

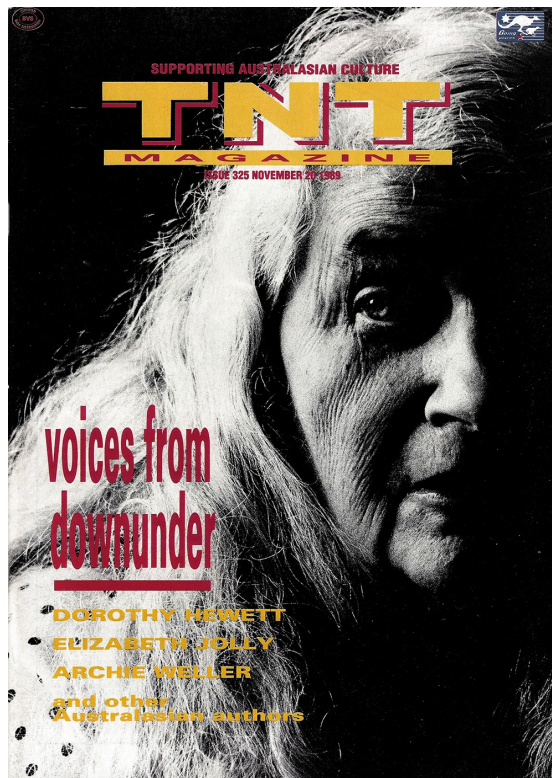
**This feature was written for TNT Magazine as part of a series of interviews with prominent Australian writers, this one with the eminent playwright and novelist, Dorothy Hewett**

## Rapunzel at Large

By Lyn Ashby

SOME people manage to defy the gravity of time. If growing old is a steady drift towards conservative and inflexible attitudes on life, and youth is an open-ended enthusiasm, then Dorothy Hewett, in her 66 colourful years of strife and triumph, has managed to grow young. Looking for all the world like an alternative fairy godmother, with her long, unbound grey locks, plump and overflowing with earthy good humour, she could easily be on of her own larger-than-life stage characters, representing, as in fact she does, an aspect of humanity that has walked a little on the wild side.

As a 22-year-old rich kid from a middle-class Western Australian family, she chose the hard but eventful road of a communist in a conservative, reactionary Australia. As such she was obliged to (willingly) swallow the dogma of the time



**Above:** Front cover of TNT Magazine for the Dorothy Hewett issue.

**Below:** The Dorothy Hewett page spread in the magazine.

### INTERVIEW

# rapunzel at large

Lyn Ashby talks to esteemed poet, playwright, novelist and "screwy old dame from Australia", Dorothy Hewett.

Some people manage to defy the gravity of time. If growing old is a steady drift towards conservative and inflexible attitudes on life, and youth is an open-ended enthusiasm, then Dorothy Hewett in her 66 colourful years of strife and triumph, has managed to grow young. Looking for all the world like an alternative fairy godmother, with her long, unbound grey locks, plump and overflowing with earthy good humour, she could easily be one of her own somewhat larger-than-life stage characters, representing, as in fact she does, an aspect of humanity that has walked a little on the wild side.

As a 22-year-old rich kid from a middle-class Western Australian family, she chose the hard but eventful road of the hard-line communist in a staid, reactionary Australia. As such she was obliged to (willingly) swallow the dogma of the time and harness her budding writing talents to the "inevitable triumph of the working class cause". For Hewett however, this proved to be a fruitless conflict of interests.

"For nine years I couldn't write anything. I was supposed to write socialist (not social) realism and I couldn't do it. My writing was self-censored. Socialist realism meant you always had to be positive — even if you were writing about something tragic. It had to always end with the workers marching into the dawn or something like this. To write this stuff and make it sound feasible in Australia was ludicrous.

In her commitment to the communist cause and as a vague Utopian gesture that middle-class girls trying to expiate their guilt, indulged in to "proletarianise themselves", she went to work in the worst factories in Sydney. These long years of dedicated struggle and hardship eventually supplied her with the material for her only novel "Bobbin' Up" written in 1959 as a response to a writing competition. Although formally criticised (predictably) by the communist party for being "too naturalistic and sexually explicit", the novel marked the onset of a new and somewhat bitter perception of how things actually were politically rather than how they should be. "I became less and less liable to censorship from that time and I began writing again."

