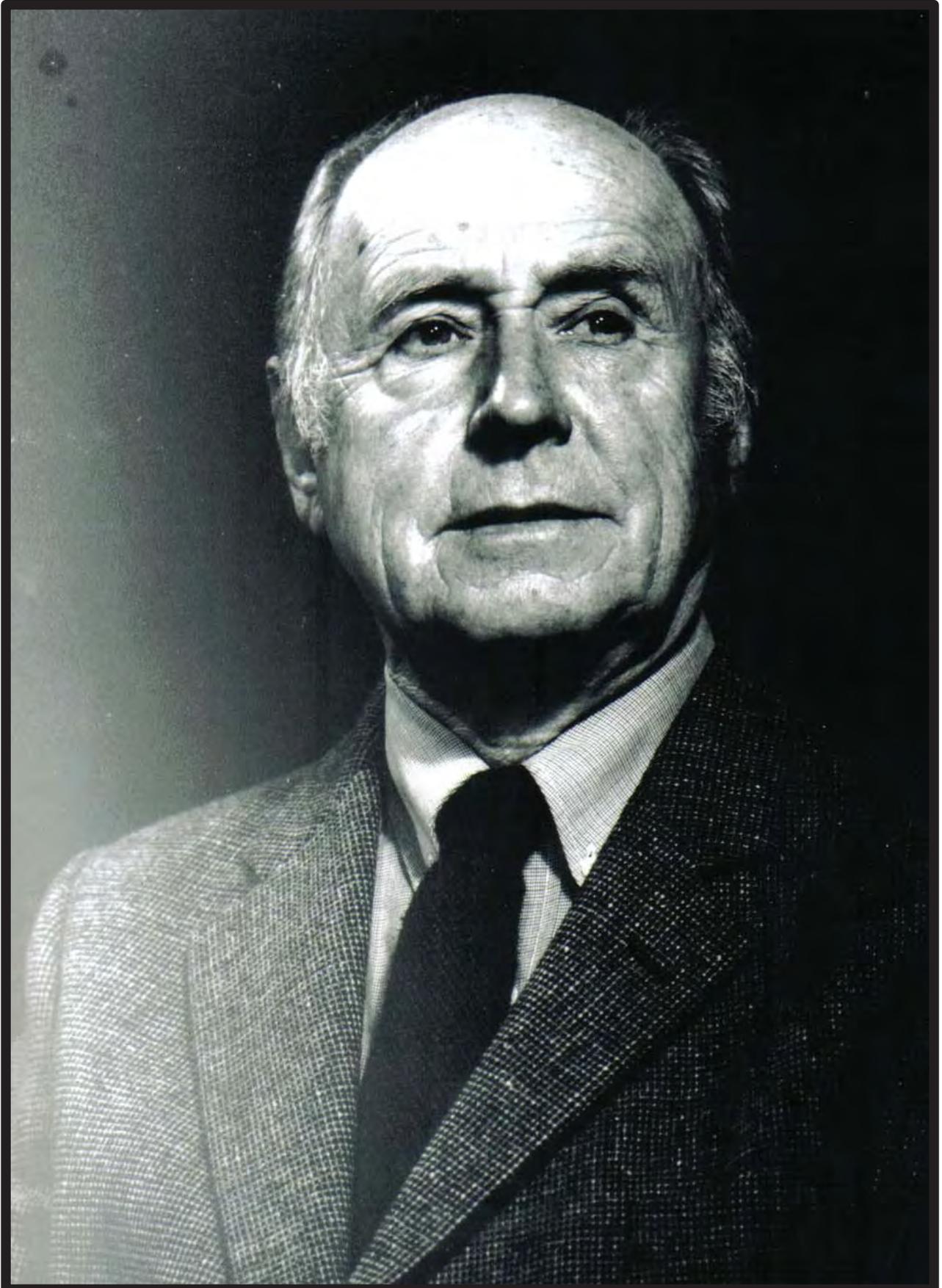


What I Wrote  
Ray Lawler



# Introduction

This study guide to accompany *What I Wrote: Ray Lawler* has been written for teachers of senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

*What I Wrote: Ray Lawler* is a DVD on the Australian playwright Ray Lawler. Dr Tess Brady interviews Lawler and provides a critical introduction to *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1953/4) and *The Doll Trilogy* [*Kid Stakes* (1974/5), *Other Times* (1976), *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*]. The DVD also includes an exploration into aspects of the history of Australian theatre. This includes the way an actor learnt their craft and the way in which *The Doll* changed the landscape of Australian theatre.

*What I Wrote: Ray Lawler* is one DVD from series 3 that spotlights Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the writers have to say about their work. Other titles available in the *What I Wrote* series include:

## Series 1:

What I Wrote: Matt Cameron  
What I Wrote: Louis Nowra  
What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson  
What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson

## Series 2:

What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith  
What I Wrote: David Williamson  
What I Wrote: Debra Oswald  
What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell

## Series 3:

What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd

Further information about the series and film trailers can be found at: [www.whatiwrote.com.au](http://www.whatiwrote.com.au) or [www.snodger.com.au/shop](http://www.snodger.com.au/shop)

The play scripts are available from Currency Press: [www.currency.com.au](http://www.currency.com.au)

## About the Filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady *Presenter*

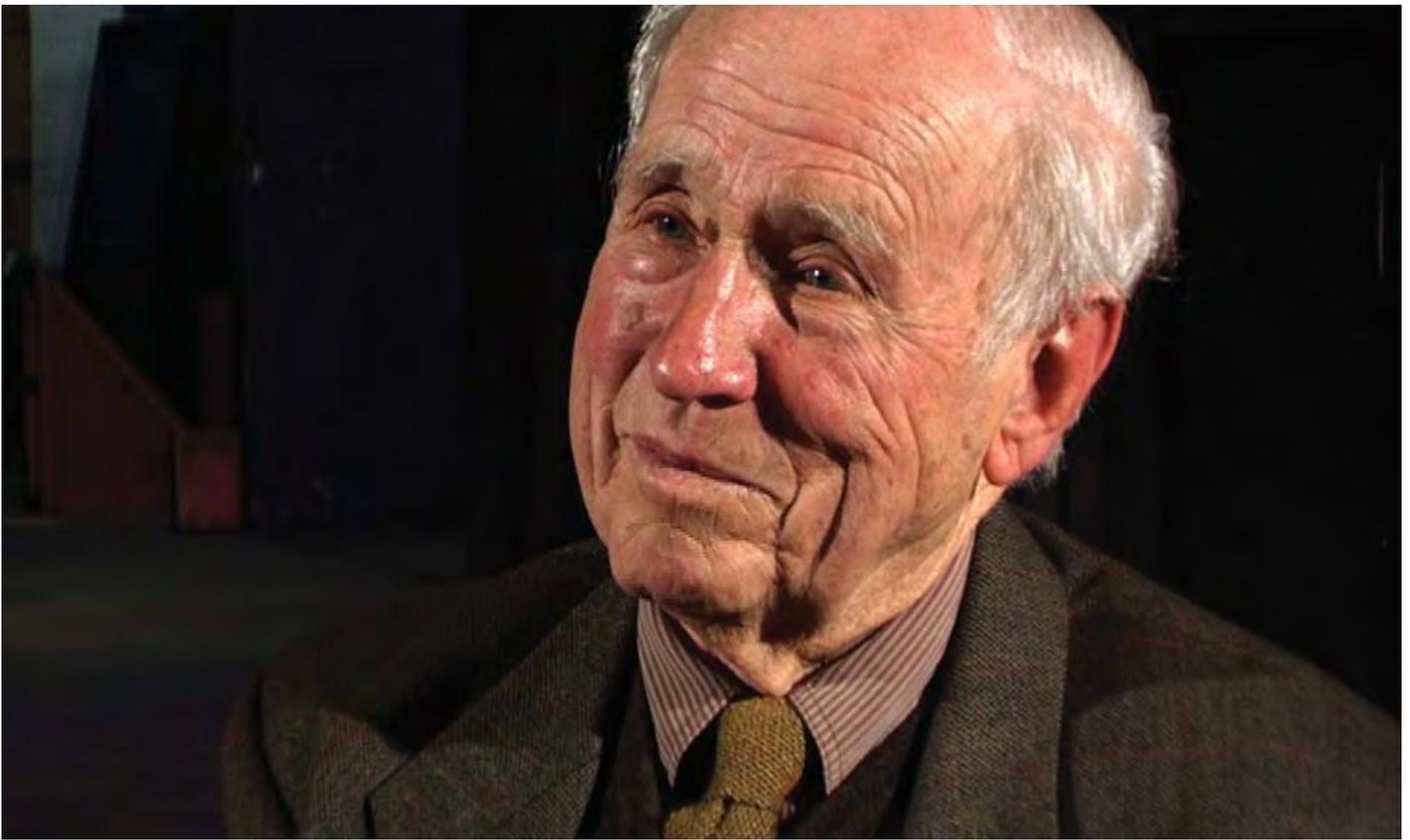
Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady *Director*

