Wolf**. Sydney: Currency Press, 2008. Pp. xvi + 288 + 24 illus. Aus-\$32.95 Pb.

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The Melbourne-based Australian Performing Group (APG) was active in the years 1967-1981 and contributed significantly to the renaissance of form, content, and method that occurred in Australian theatre in those years. Emerging as a politicized collective in 1967, its practitioners were resistant to the well-made plays of the English repertory model that dominated Australian theatre through the middle of the twentieth century and influenced by the experimental practices of contemporaries such as Brook, Grotowski, Chaikin and Schechner. Along with other young writers, thinkers and performers of the so-called 'New Wave' of Australian theatre, the group's members "shared a goal of revitalising Australia's theatre scene with distinctively Australian and experimental drama." (p.32) The collective eventually numbered over fifty people and "aspired to create drama that was distinctively Australian, examined the national character and addressed Australians and their concerns". (p.82) Playwrights whose works have long been considered canonical (Hibberd, Romeril, Williamson) launched their careers at the converted Pram Factory from which the group worked, many members subsequently forged influential careers as teachers, writers, producers, directors and performers, and Circus Oz, whose international career continues today, emerged from the collective in 1977.

Despite the APG's widely acknowledged role in renovating Australia's theatrical landscape this is, surprisingly, the first systematic scholarly investigation yet published by someone from outside the group. To date, commentaries about the APG have been written primarily by acolytes and former stake-holders with the inevitable consequence that "the public memory of the APG has been clouded by legend and nostalgia". (p.xv) Through judicious archival scholarship, recent interviews with former members of the group, and reflections from critics and theatre historians who critically endorsed the work of the APG, Wolf traces the development of the collective, ideologically and artistically, from its earliest showings in 1967 to its dispersal in 1981. The result is a balanced interrogation of the group's working methods and stylistic influences (which ranged from Brecht to popular theatre forms of the nineteenth century), of the personalities and creative tensions that held the group together, of the mythology surrounding the APG and the contradictions inherent in its nationalist project. Wolf provides meticulous analysis of many key productions while keeping an eye on the broader context of cultural and political change that was steadily reshaping Australian society in the 1960s-70s. Through frequent incursions into Australian theatre history, she locates the APG within the continuum of Australian drama, recognising that the practitioners of the 'New Wave' were not the first Australian artists to speak with a vernacular voice.

While at times repetitive, Wolf's text flows easily and scholars and students of Australian theatre history will welcome this long-overdue study of the life, times and legacy of a collective whose work in the 1970s changed the way Australians experience theatre.