

ON SHIFTING SANDSHOES
Comic farce or Postmodern Morality Play?

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Paul Davies

The English Morality Play

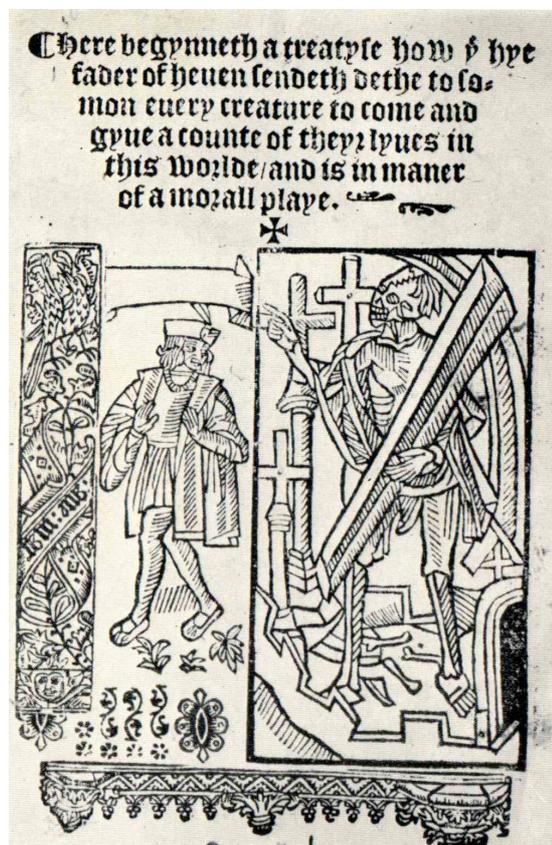


Figure 1. Everyman and Death
 Wood cut from the title page of the Skot print of *Everyman*
 (Henry E. Huntington Library copy)

First performed in later part of the 15th Century *Everyman* is probably the best known of the English morality plays and tells the story of Everyman as he is summoned by Death to his day of judgment and seeks desperately around for help from various characters designated as Fellowship, Kindred Goods the five Witts, Knowledge, Strength but they all desert him. Only Good Deeds takes him by the hand into eternal life. Clearly this was a kind of sermon presented dramatically just as the earlier medieval Miracle and Mystery plays had been enactments of scenes from the New and Old Testaments. In a play like *everyman*

however we see the beginnings of a rudimentary human characters becoming more central to the drama, however embryonic

My focus in this paper is more with the construction of ‘character’ than ‘space’ and I argue that, just the idea of the fully rounded, psychologically coherent human being in drama emerges from the medieval morality play where ethical and physical attributes were first embodied in individual players (designated as Kindness, Good Deeds, Beauty, Wit, Strength etc.). So too, plays like *On Shifting Sandshoes*, half a millennium later, harbour within their dramatis personae, a certain tendency to prescriptive stereotyping (mono-typing?), or at best a form of personality constraint.¹

This arises in *On Shifting Sandshoes* also because of the collaborative way it was written: by means of script workshops where character intentions and wants (their ‘motives’) could be reduced to simple workshop-able descriptors. Appropriately for this conference, the dominant personality traits that seem to have emerged for the characters of *On Shifting Sandshoes* can be read not as virtues, but as mortal sins, a list of spiritually fatal transgressions as first defined by Pope Gregory in the 6th Century.

In his introduction to *Everyman*, A.C. Cawley points out that

The earliest moralities...show a change from the biblical history to the contemporary world, from biblical characters to human types and personified human qualities; the struggle between good and evil is staged in the soul of the individual representative Christian, and his salvation is brought by the Christ-given sacraments of the Church. Man now becomes the leading personage in a play which is complete in itself and distinct from the cyclic pageant in that it is no longer part of a larger whole.²

J.L. Styan in his history of the English stage goes on to say that, as it shook off the influence of the Church, the morality play became increasingly secular and political, while it still “pursued its purpose by working with *abstract* characters that conveyed an *allegorical* story,” and that the “struggle of good and evil automatically built a bold, confrontational dramatic structure.”³ This process still happens in drama today in a post-modern ‘morality’ play like *On Shifting Sandshoes* where the dramatic conflict also arises from a confrontation of stereotypes.

