



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## Jane Montgomery Griffiths' Theatrical Poetics

### Autumn Royal

*As scholar of the Classics and drama studies, Jane Montgomery Griffiths has devoted much of her artistic practice to interpreting the voices of women who have either been censored or misinterpreted throughout history. Montgomery Griffiths has been celebrated for her writing of, and solo performances in, productions such as Razing Hypatia<sup>1</sup> and Sappho in 9 Fragments.<sup>2</sup> With her experience of theatrically exploring female desire, sexuality and intellectual contribution, it is understandable that Montgomery Griffiths was attracted to Dorothy Porter's verse novel Wild Surmise<sup>3</sup> written in the Sapphic tradition with lyrics mediating on desire, exploration and loss.*

*In the program notes to the production of Wild Surmise,<sup>4</sup> Montgomery Griffiths writes that the 'project started with the act of falling in love – falling in love with characters, falling in love with a book, falling in love through the act of reading.'<sup>5</sup> Love is one of the central themes of Porter's Wild Surmise and it was carried onto the stage with Montgomery Griffiths' performance as Alex, an astrobiologist infatuated with discovering life on one of Jupiter's four Galilean moons, Europa. This moon is both the subject of astrobiological study and the intergalactic symbol of desire for Alex who is gravitating away from her literary academic husband Daniel, played by Humphrey Bower, and into an affair with the astrophysicist Phoebe.*

*Directed by Marion Potts and staged at the Malthouse Theatre from 9 November to 2 December 2012, the production of Wild Surmise was culturally significant as it embraced the oral tradition of poetry and allowed for new audiences to be exposed to Porter's dynamic poetics.*

*Below is an interview with Montgomery Griffiths, focussing on her process of adapting Wild Surmise, and the critical responses the production received.*

**Q.** I'd like to thank you for such a wonderful and brave adaption of Dorothy Porter's *Wild Surmise*. Even if this wasn't your original intention, your adaption of Porter's verse novel reopened dialogue about Australian poetics, and allowed for new audiences to be exposed to

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1 *Razing Hypatia*, by Jane Montgomery Griffiths, dir. André Bastian, Alliance Française Theatre, St Kilda, Vic. 20 August–6 September 2009.

2 *Sappho in 9 Fragments*, by Jane Montgomery Griffiths, dir. Marion Potts, Malthouse Theatre, Southbank, Vic. 30 July–21 August 2010.

3 Dorothy Porter, *Wild Surmise* (Sydney: Picador, 2002).

4 *Wild Surmise* by Dorothy Porter, adapted by Jane Montgomery Griffiths, dir. Marion Potts, Malthouse Theatre, Southbank, Vic. 9 November–2 December 2012.

5 Jane Montgomery Griffiths, 'Adapter's Note', Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, 2012.

<http://www.malthousetheatre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Wild-Surmise-Program-Note.pdf>

Porter's work. What was the initial reaction you received when you told people that you were adapting a verse novel? Were there many people aware of such a form?

**A. I think it was somewhat new territory. I met various people who knew and loved the book – but in the early days, we weren't quite sure what we wanted to achieve with the adaptation. My idea was always that it needed to be simple – that it needed nothing other than Porter's words. Consequently I was unsure about its theatrical viability. In early discussions with Marion Potts, she made it clear that she wasn't interested in a 'talking heads' production. For her, the crucial element was to frame the project as an analysis/metatheatrical exploration about the nature of reading, readership and the shifting levels of authorial possession between the writer and the reader who then interprets. She was also keen to draw out the intertextuality of the many poetic references in the book. In the early drafts, I followed this brief and wrote a large amount of original material about the frame of reading and adaptation – which included everything from personal reflection to discussions on Hypatia and Bruno Giordano. None of this felt right. We workshopped the new writing several times, but my gut instinct was always that it was unnecessary – that the starkness and immediacy of Porter's language needed to be reflected in the theatrical form. I was pleased, I have to say, when my original writing ended in the bin – it was just unnecessary. So ironically, I supposed the biggest person I had to convince about the theatrical viability of simply putting the words and the story on stage was the commissioning director!**

**Q. Due to your expertise, you're very informed about the historical relationship between poetry and performance. Do think that this ancient connection is something many people are still not aware of? If so, how do you think this contemporary view influenced the reception of your adaption?**

**A. Well, yes, in terms of audience ignorance – there is a great fear in Australian theatrical culture of language, text and allowing words to speak. This is quite different in the UK, which I think has a richer aural/oral tradition owing to the fostering of verse speaking through the Royal Shakespeare Company and National Theatre (that's how I learnt). So generally there were some 'industry' misgivings about how and whether a verse novel simply spoken on stage would have theatrical currency. My feeling was always that the verse novel itself has innate theatricality, and so simply 'being true to' the verse would do the job. With verse performance, less is generally more – and as noted in the above answer, the more gilding of the lily we did, the less strong the work became. The critical response to the project was interesting – most loved it, but some critics couldn't see the point. I do appreciate that feeling. Verse performance is not for everyone, and the lack of clear physical drama worked against the old adage of the theatre, 'show don't tell'. Personally, though, I think there are ways and ways of 'showing' – and language – especially poetic language – can have the ability to pierce into more affective, visceral, internal connections with the audience than overt theatrical drama.**

**I feel now that there is a slight shift occurring in Aussie theatre culture to validate the text more – and with it, the possibilities of heightened language – but I'm not so sanguine**

**about the will of industry programmers to give it a try. There was little will from Malthouse to push the project to further touring, despite its critical and audience success. Perhaps that's indicative of the sense that audiences just don't get verse. I think – from the responses of non-industry people who saw the show – that underestimates the audience, and that there is a substantial tranche of potential audience that actually wants to luxuriate in heightened forms.**

**Q.** I recently read an argument that the hybrid form of the verse novel allows for a smoother adaptation from one medium to another.<sup>6</sup> I tend to agree with this point, though it does depend on the original structure and plot of the verse novel intended for adaptation. How would you respond to this argument after your experience adapting *Wild Surmise* for the stage?