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary maker. Her documentaries are about a variety of subjects and for a variety of media. Recently Catherine has divided her

focus between documentaries that focus on the arts, especially Australian writers and visual artists, and works which look at the relationship of philosophical movements to the global realpolitik. You can find out more about her by visiting [www.snodger.com.au/catherine/](http://www.snodger.com.au/catherine/)





## About Ray Lawler

Ray Lawler was born in the working class suburb of Footscray, Melbourne in 1921. His major play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, revolutionised the Australian stage. For the first time Australian audiences saw Australian actors taking the leads in a play and saw the lives and language of their times acted out in front of them.

Lawler worked in theatre as an actor, director, artistic director and playwright. In the original cast of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* he played the part of Barney. He is a quiet-spoken man who found the trappings

of success unpleasant. He turned his back on the film version of the play and has never seen it.

Lawler has been honoured by the Victorian Government and the Melbourne Theatre Company who named their experimental studio after him.

More about Ray Lawler can be found at Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray\\_Lawler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Lawler)





*Doll* and first performed it at the Melbourne University Union Theatre. That theatre still exists and it is in that space that Lawler was interviewed.

The play was a hit and toured Australia to much critical acclaim. It went on to London where again it was a great success. Throughout this time Lawler played the part of Barney, the sidekick to Roo.

When the play was taken to New York it flopped, principally because the Americans did not understand the Australian accents and language. Perhaps surprisingly Hollywood then purchased the rights to make the play into a film. They left it in its Australian setting but used American actors and changed the language deleting all the Australian slang. Ray Lawler has refused to see the film.

Lawler lived and worked overseas for a time and wrote several more plays but he is best remembered for the prequels *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times* which form part of *The Doll Trilogy*.

## Discussion

- As you view *What I Wrote: Ray Lawler*, compile a list of statements that outline Lawler's career path toward professional theatre. How does it differ today?
- On the DVD Lawler says, "The playwright is the only person in theatre who really works alone .... he or she conjures up from nothing a play." Consider the roles played by the actors, designers, director and dramaturge. For Lawler their creative input occurs *after* the playwright has written the play. There other ways of working as a playwright. Take sides and debate this in class.
- Using the internet and other sources find out about the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Draw a diagram to show just how many cultural bodies owe their existence to this Trust. Then in small groups discuss: "In what way was the rise of an Australian theatre part of a broader cultural change occurring in Australia?" Share your findings with the class.
- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the historical contexts that shape Lawler's work as a playwright. Discuss your findings with others in the class.

## The Writer's Context

In the same year Edith Cowan became the first woman elected to the Australian parliament, the Royal Australian Air Force was formed, and the cartoon character Ginger Meggs was created, Ray Lawler was born.

The Great Depression hit Australia hard and families, like Lawler's, whose father was a council worker, would have felt it badly. Lawler, one of eight children, left school at thirteen to work in a foundry to help support his family.

Lawler developed a fascination with theatre which saw him taking lessons and performing bit-parts to learn his craft. With little money to pay for his lessons, opting to spend his few pennies on lessons rather than something else must have been a hard decision.

By 1952 he had written the play *Cradle of Thunder* which won an award, and people in the theatre world began to take notice of him. At the end of the following year his big break occurred. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Company took up *Summer of the Seventeenth*

# Views and Values

- Drawing on *What I Wrote: Ray Lawler* and other sources what did society expect of Nancy, Pearl and Olive? In your opinion, why were these three women breaking the rules?
- Lawler talks of the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* as being a piece of steamy realism in its day. Now he admits it's a piece of nostalgia. Using a class discussion, draw up a list of contemporary society's rules these character might break today. For example where might Olive take a job?
- Lawler says he was questioning society's values, some of which were worth hanging on onto but others needed more charity. Use a PowerPoint presentation to list four of the current social values you think are worth hanging onto and four that "might need a little more charity". Give reasons for your choices.
- The words we use can carry many undertones of meaning, adding emotions and values. These additional meanings can come from their sounds (an onomatopoeic approach), their look, (a gestalt approach); or from extra meaning infused by our culture (a Jungian approach). Lawler explains why he changed the "slack" to the "lay-off". He explained that the combination of the sound and the extra meaning of limpness did not suit a passionate play. Look up the word "rank" and make a list of its synonyms. Discuss their various uses.

# Critical Perspectives

- Search through the newspapers for the theatre review pages. Make a copy of three or more reviews. List the kinds of things the reviewer commented upon - plot, acting, direction, etc. Are there differences between the reviews? Is one more informative than another? Is a review of a new play different from a review of a well-known play? What would you like to see in the review but which is missing? Discuss in class.
- Go to a live performance of a play. Now write, in point form, the kind of review you think would be helpful to other students. Discuss what you would include and leave out if you were only allowed 3 points.
- Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical and historical reception to Lawler's *The Doll Trilogy*. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?
- Lawler wrote the prequels some time after he wrote the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. In your opinion do the prequels add or distract from the original play?
- In *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* the missing character of Nancy adds dramatic impact and depth. Discuss.



# Analytical Responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- “Dirty stinking lousy pride” infects most characters in *The Doll Trilogy*. Discuss.
- Roo has no other option but to smash the seventeenth doll? Discuss.
- In the contemporary world *The Doll Trilogy* is about the need to accept the responsibility of adulthood. Discuss.
- *The Doll Trilogy* makes use of the Australian vernacular. Many were critical of this and felt it cheapened the theatre or made a caricature of Australians. In the USA the play was dropped because no one could understand it. The film took it all out. Was Lawler, at the time, right in refusing to drop the slang? Form teams and debate this.



## The Writing Process

- “What would be the modern equivalent to a cane cutter. Choose a job and research it. Make a detailed outline of the job and the working conditions. Include what might be seen as success in this occupation, what might be seen as failure or as a hurdle to overcome. Share this using powerpoint.
- Lawler reveals how the characters came first and the plot afterwards. Take your character profile and in groups of four combine these characters. Improvise a moment when the characters come together. Where are they? Add change to the mix - (something has happened, something is ending, something is beginning). Discuss the ease or difficulty in writing a play emerging from character.
- Were you surprised to learn that Lawler is still re-

vising his plays and that new editions of his plays are changed slightly? When in your opinion is a play complete. Discuss this in class.

- Watch the section of the DVD “Tips for Writers”. Lawler says that theatre at its best uses extended scenes and is about words, arguments and ideas in a spoken form. Do you agree? What forms of theatre best fits his definition and what does not. Discuss this in class. Which mode of theatre most interests you?
- The characters Lawler has created are so real they live with him. Do writers have to live in a “crowded house”? Discuss.