Drawing directly from her experiences in the textile mills of Sydney and the breadline struggle of political activity, the novel is a sympathetic look into the lives

and loves of a handful of working-class women on the brink of political commitment and social upheaval. Far from marching triumphantly into the dawn however, these women end up in the literal darkness and uncertainty of a closed factory and sit-in strike that is likely to compound the hardships already crippling their lives. "Sit down lay" says one of the characters at the close of the novel, "it's likely to be a long wait."

A long wait indeed. For although some are still waiting, the Marxist utopian revolution never happened. The only revolutions Dorothy Hewett and her comrades saw were the Hungarian disaster in 1956 and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. It was this last tragedy in the name of socialism that finally convinced Hewett to quit the cause.

Australia in the 40s, still in the shadow of the depression and depleted by the European war must have appeared to many to be suffering the classic symptoms of terminal capitalism, the only cure being the worker's revolution. But today?

"Things are a lot more complex now. I don't see any black and white in anything anymore. Hard-line communism can't survive in the modern world. I don't believe (although I once did) that it ever really could."

"The future of politics seems to be economic alliances rather than political ideals. I'm still interested in politics and am very anti-right wing. I hate British Thatcherite politics and I hate Bob Hawke's right-wing so-called labour policies."

Without the constrictions of an organised dogma she went on to become one of Australia's most respected, prolific and sometimes controversial playwrights and poets, probably best known for her book of poems "Rapunzel" in "Suburbia". "The politics," she insists, "is still there. It's just not as dogmatic as it used to be. I was very didactic at one stage, pretty bigoted and narrow-minded. I'm not as bad as that now."

Not as bad, apparently, as many much younger people she's met at universities and colleges around the world in recent years as writer-in-residence.

"When I talk to these people, I'm generally appalled at the politics of the young. They're so conservative, so concerned with just getting jobs and making it in the world, which is ironic because

most of them won't get any anyway because there aren't any. It's mad!

"I've just been to America and it's enough to send a good socialist off the face of the Earth. I would talk to the students about American imperialism and its effect on the rest of the world and they would just look at me with such bland disinterest. I'm sure they thought — here's a screwy old dame from Australia, what's she on about?"

She's no stranger, however, to criticism and controversy. At one stage, having fallen foul of Sydney's literati because of her still evident political views, she was unable to get some of her plays produced in that city. And although a self-proclaimed feminist herself, she has often suffered the heavy criticism of hard-line feminists. But, "I don't give a stuff. I just have to write what I have to write," Hewett and dogma. It seems, no longer mix.

These days, casting her critical eye about the world, Australia, understandably, comes in for some buffeting.

"I think Australians are a very laissez-faire sort of people. They tend to let everything just happen. She'll be right mate, you know, the legacy of that sort of background. Therefore they get quite easily taken over. The Kerr-Whitlam thing for example. They can let all that just happen, and just go sailing gaily and blindly on."

The lucky country she believes has many "moments of truth" ahead. An honest reckoning for a dishonest past which she characterises as a "corrupt innocence."

"It's an opting out of the problems of the world because for the moment, you can afford to do so. It's a glorying in one's own little utopian corners of the earth which has a lovely climate and a high standard of living, even though there is a lot of unemployment — that's the innocence. The corruption is a refusal to look the world in the face or see oneself as part of that world."

Having just completed her autobiography ("perhaps the hardest thing I ever did" and thus inspired, she has embarked upon a second novel, the first in 30 years. "I believe the writer's job is to be provocative." But perhaps equally as provocative as her writing is her life. Lived as it has been with unconventional zest and uncommon honesty, "I can't imagine anything or anybody stopping me from writing what I want to write now. I just have to write what I have to write and if nobody likes it, well that's just too bad really, but it's the best I can do."

Had Australia suffered McCarthy-like investigations into communists and what would have been called un-Australian activities, Dorothy Hewett would have been purged long ago. Thankfully it didn't, and she remains one of the few traditionally radicalised voices amidst the cash-register clatter of an essentially conservative world.

and harness her budding writing talents to the "inevitable triumph of the working class cause". For Hewett, however, this proved to be a fruitless conflict of interests.

"For nine years I couldn't write anything. I was supposed to write socialist (not social) realism and I couldn't do it. My writing was self-censored. Socialist realism meant you always had to be positive — even if you were writing about something tragic, it had to always end with the workers marching into the dawn or something like this. To write this stuff and make it sound feasible in Australia was ludicrous."

In her commitment to the communist cause and as "a vague Utopian gesture that middle-class girls trying to expiate their guilt, indulged in to 'proletarianise' themselves," she went to work in the worst factories in Sydney. These long years of dedicated struggle and hardship eventually supplied her with the material for her only novel, "Bobbin' Up", written in 1959 as a response to a writing competition. Although formally criticised (predictably) by the communist party for being "too naturalist and sexually explicit," the novel marked the onset of a new and somewhat bitter perception of how things actually were politically rather than how they should be. "I became less and less liable to censorship from that time and I began writing again."

Drawing directly from her experiences in the textile mills of Sydney and the breadline struggle of political activity, the novel is a sympathetic look into the lives and loves of a handful of working-class women on the brink of political commitment and social upheaval. Far from marching triumphantly into the dawn however, these women end up in the literal darkness and uncertainty of a closed factory and sit-in strike that is likely to compound the hardships already crippling their lives. "Sit down, Luv," says one of the characters at the close of the novel, "it's likely to be a long wait."

A long wait indeed. For although some are still waiting, the marxist utopian revolution never happened. The only revolutions Dorothy Hewett and her comrades saw were the Hungarian disaster in 1956 and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. It was this last tragedy in the name of socialism that finally convinced Hewett to quite the cause.

Australia in the 40s, still in the shadow of the depression and depleted by the European war must have appeared to many to be suffering the classic symptoms of terminal capitalism, the only cure being the worker's revolution. But today?

"Things are a lot more complex now. I don't see any black and white in anything anymore. Hard-line communism can't survive in the modern world. I don't believe (although I once did) that it ever really could.

"The future of politics seems to be economic alliances rather than political ideals. I'm still interested in politics and am very anti-right wing. I hate British Thatcherite politics and I hate Bob Hawke's right-wing, so-called labour policies."

Without the constraints of an organised dogma she went on to become one of Australia's most respected, prolific and sometimes controversial playwrights and poets, probably best known for her book of poems "Rapunzel In Suburbia". "The politics," she insists, "is still there. It's just not as dogmatic as it used to be. I was very didactic at one stage, pretty bigoted and narrow-minded. I'm not as bad as that now."

Not as bad, apparently, as many much younger people she's met at universities and colleges around the world in recent years as writer-in-residence.

"When I talk to these people, I'm generally appalled at the politics of the young. They're so conservative, so concerned with just getting jobs and making it in the world, which is ironic because most of them won't get any anyway because there aren't any. It's mad!"

"I've just been to America and it's enough to send a good socialist off the face of the Earth. I would talk to the students about American imperialism and its effect on the rest of the world and they would just look at me with such bland disinterest. I'm sure they thought "here's a screwy old dame from Australia. What's she on about?"

She's no stranger, however, to criticism and controversy. At one stage, having fallen foul of Sydney's literati because of her still evident political views, she was unable to get some of her plays produced in that city. And although a self-proclaimed feminist herself, she has often suffered the heavy criticism from hard-line feminists. "But I don't give a stuff. I just have to write what I have to write." Hewett and dogma, it seems, no longer mix.

These days casting her critical eye about the world, Australia, understandably, comes in for some buffeting.

"I think Australians are a very laissez-faire sort of people. They tend to let everything just happen. 'She'll be right mate,' you know, the legacy of that sort of background. Therefore they get quite easily taken over. The Kerr-Whitlam thing for example. They can let all that just happen, and just go sailing gaily and blindly on."

The lucky country, she believes, has many "moments of truth" ahead. An honest reckoning for a dishonest past which she characterises as a "corrupt innocence". "It's an opting out of the problems of the world because, for the moment, you can afford to do so. It's a glorying in one's own little utopian corner of the earth which has a lovely climate and a high standard of living, even though there is a lot of unemployment — that's the innocence. The corruption is a refusal to look at the world in the face or see oneself as part of that world."

Having just completed her autobiography ("perhaps the hardest thing I ever did") and thus inspired, she has embarked upon a second novel, the first in 30 years. "I believe the writer's job is to be provocative." But perhaps equally as provocative as her writing is her life, lived as it has been, with unconventional zest and uncommon honesty. "I can't imagine anything or anybody stopping me from writing what I want to write now. I just have to write what I have to write and if nobody likes it ... well, that's just too bad really. But it's the best I can do."

Had Australia suffered McCarthy-like investigations into communist, and what would have been un-Australian, activities, then Dorothy Hewett would have been purged long ago. Thankfully, it didn't, and she remains one of the few traditionally radicalised voices amidst the cash register clatter of the conservative world.

*Published in TNT magazine November 20, 1989*