**A.** Well, hybridity of form probably frees the adapter up to be more adventurous and hybridised themselves. But as I noted earlier, that wasn't the case with *Wild Surmise*. I can see that in other hands (directorial and designer) the production might have been much more adventurous – even with what was a relatively faithful text. I'm currently working on a production (*Story of O* with theatre company, The Rabble<sup>7</sup>) where we have been able to translate the queerness of the book (complete with its odd subjectivity and alienation) within a theatrical frame – so I can see that in that case, it's very possible. I'd imagine that the theorising of hybridity perhaps ignores the very simple fact that the end product is the result of that combination of people in that rehearsal room during that specific period. Change the creative dynamic, the text will open out in other ways. Marion is a relatively conservative director, hence we remained within the same narrative structure and form.

**Q** One review of the adaptation of *Wild Surmise* claims that the play 'lack[ed] emotional impact'.<sup>8</sup> This is an observation I find extremely hard to accept, both because of the subject matter and also because of the subversive ways in which Porter explores the notion of fidelity and marriage. How much do you think Porter is critiquing the traditional notions of marriage and how much do you think it is a driving force of the narrative?

**A.** Yes, I was surprised at that review too – since from first reading the book to last playing the production I found it acutely affecting. I don't think Porter is necessarily critiquing marriage. It seems more personal than that. Couples get older, get more used to each other, get staid ... that's the same with married hetero or not-allowed-to-be-married lesbian couples. For me the book and narrative is less about a critique and more about a parallel snuggle up with what Sappho understood so well – that Eros is inescapable. The genius of the book (for all that after so many readings I began to see where it was in places over-written

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6 Jeri Kroll, "From page to stage": a case study of transforming a verse novel', *Encounters: Place, Situation, Context - The Refereed Proceedings of the 17th Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs* edited by Cassandra Atherton, Rhonda Dredge et al. (Canberra, 2012) 1-12. [http://aawp.org.au/files/Kroll\\_1.pdf](http://aawp.org.au/files/Kroll_1.pdf)  
7 *Story of O*, by Pauline Réage, adapted by Kate Davis and Emma Valente, dir. Emma Valente, Melbourne Theatre Company, Southbank, Vic. 27 June–7 July 2013.

8 Andrew Fuhrmann, 'The Glass Wall: Dorothy Porter and Enthusiasm', *Australian Book Review* no. 347, December 2012–January 2013, 50.

and obvious) is that she articulates so well the itch we all have for something more. Alex and Daniel have that itch in equal measure – they simply find vastly different outlets for it. She critiques desire, need, lack, itchiness – but not the institution of marriage. And she does that brilliantly through the intertextual resonances of all the poets who have equally sought to fill the gap, and Alex’s obsession to fill the biggest of all gaps, the universe, with her imprint.

**Q.** Returning to the aforementioned review, the reviewer questions Porter’s metaphoric language and cites her description of emotion as melodramatic. I would argue that this review misses the point of Porter’s emphatic language as it actually forces the reader to confront the ideologies we commonly base our ideals of love, commitment, and intellectual value upon. I read *Wild Surmise* as an elegy for when these ideologies and ideals fail and there’s nothing left to cling to other than a language in which we may attempt to express our mourning and distress. Is this something you agree with? Would you consider *Wild Surmise* as an elegiac expression?

**A.** What an interesting thought. Yes, in some ways it is – an elegy for what is lost and can never be found that you realise in middle age. No, I find nothing in the book melodramatic. The affair, Daniel’s illness, Alex’s strange, alienated grief are all highly recognisable to me. And you make a good point that the language itself reframes what could be melodramatic to make the audience question it. It’s interesting that playing at Melbourne Theatre Company the same time as us was *Music*<sup>9</sup> – a poetry lecturer who quotes Auden discovers his wife is having an affair and that he’s dying of cancer. In narrative terms, exactly the same play. I’d argue that *Music* was the worst type of maudlin, melodramatic deadly theatre, where it was hard to see anything other than the self-indulgence and selfishnesses of the characters. *Wild Surmise* could have been just the same – but Porter’s language – and the rigour of the verse structure too – prevents that descent into the maudlin and melodramatic. Perhaps it’s that the heightened quality of the language creates another level on which the narrative is less diegetic, and more affective.

**Q.** I think Porter’s use of space and astrobio logical metaphors allow for a comment on the constructed binaries of masculinity and femininity. I find it both interesting and subversive that Porter aligns Alex with the rational world of science and Daniel with the literary world. What do you think of this point?

**A.** Well yes – and that’s why it’s a clever book. She takes us away from the obvious. Alex is no hero. Her lesbian affair is not a triumph over an unfair patriarchy. She’s a sad, flawed, selfish, impatient woman who allows herself to become a victim of her neediness. Daniel – though not perfect – is infinitely more sympathetic ... and as I’m sure you know Dorothy Porter’s and Andrea Goldsmith’s<sup>10</sup> favourite creation. I like the fact that Porter shies away from lionising the female and lesbian as a matter of course. She is an infinitely wiser humanist than to do

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9 *Music*, by Barry Oakley, dir. Aidan Fennessy, The Melbourne Theatre Company, Melbourne, Vic. 9 November–22 December 2012.

10 Andrea Goldsmith was Dorothy Porter’s partner until Porter’s death in 2008. Goldsmith is a Melbourne-based writer and novelist.

something like that. So yes, she manipulates the obvious – and that’s what makes it so compelling.

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