## From Script to Stage

- Create and present a short performance from a minor character’s perspective. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.
- Lawler wrote the play and also performed the role of Barney. He says “it was difficult but not impossible.” Make a list of the difficulties in acting in a play you have written. What are the advantages?
- Lawler worked in theatre as an actor, director and playwright. For him the role of the actor, director and designer is to interpret the playwright’s intent. He says that while the other theatre workers are often creative in their interpretation, the writer is the only one that creates something from nothing. Do you agree with him? Discuss.
- Explore the relationship between the audience, the actors and the play. Is it a static or fluid relationship? On what does it depend?



After a successful tour of Australia, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was taken to England, where the great actor Sir Laurence Olivier backed it.



## Discussion

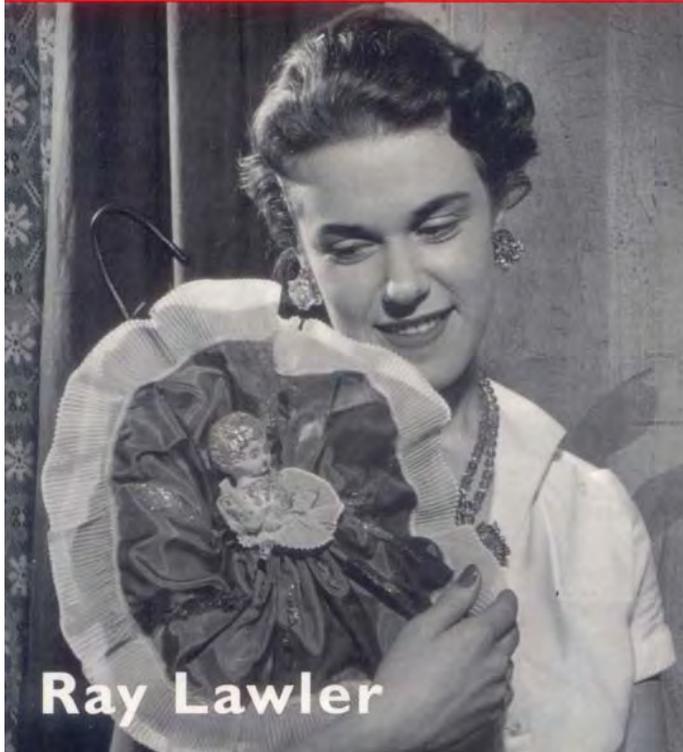
- Watch the DVD interview *Finding a Way*. Were you surprised to learn that there were no drama schools or courses, no funding for local theatre? Working in small groups and using various resources available to you, draw up a career path for a modern playwright or theatre worker. Where might they study, how do they get into the course, what might they do after studying? Compare that, step by step to Lawler's career path. What was better and worse, then and now?
- Lawler talks about the play being “steamy realism” and that theatre was moving in the direction of realism. Research realism in theatre. Is realism the dominant form in Australian theatre today? Discuss.
- For a play to be performed in England at the time, it needed approval from Lord Chamberlain's office. This is government censorship. Do you think that censorship is a good or bad thing in theatre. Might it be a sliding scale? If so where would you draw the line? Discuss in class.

## Finding a Way

At times many of us consider that we can't change the world or create something new, the odds are against us. But Ray Lawler left school at thirteen, had to pay for acting classes, wrote plays that were never performed and dreamt of an Australian theatre with Australian stories, Australian accents and Australian stars. We can learn from this quietly spoken man the importance of having a vision and working towards it.



# Summer of the Seventeenth Doll



## Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

This is Lawler's most significant play and has become an icon in Australian theatre.

Roo and Barney a couple of cane cutters go to Melbourne during the 'lay-off'. There they meet Olive and Nancy and they become a foursome staying at Emma's boarding house. Emma is Olive's mother.



During the first summer Roo wins a doll at a sideshow and gives it to Olive. Then every year when he returns to Melbourne from the cane field he gives Olive another side-show doll. This is the seventeenth year.

The play is set at the moment of change. Nancy has left and chosen marriage and a reliable partner, so Olive invites her friend Pearl to take Nancy's place and partner with Barney. This upsets the balance of the foursome. But there is a bigger change. Roo is aging and he can no longer out-fight and out-work the younger men. He was challenged by the younger Johnny Dowd and lost. He left the sugarcane fields a broken man and now has to take a labouring job to support himself.

Barney also faces change in terms of disillusionment. Not only has Nancy walked away from him but Roo who he always looked up to as the top man has fallen by the way. Barney and Olive are trying desperately to hold onto the past, the way things were. But just as the dolls are disintegrating into dust so too are their dreams.

### Discussion

- Watch the interview on *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Do you agree that the biggest change in the play is centred around Roo? Divide the class into five groups, each take the perspective of Olive, Pearl, Emma, Roo or Barney. Argue why the change your character faces is greater than any of the others.
- In class, perform a rehearsed reading of a scene from the play. Explain why you selected that scene and how it relates to the play as a whole.
- Take one character from the play and make a character profile which would be useful to an actor playing that part. Include ideas for costumes.

### Summer of the Seventeenth Doll cont...

- Lawler talks about the garden encroaching onto the characters and the house. Design a set for the three acts which makes use of this. Remember your set does not have to be naturalistic. Discuss what is being conveyed by such a set.
- Lawler reveals that he has never seen the film of his play. How is the film different to the play? Why do you think Lawler felt so deeply about these changes that he turned his back on the film? Discuss in class.
- Using the web and the library as resources give a PowerPoint presentation on Australian life in the 1950s. If you were staging the play now, how would you evoke these images? Discuss.
- Take one of the characters and write a short monologue as that character, five years after the seventeenth year. What has happened to that character?
- Some playwrights will change anything to make the play accessible to an audience yet Lawler refused to remove the broad Australian slang to make the play accessible to the American audience. Why did he do this? Do you agree? Discuss in class.

- Look at the following extract from the play, Act 1, Scene i.

**Barney:** They was workin' side by side, and when Dowdie finishes the strip looks back to see how far behind Roo was. Well, right at that moment Roo's knees went. Never seen anythin' like it, they just buckled under him and there he was, down on the ground. This strikes Dowd as bein' funny, see, and he starts to laugh. Well, that did it. Roo went him and it was on, cane knives and the lot. Took six of us to separate 'em; could've been murder, I reckon. 'Course the boys all blamed Roo for it, so he did his block again, packed up his gear and walked off. [*There is an uncomfortable pause*] I didn't see him after that till I picked him up in Brisbane a week ago.

**Olive:** You didn't go with him?

**Barney:** No.

**Olive:** Why not?

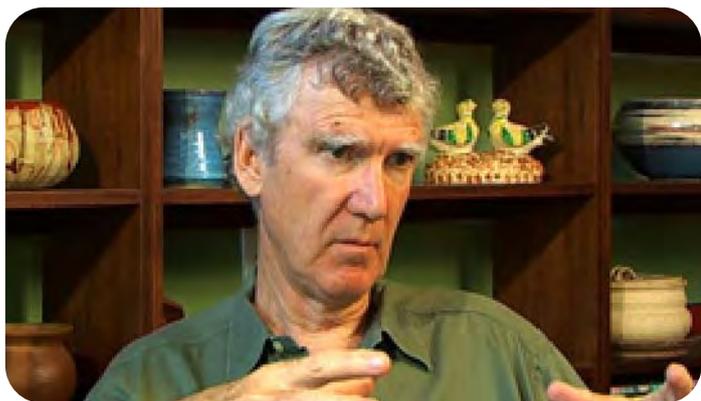
**Barney** [*disturbed*]. I dunno. It was all messed up. You know what Roo's always been to me, a sort of little tin god. I've never seen him in the wrong before.

What does it tell us about Barney and Roo's relationship, about mateship and about Barney himself?

Write a monologue from Barney's point of view set on the evening of the fight and Roo's leaving. Perform a number of these for the class and discuss the differences.



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Teachers notes on each writer available on the website