

This business of being human

ANDREW Bovell has a thing about lost shoes, especially those found in strange places, such as a lantana bush. Immediately, we ask ourselves who owns this shoe and how did it get there. Bovell, dramatist and screenwriter, is a master at hooking the viewer from the first scene; he then constructs an elaborate pattern of seemingly unconnected relationships that take us into the lives of unidentified corpses, lost and abused children, tortured parents and cheating wives and husbands.

Why, I ask him, is there always a dark current beneath the surface of his words? What has happened in his life to create this seeming obsession with the marginalised, the lost, the emotionally alienated?

We are sitting in the kitchen of his home, high up in the hills of Willunga, a charming village only 40 minutes from Adelaide, where olive trees and vineyards abound.

He and his wife, actress Eugenia Frangos, and his three children, have lived at this farm for the past 10 years, nestled close to the bosom of his wife's Greek family.

It has been a busy time for Bovell. He took out two awards at Friday's AWGIE Awards, held by the Australian Writers' Guild to celebrate excellence in Australian screen, television, stage and radio writing. His play, *When the Rain Stops Falling*, won the stage award, while his work on *Blessed* - alongside writers Melissa Reeves, Patricia Cornelius and Christos Tsiolkas - won the award for best feature film adaptation.

His play *Speaking in Tongues* (adapted for the screen as *Lantana*), will have its West End premiere in London next month. When *When the Rain Stops Falling* is part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival in October, and

will have a New York season next year.

Back in Willunga, the writer has made me a delicious coffee from his machine. The long table is free of clutter, the kitchen is immaculate and his boyish, 46-year-old face has one deep crease just above the left eyebrow.

"My children often ask why my plays are so sad," he says. "They say that my work doesn't fit with the warm, joke-making father they know. But I know how lucky we all are as a family. My biggest fear is that I would lose one of my kids."

"My dramas all pivot around a point in time when people have been thrown off their axis by random events or their own destructive patterns of behaviour. I don't put a body in lantana because I am carrying any dark baggage, though no doubt I am, most of us are. The body is there as a dramatic device. You may wish to enter philosophical or ideological terrain and having hooked the audience in, they will go with you."

Bovell is not interested in exploring his own psyche and admits that even if he were, he is such a private person that he would never write about it.

There are, however, a couple of childhood recollections that he shares that could fit into the jigsaw of his art and his life.

His father was a bank manager in the wheat country of Western Australia, a position of power and trust in the late 1960s. By the time he turned nine, he had lived with his three older sisters in seven different country towns, often in houses with no electricity. They were a very close family and he remembers his father being in trouble for lending money to Italian migrants to start market gardens that somehow failed to prosper. The bank moved him on.

In another town he remembers their house being full of old Aboriginal women every Friday afternoon. Years later he realised that his father was giving them money from his own pocket. The importance of trust and looking after those less fortunate were values imprinted at an early age. Bovell was 19 before he saw his first play.

When he graduated from the Victorian College of Art, Melbourne in the 80s was the centre of the new wave of Australian playwriting and production. All things seemed possible.

Bovell became a member of the close community that formed the Melbourne Workers Theatre and was part of a collaboration that wrote *Who's Afraid of the Working Classes?*, a play about the ways economic rationalism had forced many of the traditional working class, through no fault of their own, into an underclass, scrabbling for a life on the margins of society. The newly released film, *Blessed*, is the adaptation of this play.

Bovell's special talent lies in making serious issues dramatically gripping through his emphasis on storytelling. He structures his stories so that they are told from many different viewpoints, encouraging his audience to empathise with his characters. He never preaches or judges; he connects with us on an emotional level in order to engage with the big intellectual questions of our times.

Having explored class in the context of contemporary urban living, in *Holy Day* he explored the Australian frontier in the late 19th century: the story of a murdered husband and a stolen baby that plunges us into the murky depths of race, truth, innocence and faith. (Bovell is working with *Lantana* director Ray Lawrence on a film adaptation of it.)

His next play, *Speaking in Tongues*, an amalgamation of three previous short plays, demonstrated Bovell's exploration of narrative structure, influenced by his admiration for the films of Robert Altman. Working on a lateral rather than a linear pattern, Bovell focused on the way that different characters view the same incident.

"I was interested in the random connections between people and how we make sense of our own lives through encountering the lives of others," he says.

It asks questions about trust and betrayal, the right and the wrong of emotional contact, and about the intimacy of strangers and the alienation of intimates. He uses narrative shapes where the plot moves sideways and backwards and time-travels to moments already seen and returns to see them from a different angle.