¹ Character stereotyping in *On Shifting Sandshoes* also derives from the commedia dell’arte tradition (emerging concurrently with the moralities in the 14th Century) a style of acting that was applied to TheatreWorks’ other site-specific plays, where a certain exaggerated, or over-the-top acting manner became logistically necessary (in order to be seen and heard). This model for working up a script with the available actors and director had been used by the TheatreWorks ensemble since the original *Go Anywhere Show* in 1981

² *Everyman*. Old and Middle English Texts. Ed. Cawley, A. C. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961. Print. xiv.

³ Styan, J.L. *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print. 41.

On Shifting Sandshoes

In 1988 I was commissioned by the Bicentennial Authority to write a play which would be part of a celebration of two centuries of European settlement in Australia. This was a rare opportunity to create a piece of theatre, in the Christmas pantomime tradition, but updated and in close collaboration with a director and cast. The basic dramaturgical strategy was to work up the shape and personalities of the characters drawing on the skills base and (comic) abilities of the people who would be performing them. In this way, the actors, to a certain extent, not only 'own' the story, but the plot emerges from the characters and the friction between them, rather than from some predetermined narrative architecture imposed from above. The methodology was to bring a potential outline of events to the table, a treatment effectively, which was divided into 'beats' or embryonic scenes such as "Arrival," "The Storm," "Men On Women," "Women on Men," "Night Games," "Xmas Day" etc. So that the final dialogue, and the order of events, grew out of improvisations based on the over arching intentions and drives of each person.⁴ These 'wants' were driven in turn by a series of 'needs' and 'desires' – providing the conflicts of interest from which 'drama' flows. Sandy wants Diane, Bruce wants Paula, Margot once wanted Raoul, but of course he's gay and Bruce has all the money, so Raoul in turn pretends to want Sandy.

At the time, TheatreWorks' artistic agenda was to marry the idea of 'celebration' with that of 'disturbance' because of an ambiguous attitude to its suburban community.

Although *On Shifting Sandshoes* was not 'site-specific' it was born out of an intention to be potentially so, and in fact arrived on the back of two earlier TheatreWorks' tent shows which were site-specific.

The first of these was *The Go Anywhere (within reason) Show* in 1981.

⁴ The TheatreWorks archive contains 14 hours of audio tapes from these script workshops and includes this author's notebooks from these discussions.



Figure 2. TheatreWorks' *Go Anywhere (within reason) Show*, March-December, 1981

Back: Peter Finlay (Dick Dickens) Caz Howard (Dolly Dickens),
Susie Fraser, (Desdemona Dickens)

Front: Tony Kishawi (Darryl Dickens) Robin Laurie (director)
Hannie Rayson (Daphne Dickens)

This play revolved around a lower middle class family forced to wander Melbourne's eastern suburbs because they were unemployed and therefore actually homeless. It was performed as if the camping ground, shopping centre, street, school or community hall in which they pitched their tent was going to have to be the Dickens' residence for that night. The script was reworked three years later as *The Dick And Dolly Dickens' Show* and performed in similar locations.



Figure 4. Cast of *The Dick And Dolly Dickens Show*, 1984
 Front: Phil Ceberano, (Darryl Dickens) John Wood Ingram (Dick Dickens)
 Kate Kantor (Daphne Dickens),
 Back: Debbie Helloran (Dolly Dickens), Helen King (Desdemona Dickens)

Lack of space prohibits further contextualizing these plays within the conventions of the castaway genre as it extends say, from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*; or even the venerable tradition of tent shows and other forms of travelling theatre reaching as far back as the pageants, strolling players and miracle/mystery plays of the early middle ages – a tradition of mobile entertainment that continued through to the great tent-located circuses of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

We chose as our starting point five apparently well-adjusted Brisbanites and one Melbournian who collectively participate in that great, annual Australian ritual of the Christmas camping holiday by the beach: specifically, Flinders Beach on North Stradbroke Island (Mingerriba). Loosely based on real events, this was also going to be one of those years when the Sunshine State morphs into the Cyclone State and in an odd premonition of the current fixation with climate change, our unhappy campers soon find their site wrecked, their food gone, their SUVs inoperable, their nerves frayed, the 'Fourex' running low, and little prospect of 'rescue' any time soon. By the time help arrives, all constraints have been lost and their lives, despite protestations to the contrary, will never be quite the same again. It seems improbable of course, that people could be effectively isolated and starving on a beach barely 20 kilometres from civilized Brisbane. But this is farce not fact, allegory rather than documentary and is Brisbane civilization anyway, or are there primitive, primeval urges festering away beneath the modern façade? Such was the broad narrative canvas onto which the detailed characters could then be sketched through the script workshop process. Above all, the theme of *On Shifting Sandshoes*, something with which to 'disturb' the Bicentennial moment, was the fraught nature of the Australian engagement with its continent, a point that Joanne Tompkins underlines in *Unsettling Space* where she argues that "Representational space performed in Australian theatre not only contests a conventional Australian history and culture; it also stages alternative means of managing the production of space in a spatially unstable nation"⁵

