

## *From the Kitchen*

2 September 2012



This is coming to you from a different kitchen. The morning sun is flooding the courtyard of the Neram Harvest Café at the New England Regional Arts Museum in Armidale, northern NSW. Despite the sun, it is still too cold for me to sit outside – the air temperature has risen from an overnight low of  $-4^{\circ}\text{C}$  to around  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$  – although the hardened locals are sitting out there in their shirtsleeves.

I have made the journey across the country to witness three performances of two of my short plays, along with five other plays, at the local *Favourite Shorts* 10-Minute Play Festival.

I have sat here in the café for the past three hours, making my way through fresh juice with beetroot and ginger, Eggs Florentine, a coffee, a Turkish Love Cake, a cup of chocolate milk made with grated 85% dark chocolate, another excellent long black and all washed down with filtered water. The only thing missing is excellent company.

Armidale is a very friendly town. In the street, people readily smile at me and look me in the eye. The place is full of people in their late teens and early twenties, because of the university. It gives a feel to the place I haven't experienced in other country towns I have visited.

I gained a lot from seeing my plays performed three times. I could talk to the directors and actors between performances, see the performances change subtly and see the actors gain confidence with the works. I can also see where I can make changes in the scripts and, in one of the plays, substantially rewrite it.

Playwriting is so different from writing stories, essays, poems, blogs or novels – the script is little more than dialogue for others to mould into a performance. With the other forms, the finished work goes out into the world and each reader forms an individual relationship with it. Each time a play is trotted out, it is likely to have a different director and different actors, resulting in a different staging, including new set and lighting. I was surprised, at the first of the three performances this weekend, to see three of the parts I had written for men played by women (there had been a lack of available male actors). It required extra suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience as well. The audience usually doesn't have access to the script, so their only experience of the work is through the cast's interpretation and the reactions from the audience itself.

Even when I had written the words being spoken on stage, I found myself laughing occasionally at what was being said, partly because of what was being said, partly because, although I had written the words, I hadn't heard them outside my own head. The impact of the humour was not due to surprise, any more than is the impact of the humour in a film or play we have seen a number of times before.

Both of my plays dealt with relatively light subjects in a light way. They were not the best in the program. The two best plays dealt with weightier matters; one with humour and depth, the other with gravitas. The latter was a monologue (as was my piece, *Be Mused*) and was in the form of a poem, with 'traditional' metre and rhyme; however, not recited in a traditional manner. The other best play had two derelict men examining issues around masculinity.

As voracious reading is important for any writer, so is watching stage plays essential for a playwright. Reading and watching allows the writer to find out what works and what doesn't,

what communicates clearly and what puts the reader/audience to sleep. One of my plays (*Dealer Wins* – with the male/female swap) did not work as well as I had hoped. The fault was not with the acting or the staging; it was with the writing. It was invaluable for me to see where the writing let the actors and the audience down.

Despite what I saw as the mixed success of my plays, I was invited to submit a full-length play I've written, for the consideration of the drama society in Armidale. With some sixteen roles, I've been told it could never be considered for a commercial production, as paying that many actors would make it commercially unviable. The Armidale group has no such concerns and welcomes opportunities to offer roles to a large group of actors.

I enjoy writing short plays for the same reason I enjoy writing short stories: they are compact and need to tell a story economically, with little opportunity to be laid-back or expansive. They demand, as poetry does, the careful choice of words and the necessity for those words to work hard for a living. Just like a writer has to.