The play became the basis for his screenplay of *Lantana*, which Bovell describes as "part mystery, part thriller and part journey through the labyrinth of love". Apart from all the accolades bestowed on the film, Bovell was named screenwriter of the year in 2002 by the London Film Critics Circle. He spent the next few years in the world of international screenwriting and adaptations but never forgot the power of theatre and the immediacy of its ability to create change in the way human beings feel about themselves and their place in the world.

His most recent play, *When the Rain Stops Falling*, premiered at the 2008 Adelaide Festival but began five years earlier in a collaboration with director Chris Drummond, his company Brink Productions and visual artist Hossein Valamanesh. The dark undertow of this play is pedophilia, child abuse and the relationship between fathers and sons. It leads to an exploration of the question: "If children represent our future and we abuse them both literally and emotionally, is this how we have repeatedly treated our planet as a human species? What does this say about our future and our capacity to change our behaviour towards each other and the planet?" Bovell's pattern for this play is musical; using repetition, multi-layering and a theatrical language that takes the audience outside naturalism in order to tell an interwoven story that spans five different settings, four generations and two continents. It is a play that speaks the unspoken in order to explore betrayal, abandonment and destruction, and also to embrace the possibility of change, hope, love and forgiveness.

Once when Bovell was asked by a taxi driver what he did, he replied that he wrote plays and films about "being lost, emotionally. Each piece of work is like a map, for the characters and hopefully the audience to find some meaning in this business of being human."

"Geez," replied the driver. "Sounds depressing."

International success and a plethora of awards have not encouraged Bovell to think of himself as a celebrity. He is content to be a husband, a father and a farmer, and pursue his talents as a writer.

As his dad said to him after he had seen Bovell's first play, "I think you've got something there."

Article from *The Gazette*

Article from: *The Australian*

The slap is right on target

The setting is Melbourne, but, give or take some local details, we could be in any reasonably well-heeled suburb in the world.

A group of friends have gathered for a backyard barbecue, and with the usual mix of easy bonhomie and suppressed resentments, things are going well enough. Everything changes when one of the guests slaps a misbehaving child - some might say an insufferable spoiled brat - who is not his own.

The Slap isn't solely about the incident that gives the book its name. The resulting legal dispute is resolved surprisingly early. But the slap does push one of the last guaranteed hot buttons in a culture that's increasingly *laissez faire* (complaints of "nanny state" meddling notwithstanding). The close-knit group at that party finds itself divided down the middle over the moral and social implications of that man's split-second decision and, very soon, all kinds of other cracks start showing.

By examining that fallout from the perspectives of eight people affected, Tsiolkas - long celebrated in Australia, and now the first international literary face of that country's large Greek community - ends up providing a rich, provocative, up-to-date and, in the end, surprisingly touching cross-section view of a whole society.

The multiple-perspective strategy gives Tsiolkas ample scope to

explore any theme of his choosing, and he chooses many: loyalty, friendship, marriage, class, gender politics, generation gaps, aboriginal assimilation, immigrant identity and, of course, corporal punishment. It's an ambitious agenda, but nothing ever feels shoehorned in, and that's down to the even-handed skill with which Tsiolkas draws his characters.

He's perhaps at his most impressive when channeling voices farthest from his own (and, probably, from those of most of his readers): a teenage girl having an affair with her boss, an elderly Greek immigrant looking to reconcile with old friends before he dies. But there are no weak links among a cast varied enough that almost any reader is

sure to find a counterpart.

No clear lines of morality are drawn, and that's *The Slap's* greatest strength. Depending on your own sensibilities, you might think Tsiolkas is being unduly harsh on the parents of the slapped child: the mother continues to breast-feed the boy almost until school age, the father is an alcoholic bully with artistic delusions. Even here, though, we're given more than enough background and personality nuance to make this couple's often dubious actions understandable and, thus, on some level, sympathetic.

No one is infallible; even the closest thing to a paragon, an Indo-Australian veterinarian ("Aisha knew exactly what to do, she always did," says her worshipful but nonetheless philandering husband), isn't immune to the lure of a casual affair.

On the surface, *The Slap* might feel at times like a novelization of an Australian soap. The sex scenes are more numerous and linger longer than perhaps strictly necessary, for example. But if so, it's a superior soap, more *The Sopranos* without the body count than *Neighbors*.

Tsiolkas's populism is that of a writer who's deadly serious in his intent, but wants his work to be accessible to the widest audience possible. *The Slap* looks likely to hit its target.