As I wrote in the 1988 programme for *On Shifting Sandshoes*:

The human experience in Australia has been sited overwhelmingly in some kind of temporary camp. From the gunyahs of the aborigines to the tents of the First Fleet and the goldfields, Australians have housed themselves impermanently. Despite our weatherboards and brick veneers we still answer, every Christmas,

⁵ Tompkins, Joanne. *Unsettling Space Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre*. Studies in International Performance. General Editors Janelle Reinhelt and Brian Singleton. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006 Print. 5.

some national primitive urge to escape from ‘civilization’ and camp under the stars.⁶

But in this dystopian, bicentennial year, as things go from bad to worse for our unhappy campers, Bruce becomes increasingly greedy, Margot vain, Diane angry, Sandy lustful, Raoul lazy, and Paula jealous. In addition, they collectively exhibit a ruinous gluttony as their growing hunger, excited by an accidental dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms, soon carries grave danger for the already endangered local wildlife.

Characters and their Sins



Figure 6. Bruce McKenzie
(Greed)

Bruce is a property developer and tax avoider whose personality is driven by a relentless selfishness. He unapologetically sees himself (and without a hint of irony) as the sort of visionary builder who “made the Gold Coast what it is

⁶ TheatreWorks Archive. Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane. *On Shifting Sandshoes*. Box 3

today.”⁷ Bruce will sell you anything you want, even if he doesn’t technically own it yet and in fact he secretly plans to construct a toll bridge to Stradbroke from the mainland carrying a pipeline that will effectively drain the island’s lakes of their pristine fresh water in order to profit from a drought-prone Brisbane’s growing thirst.⁸ In this one act he effectively bridges, literally, Pope Gregory’s traditional sin of ‘Greed’ over to the modern sin of ‘Environmental Destruction’ as outlined in the list recently announced by Monsignor Gianfranco Girotti, head of the Vatican’s Apostolic Penitentiary Committee.⁹ Bruce is so locked into personal wealth creation that when his wife Margot’s credit card is stolen in the Vatican during a tax deductible trip to Europe, he refuses to report it because as he soon discovers, the thief is spending less than Margot did.



Figure 7. Margott McKenzie
(Vanity)

Bruce’s wife Margot is a self-anointed ‘Beauty Consultant’ and former kindergarten teacher with pretensions to much higher things. Her ‘day job’ consists of running one of those temples of modern narcissism: a hairdressing salon called “Curl Up and Dye”. This loss-making place of mirrors is funded by Bruce (primarily as a tax deduction), but mainly because it keeps Margott occupied with her talent for gossip even if it involves mainly talking about herself. Margott brings a huge

⁷ *On Shifting Sandshoes*, Paul Davies 2009 TS. TheatreWorks Archive. Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane. 7.

⁸ Such a plan was proposed by Hon. Russell Hinze, Minister for Transport, Development and Gambling in the Bjelke-Petersen government at the time. In a cruel piece of political caricature Minister Hinze was himself parodied by cartoonists as the ‘colossus of Roads’.

⁹ Swartz., Barney, “Seven deadly sins get a modern day makeover.” *The Age* 11 March 2008, Print. Other new sins in the Vatican’s canon of updated transgressions, include ‘conducting immoral scientific experiments’ and ‘genetic manipulation’.

collection of beach clothes to try out on holiday (and help hide any tiny little imperfections). The size of the wardrobe every year is something Bruce simply cannot fathom because, as he correctly points out, all that Margott does when she gets to the island is take it all off again!



Figure 8. Diane Stewart
(Anger)

Diane is a physical education teacher at an unnamed Brisbane high school. Bossy and almost permanently single, she carries a fairly large and apparently immutable chip on her shoulder, especially in relation to ex-boyfriends. Diane is annoyed with Bruce because he's such a 'boof-head', and deep down is intelligent enough to know that Margott is pretty shallow also. At work Diane is irritated by her students, other staff, parents generally and is quietly stewing over the increasingly audible ticking of her biological clock. Her last 'ex', Craig somebody, who we never see, had been playing a lot of night tennis and Diane only belatedly discovered that it was all 'mixed doubles.' Even though they had triathlons common, and he once took her to Port Douglas, infidelity on the tennis court, caught on court as it were, was more than enough to see Diane picking up her racket and walking. As she reveals to her closest girlfriends, Craig had "zero concept of what it was like to live on a planet that is slowly breaking down."¹⁰ Finally, Diane becomes really annoyed when she cuts her well-conditioned foot on the toilet shovel and overnight succumbs to some dreadful tropical infection that soon sees her reduced to virtual immobility on Margot's banana lounge. The dramaturgical strategy here was to take a character's salient, empowering qualities and render her inoperable, to cripple her as it were, in Diane's case literally. The active person thus becomes inactive, the lazy, busy, the vain, humble, the ugly, lustful and so on.

¹⁰. Ibid 56.



Figure 9. Sandy Mills
(Lust)

An unfit, self-declared poet, Sandy runs a bookshop in Melbourne, wears a lot of black and rarely comes in contact with the sun, let alone tents or unpatrolled beaches. In an inversion of the usual stereotype (again for exaggerated comic effect) Sandy, by far the least attractive of the campers, becomes the unlikely Lothario. Just as opposites attract, he soon finds himself shamelessly ignoring Paula and lusting after both Diane's athletic body and her razor sharp mind. A hopeless hippie romantic at heart, Sandy soon engages in playful intellectual banter with Diane, much to Paula's growing unease. He even foolishly reveals his true feelings in a private diary (notes for a potential novel) that is soon discovered by Raoul and used to effectively expose Sandy's duplicity, destroy his relationship with Paula, and pretty comprehensively humiliate him in front of everybody – all at a point when he's also technically starving. As Sandy laments soon after: “This is the worst good time I've ever had.”¹¹

¹¹ Ibid. 83



Figure 10. Paula Edwards.
(Envy)

Sandy's partner, Paula, another former teacher and now an aspiring singer is the one character to have escaped her Brisbane nest, hoping to establish a musical career with an all women's band in artistically supportive Melbourne – only to find public disinterest and financial disappointment. Along the way she also finds Sandy, only to be disappointed by him too given his flirtations with Diane. Paula always plays low status and has little to offer. She quietly envies Margot's carefree lifestyle, Diane's strength and courage, Bruce's bonhomie and largesse, Sandy's brains, and Raoul's flair. In a further complication it is revealed that Paula had a drunken encounter with Bruce out on the dunes under full moon, several camps ago.



Figure 11. Raoul Manon
(Sloth)

The soul of Raoul is being permanently struggled over in a tight contest between the twin devils of his innate laziness and his boundless self-regard. Raoul's basic attitude to life is "let's party before we all die." A gay, irresponsible, but talented chef, Raoul's only material contribution to the campsite is a set of dumbbells brought over on his bicycle – both designed to keep the 'body beautiful' in shape. He refuses to cook (he's on holidays) and brings absolutely nothing useful to add to the pool of goods necessary to keep a camp of six people functioning for a festive week. Like most years, Raoul pretty much expects to 'sponge' off the others for the entire time, rewarding his fellow camp mates with his amusing take on everything. It is revealed that Raoul also had a mad fling with Margot several camps ago, and tries to use this grubby skeleton in her large closet to blackmail more money out of her for his failing restaurant in the Valley, hoping as always to get something for nothing.

In addition to these individual moral failings, and as their supply of edible goods soon reduces down to a bottle of tomato sauce and a slab of 'Fourex', the characters in *On Shifting Sandshoe's* begin experiencing real hunger probably for the first time in their lives. When Bruce finds a packet of soggy chips washed up on the beach, true to his nature, he at first tries to hide them, then refuses to share a single chip, threatening to swallow the entire packet in one go. However, under pressure from the group, including Diane's withering temper, Bruce relents and proposes a winners-take-all game of 'bastard ball' (their private version of beach volleyball), and proceeds to choose the best players for his own team, leaving Margot and Sandy with the crippled Diane. When even the chips aren't enough, however, the final desperate struggle for food sees them ingesting wild mushrooms which soon appear to have been hallucinogenic.



