

Rediscovering Ruby – by Anne Wilson

After teaching the HSC Text “Ruby Moon” by Matt Cameron for 8 years straight, a part of me felt almost as mad as the residents of Flame Tree Grove, setting out to produce and perform it.

How do we as teachers and performers keep coming back to the same text and continue to be stimulated by it, energised by it and in a position to inspire students and audiences alike? How do we find new ways to illuminate what, for many of us has been a text that we have seen performed countless times and taught for a large portion of our teaching careers?



I joined forces with Actor Scott Grimley and Director/ Dramaturge and Writer Cathy Hunt to breathe new life into this text that many of us are all too familiar with. In this, its last year on the syllabus, I hope to inspire you with some new revelations that we have had in the rehearsal room. What I have been encouraged by is to be reminded of the power of theatre. Scripts are rooms full of doors, windows, mouse holes, cat flaps and cracks; endless crannies and portals. These openings let light in, shift how you see the familiar, the learned, the discovered and transform and surprise in endless ways. This is the power of the well conceived script. This is the power of translating a script to the stage. There is always more to discover.

Sometimes we can feel just like Ray and Sylvie; in a routine, perpetually going through the motions. Just as the parents never give up searching for the next clue, even when they feel they have exhausted all possibility, we too need to keep pursuing this incredible text.

At a time when the Madeline McCann story is re-emerging in headlines, six years on, the faces of her parents still stare out, frozen in their ‘not-knowing’. Their eyes still asking the same questions of us, looking for someone to blame for the brokenness of their lives and their overwhelming sense of loss. Ruby Moon is just as relevant as it was the first year it was on the curriculum.

So how do we find new ‘clues’ in the script to reinvigorate our exploration?

I will share with you some of the notes we have made in the early phase of rehearsing and discussion. Scott is also already familiar with the text as he has performed the role of Ray previously. In this way, working with the incredible talent of Cathy Hunt has been incredibly eye opening as she leads us with fresh eyes, into exploring this text. Questions and activities are provided that I hope are useful in provoking the sorts of engaging discussions that we have had as a team, with your own students.

As I approach this text as an actor I have been particularly fascinated by the psychology of the characters of this play. Jung’s theories on “the shadow” have been helpful in analysing the behaviour of Ray and Sylvie. He coined this term to define the disowned sub-personalities that we create to cope with that which we feel is alien or hostile. Ruby Moon is a play about the many ways which we as humans cope with loss. How we allocate guilt, manage threat, and strive to hold onto a sense of safety, hope and normality in the face of overwhelming despair.

PERFORMING THE 'CHARACTERS' OF THE PLAY

The shadow stands on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious mind... It is all we don't want to, can't admit into our conscious self, all the qualities and tendencies within us that have been repressed, denied or not used...

Ursula K. Le Guin

Ray and Sylvie are still 'characters', 'roles'. They impersonate parents, long after they have ceased to be parents. They wear the masks of their former roles in order to put up a front to the outside world and to one another. Except for perhaps moments in the epilogue and scene 9, there is effectively very little time in the play when they are being openly themselves, real and honest, dropping the masquerade or 'act'.

Every character in the neighbourhood needs to have clear secrets and motivations. Every character has a particular trigger to divulge and reveal themselves.

Discussion questions:

Why have Ray and Sylvie selected these particular neighbours to recreate? What purpose does each serve to move Ray and Sylvie towards a state of revelation, healing, exoneration, acceptance, or penance? E.g.; Sonny Jim gives Ray the opportunity to assert his manliness whilst simultaneously condemning his lack of manliness

What roles do we play in our lives? In different circumstances? Under pressure and stress? Around different people?

How do these roles serve our goals/ needs?



LOSS

"I am responsible. Although I may not be able to prevent the worst from happening, I am responsible for my attitude toward the inevitable misfortunes that darken life. Bad things do happen; how I respond to them defines my character and the quality of my life. I can choose to sit in perpetual sadness, immobilized by the gravity of my loss or I can choose to rise from the pain and treasure the most precious gift I have- life itself.

Walter Anderson

When you lose a person, you not only lose them, but you lose your role in relation to them. You lose a part of your identity. You also lose the hope that you had for the future, and all the imagined plans that you had made. Who is Sylvie if she is not a mother? Who is she if she is not connected to Ray as a wife?

With the loss of Ruby, the characters lives and identity become fragmented, confused, and warped. As a result, they seek to compose and reconstruct their fragmented selves by connecting into the 'neighbourhood characters'- all aspects of their former selves, or their suppressed feelings and needs. E.g.; Veronica represents Sylvie's repressed sexuality, power and need for physical affection and attention from Ray.

Not only Ray and Sylvie, but every neighbour has experienced loss to some degree. Just as Ray and Sylvie seek to avoid the potentially grim truth, the neighbours also live in a state of denial- avoiding the full truth of their own losses.

Character	Acknowledged Loss	Deeper Loss
Dulcie	"Polly had gone missing"	Never been a mother, only has an imaginary parrot for company
Sid	"I lost my photo"	"Nobody likes clowns anymore"- Sid. He is no longer accepted/ appreciated in society. Seen as a threat
Veronica	"Sullied by clawing men"	Suggestions of a connection to a dead lover in her opening torch song
Sonny Jim	"I was working on my model of a B52... which remains to this day incomplete"	His Mother has died
Dawn	"Your little princess broke one of my dolls once. Snapped its head off for no good reason"	Suggestion that Dawns family has grieved the loss of perhaps a younger sister "Your house needs a grief chimney <u>too</u> ... <u>We</u> just kept breathing it in"- Dawn. Also; "both parents were bed- ridden with no income to speak of"- Sylvie
Carl	"The black hole took my beautiful wife"	Celeste has left him voluntarily

Ray and Sylvie inhabit these characters as a form of therapy to touch on the experiences of grief from a safe distance. In this was they get close, but have a degree of separation from the experience of loss.

Discussion questions:

What does Sylvie gain from enacting Dulcie and Dawn? What needs are fulfilled in these performances?

What does Ray gain from enacting Sid and Carl? What needs are fulfilled in these performances?

COPING MECHANISMS

If there were only darkness all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable

Beckett

Ray and Sylvie numb themselves; with pills, with routine and repetition. Veronica uses alcohol. They also expose themselves to pain and threat in small amounts to help toughen their skins so they can avoid being overwhelmed by the full truth.

Rituals and routine serve the purpose of recreating hope each night. In this way they can recreate the same sense of possibility that existed on the first night- the sense that Ruby is not far away.

Parental roles also offer a method of coping. Sylvie can still cling to the cultural image of the noble mother- waiting patiently at home for Ruby's return. She often does quite motherly actions e.g.; offering to bring in Sonny Jims washing. Ray has no societal role, no parental function left to hang on to. As a father, he failed to protect. He failed his wife and daughter. He has lost Ruby and his role in the world.

Passing guilt onto the community enables the couple to manage. Each scene leads into the next, with one neighbour incriminating another; actively continuing the progress of interrogation. In this way the couple actively fuel and perpetuate the search. As they mock and deride the neighbours they find security and certainty in sharing agreement with one another and a sense of superiority and power.

Discussion questions:

We all have a preferred method for dealing with pain. What does each character do to escape?

What strategies do I use to deal with that which is threatening or uncomfortable?





SAFETY/ SECURITY

Fantasy and reality are equally personal and equally felt and their difference is of only relative importance

Bunuel

Parents will always by nature put their own safety at risk to save their child. It is instinctual. It feels abnormal for Ray and Sylvie to be powerless to protect or recover their daughter.

The more that is unknown, the worse Ray and Sylvie imagine. Safety is found in the security of facts. This is a big reason why the facts of Ruby's disappearance are repeated and rehearsed- in order to maintain clarity and sanity over time. Even clinging to the reassurance of a fairytale is comfort to Sylvie in its consistency.

Ray and Sylvie ask lots of questions. This strategy gives them a sense of control and power and allows them to direct the conversation and drive the other person. