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Plautus in Twenty-First-Century Australia: *Does the Roman Playwright Still Influence People's Identity?*

GESINE MANUWALD

The Australian dramatist David Williamson (b. 1942) is regarded today as one of Australia's most successful and influential living playwrights and screenwriters.¹ Over the course of his long and varied career, this reputation has been based not in the least on the fact that he became known for dramatizing contemporary subjects and discussing topics that are central to Australian society,² the most obvious example being his play about an Australian election in 1969, written immediately afterwards (*Don's Party*; performed 1971, published 1973). This choice of topics agrees with his general aim to create an independent and creative Australian theatre.³ Accordingly Williamson stated in an interview in 1988:

⊕

I have never seen myself as writing for a world market. From the very earliest days I was writing Australian plays for Australian people. Australian playwrights before me, who were consciously writing for a world market, would not put any local references in, would not put any place names in. They would either locate their plays in hypothetical lands that didn't have place names or in other countries. We've had a tradition of that sort of writing, but I've always seen myself as an observer of the life around me and reflecting that life. If the writing is good enough and does travel to other cultures I am delighted, but the writing is not predicated with that ambition. Someone said, of all the art forms, drama is the most parochial. It really is rooted in its particular tribe. The very best of that tribal writing transcends the boundaries of that tribe." (Quoted from Willbanks 1988, 105)⁴

The box office profits of David Williamson's plays in Australia confirm that he managed to appeal to local audiences and to their interests and concerns, although his dramas and screenplays were later taken to the United States and also to the United Kingdom with some success. Against this background it is all the more astonishing that in 2004 he



produced his first proper drama on a non-contemporary topic, going even back to classical antiquity.⁵ This play, which was shown in Sydney and later in Melbourne,⁶ was entitled *Flatfoot: A Roman Comedy of Bad Manners* at the first performance and *Flatfoot, incorporating the comedy The Swaggering Soldier by Titus Maccius Plautus* in the printed version of the same year.⁷

Williamson had been attracted to Plautus, since, to his own surprise, he found himself laughing at 2200-year-old plays⁸ and realized that Plautus, particularly in his *Miles gloriosus*, had superbly used the basics of all successful comedy.⁹ And according to his statement just quoted, Williamson must have regarded Plautus as a great playwright, even though he refers to Aristophanes more often in his interviews and discussions and seems to think that Greece was ahead of Rome in terms of cultural achievements.¹⁰

Nevertheless, in view of David Williamson's preceding career, a drama going back to a Roman model raises some questions: Did he believe or why did he believe that such a play might attract modern audiences? Did he expect or how did he expect such a plot to touch on topics relevant in the contemporary world? And can national and social identities of twenty-first-century audiences be affected by a play based on Plautus? These questions shall be examined and possible answers put forward in what follows, after a brief overview of the drama's structure, including suggestions on the meaning of individual scenes.

The play opens with an introductory speech by the character Plautus (pp. 1–2), who has reappeared for some unknown reason after having been dead for a very long time, during which period he observed life on earth. This Plautus introduces himself to the audience and informs them of his reactions upon seeing how his memory and his legacy have been handled by later writers. He is absolutely disappointed and disgusted, since “Two thousand two hundred years ago I was a celebrity. . . . Now my memory's kept alive by a handful of beady-eyed, humourless scholars, and they mostly get it wrong in any case” (p. 1). He then goes on to show that the tricks in his plays might seem familiar, but that all comic effects and plots were in fact invented by him in his very free translations of Greek plays; they were later adopted by authors such as William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Molière, or Racine. He concludes: “And every sitcom on television is full of my characters, set-ups and gags. And I'm back to prove it. Two thousand two hundred years of fade-to-black is enough” (p. 2).

This introductory speech gives the basic tenets of the play in a nut-

shell: Williamson obviously does not expect the audience to have any knowledge of Plautus or his dramatic works; therefore he has Titus Maccius Plautus explain the three parts of his name, translating “*plautus*” by “flatfoot” (p. 1),¹¹ give a brief summary of his life and career (of course adjusted to the requirements of the subsequent play), and include further information about theatre in Republican Rome along the way (partly taken from ancient sources other than Plautus’s comedies). At the same time Plautus is presented as the inventor of all comic action, which even influences today’s soap operas. The sameness and effectiveness of comic effects over centuries is certainly one element in Williamson’s view that might make Plautus attractive even to audiences separated by 2200 years in time and thousands of miles in space.

In contrast, however, to lifters before him, whom his Plautus accuses, Williamson acknowledges his borrowings; he even insisted that he was wrongly credited with the play and wanted it to be marketed also as Plautus’s play at its first performance.¹² But the programmes had been printed before this intention became clear to the company; so they inserted an additional slip into the programmes, saying “The play ‘The Swaggering Soldier’ featured in tonight’s performance of *Flatfoot* was written by Titus Maccius Plautus.”

It is interesting that Williamson puts so much emphasis on his debt to Plautus; he also seems to have hoped to trigger new appreciation of Plautus by this play.¹³ To acknowledge one’s sources is an element of honesty, and it imitates the method of Plautus who often mentioned his Greek models in his prologues (e.g., in *Miles gloriosus*). Besides, such references to a long preceding tradition justify the chosen plot and indicate the perennial interest of the topics dealt with.

After the introductory speech by the play’s Plautus, Crassus Dives, a senator and aspiring politician, arrives; he wishes to stage a play by Plautus at the games he is organizing in nine weeks’ time, but the problem is that Plautus has not yet written anything. Therefore Plautus makes up a play over the course of his conversations with Crassus shown in *Flatfoot*: whenever Crassus reappears on stage and enquires after the commissioned play, Plautus presents him with another scene, made up on the spot and enacted by him (partly with the help of his wife Cleostrata) to convince Crassus of the new play’s dramatic effectiveness.

Crassus, however, is not pleased with all elements of the envisaged play, and Plautus has to defend it against Crassus’s moral and strictly logical criticism or even change aspects of the plot or the dialogue, while trying not to compromise his own views of drama and of successful comedy

too much. The discussions between the two men show how Plautus must comply with what is in effect censorship and simultaneously satisfy his customer's demand for success with the audience, which proves almost irreconcilable on occasion in his opinion. The whole process amounts to a paradigmatic demonstration of how authorities put pressure on writers because of their low social status while they are dependent on these playwrights to some extent.

The play in the play that the character Plautus makes up is basically *Miles gloriosus* of the historical playwright, probably written around 200 B.C.E. or slightly earlier and featuring a braggart soldier, proud of his military achievements and his appeal for women, who is eventually cheated of everything by a clever slave and his associates.¹⁴ In *Flatfoot* the basic plot and the sequence of scenes are preserved, just stripped of some chit-chat among slaves, lengthy discussions on general moral issues, and repetitions of detailed instructions to the players; what remains, however, are the central role of the scheming slave, reflections on his position, the pressure put on him by his superiors, and his instructions to other actors, as this comedy includes numerous references on its improvisational quality.

Williamson's play thus combines a remake of the Latin play and a lively demonstration of what is known about the organization of dramatic performances in Republican Rome. His *Flatfoot* virtually tells a fictitious story behind the finished play as we have it, since the character Plautus is continually shown to be thinking very hard and very fast to accommodate Crassus, and the result arrived at, allegedly by improvisation, spontaneous ideas, and reactions to Crassus's objections, is the equivalent of the *Miles gloriosus* by the historical playwright. This play's specific features are thus explained by the constraints of the process of composition and the traditional scenic conventions.¹⁵

By this ingenious combination, instead of recreating or adapting a Roman comedy as Shakespeare or Corneille did, Williamson gives himself the opportunity of going behind the scenes: he can thus explain what lies behind the comic plot and what restrictions the playwright was subject to in producing the play or, in other words, include metadramatic elements, just as Plautus did. Some aspects that are part of the play in the play and are commented on in its construction also happen in the actual play, which proves their universality and effectiveness—for instance, when the character Plautus and his wife, like clever comedy slaves, trick Crassus into accepting elements of the play as they want them to be. Hence *Flatfoot* is extremely entertaining because of the origi-

nal humor emphasized by these double effects and the added level of comment. Finally the performative feat is remarkable since Plautus (or the character playing Plautus), as he has not yet a cast, acts all the roles of his proposed play himself (the female ones being done by his wife) and thus impersonates several characters at once.

The first recipients gave *Flatfoot* a mixed response: the play was well received by audiences at its first run in Sydney, which had been preceded by a successful rehearsed reading in Noosa.¹⁶ Some of the critics, however, although they admired the achievement of the single actor Drew Forsythe,¹⁷ found “the humour a bit dated” (Webb 2004) or the plot “all too familiar to have a cutting edge” (Thomson 2004). Yet such reactions rather prove one of the points Williamson wanted to make: the themes of comedy are perennial and ultimately go back to Plautus,¹⁸ and the kind of types and social interactions shown in *Miles gloriosus* still exist today.¹⁹

More generally, some critics have claimed that Williamson’s comedy of manners, like all good manners comedy, reaches beyond its particular time and place.²⁰ As *Flatfoot* was subtitled *A Roman Comedy of Bad Manners* at its first performance, it was explicitly stated that the play went back to a Roman model that included aspects of social criticism like a comedy of manners; at the same time the specification of “bad manners” satirized the genre title and indicated the partly frivolous subject matter, but referred all blame to the Roman source.²¹ Other critics, however, denied all further relevance to *Flatfoot*: “The original was entertainment for the masses, something Williamson knows a lot about, so, looking for the deep and meaningful would be pointless. What we get is a complicated but stock plot and stereotypical characters who, 2200 years later, still inhabit both the real world and the artificial one of the stage” (Thomson 2004).

It must be checked, therefore, whether the play’s effect just consists in its being funny or whether there are also serious elements beneath the entertaining surface. For instance, Crassus, the responsible politician in *Flatfoot*, forbids all obvious allusion to and ridicule of Roman institutions and requests that Cato, who functions as the representative of austere Roman morality, not be provoked and Roman society endangered (p. 4). In response to these requirements, the character Plautus manages to convince Crassus of the nonexistence of this danger by emphasizing that the characters on stage are Greek and therefore unable to represent Rome directly (pp. 4, 7, 10, etc.). When Plautus promises to ridicule one of Crassus’s opponents in this disguise (or someone that he turns into his

opponent), Crassus readily agrees to the technique of satirizing specific Romans in Greek disguise (pp. 8–9).

These conditions can easily apply to the contemporary world as well, since an engaged modern playwright may be confronted by the same problems as the play's Plautus: he wishes to write a good and successful play, by which he can tell audiences something meaningful, but it is wise to refrain from offending the authorities and making explicit political statements. Hence this re-creation of a Roman play may be interpreted as an attempt at a modern form of veiled speaking, even though this aspect of poetic technique is perhaps not the one that concerns audiences most.

Such aspects are more likely to consist in two related points concerning the structure of society, thus touching on social and national concerns, which are voiced on the metadramatic level that has been added to the ancient comedy. The first is the idea supported by the Roman authorities in *Flatfoot* that slaves are happy serving their masters and therefore should not be cleverer than their masters or leave their social position (e.g., pp. 9–10, 26–7). This, however, is an illusion, as the play's Plautus indicates, and it is untrue that social status and intellectual abilities coincide. This Plautus manages to have the prominent slave in his play end up freed, just as his historical namesake does with his slaves in a number of his plays, making use of the freedom granted to the *fabula palliata* (comedy in Greek setting) in Rome.²² Although there are no longer slaves in contemporary society, the fact that authorities might aim at keeping the lower social classes content and do not wish anyone to transgress boundaries is still an issue.

The second problem is the Roman national ideology along with its representatives. Politicians in *Flatfoot* hold up the idea that Rome brings peace and civilization to other peoples (p. 14); hence Crassus forbids all hints "that Rome and all it stands for is being ridiculed" (p. 4). By contrast, the play's Plautus believes that the Romans pay off the elites of their conquered satellites and use them to help bleed off the wealth of their people, which they then employ to improve their military machine (p. 27). This tension is shown by the figure of the swaggering soldier in both 'Plautine' plays, by his possible analogue (Lucilius) in the world of the character Plautus, and by Crassus's reluctance to have such ridiculous figures on stage when they might be connected with Roman officials (pp. 7–8, 13–4).

The ambiguous nature of Rome's status and ideology comes to the fore even more prominently when it acquires a personal aspect in the

form of the question of Plautus's citizenship:²³ in the play's present the character Plautus is a slave and not a Roman citizen, but Crassus continues to promise him citizenship in the future if Plautus and his plays abide by basic Roman beliefs. On the one hand, Plautus and particularly his wife wish to gain this status, which would make them fully accepted into Roman society; on the other, Plautus the writer does not want to compromise his plays for that purpose and is not completely comfortable with the ideology of Roman society (p. 27).

That the problems alluded to thereby are to be presented as general and perennial ones is made explicit by the play's Plautus, who talks to the audience as a character of 200 B.C.E., yet with full knowledge of what happened in the 2200 years since, and whose comedy in Williamson's version is shown to address the same issues. Thus, the play's Plautus, reflecting on the prospect of citizenship and the Roman attitude towards conquered nations, says: "You might spot some modern parallels, but the Romans perfected the technique" (p. 27); and he ends the play with the statement:

The best comedy, inoffensive as it might appear, is always, always, a weapon of attack. But anyone who thinks theatre can totally change society take note. The Roman Empire lasted another six hundred years, and the Roman Soldier went on to slaughter millions more. But on that day when the play was performed it made so many people feel better about their lives. At least for a while. I hope it still did that for you. (p. 49)²⁴

It has been suggested on the basis of David Williamson's own words about the play that one of the modern parallels to the Roman world he was thinking of was the U.S. government, since he compared them: "Both use basically the same technique of seducing the elites of the countries to become quasi-Romans or quasi-Americans, and then using those elites to funnel the profits back home."²⁵ In view of the fact that the first version of the play must have been written in 2002–2003, when comparisons between the Roman Empire and the American Empire were being discussed in the media, that makes good sense. This certainly is a topical problem and ensures the relevance of Plautus's comedy on a ridiculous soldier in the early twenty-first century.²⁶

How, however, does such a play relate to Williamson's earlier work, and how might he have thought these issues to affect contemporary audiences' social and national identities? Apart from the fact that Williamson saw

great comic potential in Plautus's comedy, it seems that in this play, by going back to Plautus, paradoxical as it may appear, he took the step to make his plays relevant not just to local audiences, but rather to address audiences' concerns in a global world, for the Plautine play and particularly the discussions about the ancient comedy demonstrate Roman imperialism along with its problematic aspects and thus allude to modern analogies. The historical dimension shows that basic structures and power relations remain the same over centuries: it is still relevant to people's identity how powerful nations or nations aspiring to become dominant deal with other peoples and what place there is for lower social classes in a worldwide power structure.

By stressing these aspects, Williamson has moved from dealing with power manipulations between individuals in his first plays via power manipulations in institutions to power manipulations in the world, and has focused on interactions in the larger world in relation to the situation of individuals.²⁷ His subsequent plays *Amigos* (2004) and *Influence* (2005) continue to include similar aspects and characters such as a radio DJ, who has the ability to influence public opinion on everything, or the politics of the Olympics, which go beyond interpersonal relationships and affect society at large.

In a way, this is where the history of comedy comes full circle and ends where Plautus started: writing around 200 B.C.E., Plautus was confronted by a rapidly changing and increasing world, in that the expansion of the Roman Empire raised the questions of how to deal with subjects and other nations, what the role of the military was, and how to shape one's own society in the face of these challenges. These issues are not too prominent in *Miles gloriosus*, but they are brought to the fore in Williamson's additional metadramatic layer.

As the mixed responses to the first performances of Williamson's *Flat-foot* show, however, such a story does not have the same immediate effect as plays about Australian society; but it is still relevant to people's identity on a more general level and thereby shows the perennial relevance of Plautus's themes or the basic sameness of society over time. At any rate, modern audiences watching this play are asked to make a greater effort: they might not know more about Plautus than what is told in the course of the play, while this information is entirely new for them. Hence they will be unable to distinguish precisely between what has been taken from Plautus's play, what has come from other ancient sources, and what has been added by the modern playwright. But the classical names taken over from Plautus and a story that is foreign to present-day experiences

would make modern audiences realize that the main plot has been adapted from Plautus, which is sufficient for an understanding of the basic plot and the message of the play. Yet, people must not let themselves be put off by this distance between Plautus's world and modern times, but should rather engage with the material, and that is where Williamson directs his audiences by his metadramatic comments.²⁸ Then, on the basis of their own experiences, they would notice that situations and societies change, but that the problems in a global world remain the same.²⁹

Against the background of this analysis, the mixed reactions to the first performances of *Flatfoot* become comprehensible. But by adding a level of comment and metadrama, which allows him to hint at parallels and possibilities of transfer, Williamson demonstrates the perennial relevance of some social, national, and political problems. As they are general and affect society in the world at large, they do not touch the identity of an Australian audience as directly as a play set, for instance, in an Australian club or university department. But because Australians, too, live in a global world these days and the problems discussed affect all societies in this environment, such a play can still be relevant to Australian identity and contribute to shaping it by its own means—in addition to being good entertainment.

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Notes

1. For general information on David Williamson, see Carroll 1985, 175–89 (notes on pp. 192–3) and 1992; Ross 1985; Fitzpatrick 1987; Zuber-Skerritt 1988; Kiernan 1996 and 2004; on the evolution of his dramatic work, McCallum 1984 and Wertheim 1989.

2. Cf., e.g., McCallum 1984, 342.

3. Cf. Kiernan 2004, 327: "The Tin Alley Players, the graduate theater company of the university, became the first to produce a Williamson play, *The Indecent Exposure of Anthony East*, in August 1968. . . . In the note he provided for the program, Williamson, who later described his role as 'storyteller to the tribe,' asserted, 'We need an Australian theatre because we are not Americans, Britons, or Swedes.'" Cf. also Ross 1985, 2086: "Theater in Australia, Williamson noted, has always flourished, but only as a sort of import business which considered as its sole purpose the presentation of what was good from Europe and would therefore educate and uplift 'the barbarous beer-swilling populace' of Australia by showing them Europe's 'more refined and sensitive values.' Until the early 1970's, Williamson pointed out, plays by Australians about Australians held low priority, relegated as they were to coffeehouse theaters and small audiences. Such had been the fate of his first works. By 1974, however, attitudes had changed so wholly that he could write: 'As far as drama is concerned, the battle has been won.'"

4. Cf. also Fitzpatrick 1987, 10: "David Williamson once defined his role as that of 'storyteller to his tribe.' The very fact that a writer could so describe himself presupposes a sense of the mutual acceptance of playwright and audience which Williamson went on to elaborate [interview of 1979]: 'Storyteller to the tribe doesn't necessarily mean that you keep telling bland stories—they can have a moral point or a satirical point, they can be endeavouring to change the tribe's perception in some way. But certainly I feel very closely identified with my Australian public, and I feel that I'm in some form of symbiotic interaction with them. I write about them: they come and tell me I'm wrong in certain aspects, and I go back and write again, and they tell me I'm right in certain aspects. And so I don't see myself as anything more grand than a storyteller with a slight edge of moralistic concern about the way Australians spend their lives.' There is a touch of disingenuousness about this remark, since 'telling stories' in itself takes no account of the power and influence of the tale, or the sophistication in the art of telling it; in the pages that follow I will be claiming a great deal for David

Williamson as a shaper of cultural images and a craftsman. But despite the disingenuousness, and the self-deprecating manner of that final sentence, the function Williamson claims for himself is really rather ‘grand’. Few playwrights anywhere, and no other playwright in Australia, could make the claim. It is a measure of the extraordinary place which Williamson has in Australian theatre that no-one is likely to dispute his right to make it.”

5. Earlier attempts at modernizations of older plays had been less successful; cf. Fitzpatrick 1987, 11: “The second comment could have done with a small qualification, since Williamson’s modernisation of *King Lear* (1975) and *Celluloid Heroes*, which he wrote for the tenth anniversary of the Nimrod Theatre in 1980, both demonstrate that in the volatile world of theatre even the most spectacular career is likely to suffer the odd hiccup; neither play has been published or subsequently performed.”

6. *Flatfoot* was first shown as a rehearsed reading at the Longweekend Festival in Williamson’s hometown, Noosa, in 2003. It was so well received that The Ensemble Theatre (in association with Christine Duncan Productions) put together a full production, directed by Jonathan Biggins and starring Drew Forsythe, Tina Bursill, and John Gregg, in Sydney in summer 2004. The play was then shown at the Merlyn Theatre, CUB Malthouse, in Melbourne in autumn 2004 and given a four-month national tour in the following spring. For reviews of the performances in Sydney and Melbourne, see Jinman 2004; Thomson 2004; Webb 2004; Bruce 2005.

7. *Flatfoot* by David Williamson, incorporating the comedy *The Swaggering Soldier* by Titus Maccius Plautus, Sydney 2004 (Currency Press: Current Theatre Series). All page references to passages in *Flatfoot* are based on this edition.

8. Cf. Webb 2004.

9. Cf. Webb 2004: “‘He’s [Plautus] got a great eye for human folly and weakness, which is the basis of comedy,’ he says. . . . Pyrgopolynices is ‘a wonderful comic creation. I think he’s in the direct line to [Shakespearean braggart] Falstaff, someone who is so full of themselves that they cannot see how the rest of the world is seeing them.’”

10. Cf. e.g. Williamson (1984): “I’m driven mad by the suggestion that the Australia Council funding for the arts should be cut or that film industry subsidies should be cut . . . We give subsidies to superphosphate and God knows what but there still seems to be something in the Australian brain that says it’s immoral to foster artistic activity. And artistic activity is surely what makes a country interesting. With all due respect to the farmers, wheat growing may earn us a heap of foreign exchange but what makes a country dynamic and what leaves a country with a history is the state of its arts. If there was no artistic achievement, a country didn’t exist. Greece, after all, has always got a better press than Rome, which was a far mightier empire. There’s a message in that. If you want a good crit 500 years on, look after the arts” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 121).

11. Cf. the explanation in Festus, p. 274.3–14 Lindsay: <Plotos appellat> *Umbri pedibus planis <natos. . . > <Macci>us poeta, quia Umber Sarsinas erat, a pedum planitie Plotus, postea Plautus coeptus est dici* (The Umbrians call ‘ploti’ [flatfooted] those that are born with flat feet. . . . The poet Maccius, since he was an Umbrian from Sarsinia, started to be called, after the flatness of his feet, initially Plotus and later Plautus).

12. Cf. Webb 2004: “It should have been billed as it is here (in the inside title page): ‘*Flatfoot*, by David Williamson, incorporating the comedy *The Swaggering Soldier*

by Titus Maccius Plautus'. The audience should realise they're not seeing me, they're seeing Plautus. I've asked very strongly that it be marketed as a Plautus play as well. I objected to the advertising in Sydney, but apparently it's too late to reprint the programs."

13. Cf. Webb 2004: "Williamson hopes the play spurs new appreciation of Plautus, who he says has been 'ripped off' over the years by the likes of Shakespeare, Ben Johnson and Molière."

14. Cf. also Williamson's answer (1979) to the question, "Are women one of the ways in which men compete with each other?": "Yes. Very much so. I don't think this is peculiar to Australian society either. I think that it is a well-established phenomenon right through history that men have used women as a basis for competition. You know 'I've got the prettiest girl' type of thing" (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 162).

15. This improvised kind of theatre agrees with Williamson's own views (1978): "A playwright, however, operates on the assumption that the first point of contact between his work and its public will be in a theatre, where it will be interpreted by actors and a director to a audience. A playscript should thus be seen as a blueprint for stage production rather than as a finished literary product, for there are creative and imaginative inputs yet to come before the play comes fully to life on the stage. These inputs come from the director, the actors, the designer, the lighting designer and others associated with the production, who give us, finally, just one of many different interpretations of the script. Some interpretations may be less effective and coherent than others, but it should be remembered as you read a playscript that good plays can be interpreted, with equal validity, in more than one way. There is no one definite and ultimate production of a given play towards which all other productions must aspire. . . . It is not just the actors and director who add a dimension to the playscript. An audience contributes too" (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 44–6).

16. Cf. Webb 2004: "After 10 sold-out performances at the Noosa Arts Theatre, producer Christine Dunstan took *Flatfoot* to Sydney for a four-week run at the Ensemble Theatre. Late last month, *Flatfoot's* Melbourne season was cut from three weeks to nine days, from September 10–18. Dunstan says ticket sales have been poor, for which she blames the forthcoming federal election, the AFL finals and the Olympics. But she says the play will go on a four-month national tour next year, starting in Orange, NSW, on February 21, and visiting regional centres such as Geelong and Ballarat, and then returning to the Melbourne stage." See note 6 above.

17. Cf. Thomson 2004: "This play by David Williamson was written in homage to the Roman comic actor and playwright Plautus, and to the comic actor Drew Forsythe. Most critical opinion so far has celebrated the talents of the contemporary actor, and been much less enthusiastic about the 2200-year-old comedy."

18. Cf. also Williamson (1986): "Well, yes, there is some inevitable dating as in any work, but for instance the fact that the plays of Aristophanes were very particular to their time and place in ancient Greek doesn't lessen the impact of their comedy, because we still have the same type of personal power seeking, personal pretension. All the kinds of human foibles that satirists latch on to are still with us after three and a half thousand years (or however long it was). So that aspect of writing will never date if the play has captured those timeless aspects of the human psyche, and human nature, and I'd hope that some of my plays have some of that observation" (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 177).

19. Cf. Webb 2004: “Williamson saw that Plautus’s characters were types that audiences would recognise in their own lives. ‘We’ve still got braggarts, we’ve still got ingratia-tors, we’ve still got cunning manipulators. They’re all part of the contemporary scene.’”

20. Cf. Wertheim 1989, 99: “Instead, Williamson has attempted to create a twen-tieth-century ‘comedy of manners’ about the serious flaws as well as the less serious foibles of the educated Australian middle and upper middle class. And like most astute creators of manners comedy . . . Williamson creates a comedy that reaches beyond its particular time and place allowing the barbs to sting all viewers, Australian and non-Australian alike. At the same time, Williamson, like those other writers of manners comedies, leaves himself open to the sneers of those who argue that the only theatre is a politically committed theatre, and that manners comedy without political thesis—Shavian or other—is empty and frivolous.”

21. Cf. Williamson’s answer (1979) to the question, “David, are you a writer of comedy of manners?”: “I think so, to some extent, perhaps a satirical observer of human oddity and social situations, yes” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 173).

22. By contrast, according to Donatus (*in Terentium, Eun.* 57), in the *fabula togata* (comedy in Roman setting) slaves were not normally allowed to appear cleverer than their masters.

23. Cf. Williamson (1986): “Between the personal world and the larger political world? Yes, I think that questions of private morality connect with questions of public morality and there’s no way of breaking that nexus. I think you can’t regard the private as one domain that can be investigated by literature quite distinct from the public domain that so much shapes our lives. I try and make a connection between the two when I’m working” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 178).

24. Cf. Williamson himself (1979): “My plays are a celebration and criticism of Australian society at the same time. The theatre is basically a place where people should enjoy themselves for a few hours. This has always been the case with Anglo-Saxon Theatre in contradistinction to the Germanic type of theatre where the theatre is a shrine of relevance that people must come out better people than they entered” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 81).

25. Cf. Webb 2004: “Williamson liked how *The Swaggering Soldier* satirises the Roman military, the all-powerful ruler of civilisation in Plautus’s day. There were obvious parallels with the US Government’s power over today’s world. ‘Both use basically the same technique of seducing the elites of the countries to become quasi-Romans or quasi-Americans, and then using those elites to funnel the profits back home.’”

26. Cf. Williamson’s view (1986) of world politics in the twentieth century: “I think most writers of satire or social comedy have a pessimistic base line about human capacity for good, and I am sure there is human capacity for good but if you look at the events of this century, if you look at the holocaust, if you look at the continuing brutality of man towards man and the continual inability of two very powerful human beings, namely Reagan and Gorbachev, to actually sit down and rationally stop the insane arms race that we are all hostage to—I mean it’s not a difficult intellectual task if they really wanted to do it, it could be solved in a day of hard negotiation. They don’t really want to do it. Those basic and deeper human instincts towards aggression and domination are far more important than the rational safety and well-being of the future of the human beings on this planet, and I think that we have cause to be pessimistic, we really, truly have cause” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 180–1).

27. For the two former points cf. Williamson (1979): “Well, as I said before perhaps a little more interest in the last two plays in actually pinning down the processes of power manipulations in institutions. I think I was interested in the early plays in power manipulations between individuals. But there are still individual battles going on within the institutions so I can’t claim that the focus of the plays has shifted dramatically. I guess I am interested in the ways people use language and use tactics to manipulate each other” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 199, 164). Cf. also Ross 1985, 2091: “To an extent, all of Williamson’s work for the stage has focused on a single theme: the perfection of relationships, a goal that forever eludes the characters but one which they never cease striving to attain. The plays are always open-ended, the suggestion left that the characters will continue their search and in so doing meet disappointments, make blunders, face defeat and humiliation, and, on occasion, succeed: In other words, they will continue to live out their lives. This view Williamson has explored in a variety of ways, so that the plays, although each an entity, may be placed in three groups: the plays about family and marriage, those about social relationships outside the family, and those about interactions in the larger world.”

28. There is only one obvious passage where Williamson appeals to the experiences of a specifically Australian audience: when Plautus’s wife voices feminist ideas, the character Plautus comments for the audience that feminism is not an invention of modern times; he illustrates this view by mentioning a modern Australian feminist as an example, saying “You think that Germaine Greer invented feminism?” (p. 20).

29. Cf. Williamson (1979): “Certainly my personal aims were never just to appeal to any one particular segment of the Australian population. I’ve always hoped and believed that you could write plays that were accessible and entertaining and yet not devoid of any content” (quoted from Zuber-Skerritt 1989, 161). Cf. also Kiernan 2004, 334: “Fundamental to Williamson’s wide appeal to audiences is his ability to merge the serious (and also at times the literary) with the popular, understood to be entertaining and, in his case, amusing. With varying degrees of satiric intensity and—not surprisingly, considering his prolific output—with varying degrees of success, his comedies engage with ideas and issues, topical and perennial, that audiences within and beyond Australia can readily relate to.”