Figure 12. 'Blinky'
(Gluttony)

In this fragile, altered state, and the delirium that follows, the group, riven by the consequences of their individual and collective transgressions, plumb new depths of depravity as the camp mascot, a rare blue koala who they've nicknamed 'Blinky,' becomes impaled on a beach umbrella, a final mortal sin that confirms their descent into hell. Well within the tradition of a medieval morality, *On Shifting Sandshoes* restages the familiar adage that "the wages of sin are death," even if it is an innocent animal in this case who pays the supreme price.¹²

Aftermath

The following morning, in the sobering, harsh glare of daylight, the five Brisbane friends and the outsider from Melbourne, gather their tattered belongings and prepare to catch the barge home again, knowing full well that nothing between them will ever be the same again. In this sense the cyclone that floods and wrecks their campsite can be read as biblical also in its cleansing effect, forcing change, restoring normality and making a kind of redemptive renewal possible – placing *On Shifting Sandshoes* again well within the morality tradition.

Predictably, Leonard Radic responded to all this in *The Age* in his review "not exactly incisive or innovative theatre," lacking the "Shakespearean resonances of Michael Gow's *Away*" which he found *On Shifting Sandshoes* partly resembled. And although, as "light comedy farce" it worked "well enough" for him, if there were "any subtleties in the script," Radic felt that "neither the director Mark

¹² Although Blinky's 'innocence' may be contested by the evidence that Koalas do tend to lie around a lot on tree branches chewing gum leaves all day, whose high eucalyptus content subsequently drives them towards a constant state of irritable rage, thus embodying within their species hood the sins of sloth, gluttony and anger.

Shirrefs nor the actors [had] locate[d] them.”¹³ Other critics were less harsh. Jennifer Ellison in the *Bulletin* found the characters were “intentionally stereotypical” but the humour “largely wholesome,” and spoke of the “glee with which audiences can watch this show knowing that it’s them and not us having to live through this abominably awful experience.”¹⁴ Either way, *On Shifting Sandshoes* made a healthy profit for TheatreWorks during its extended première run, and the 2009 production in Mullumbimby enjoyed a similar popularity with Byron Shire audiences. It also received an Awgie (Australian Writer’s Guild Award) for the best Australian play of 1988.

Conclusion

The point of the caricature, exaggerated characters and incredible events, arose out of an intention to disturb the celebration of an official historical national moment. The Medieval tradition of bawdiness and irreverence is present also in the ‘crude’ way that the characters are constructed and thrown together. As A. C. Cawley points out

most of the English moral plays freely combine comic scenes and persons with a serious rendering of life. They commit what Milton has called ‘the Poet’s error of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons.’ ”¹⁵

Whether poetic error or not, *On Shifting Sandshoes* deals with ‘vulgar’ persons partly because it also grows from TheatreWorks community outreach agenda. One which insisted that these people were not in fact trivial. If the play lacks Shakespearean resonances this is because its genealogy is medieval, not Elizabethan. Radic’s post-Renaissance perspective misses the point that *On Shifting Sandshoes* emanates from a tradition two centuries older than Shakespeare and the closed in, disjunctive Elizabethan stage/auditorium tradition. Its intentions are allegorical, not Freudian, bawdy – in a mobile and robust playing style. To answer the initial question therefore: *On Shifting Sandshoes* is a comic farce precisely because it is a morality play. Subtlety was never the point. Like any good morality it also reinforces the idea that the concept of ‘sin’ marks out a bedrock moral default position beneath which men and women cannot afford to sink without compromising their fundamental humanity. Redemption becomes possible because Bruce’s environmental destruction has been checked, Margot’s vanity stripped bare, Diane’s anger quelled, Sandy’s lust unrequited, Raoul’s laziness shaken by bankruptcy, and Paula’s jealousy extinguished thereby restoring some sort of natural balance both to them as individuals and the place in which they caused took place.

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¹³ Radic, Leonard, “A camping holiday that goes wrong.” *The Age* 23 November 1988, Print.

¹⁴ Ellison, Jennifer, Theatre Review *The Bulletin* 6 December 1988, Print.

¹⁵ Op. Cit. (xv)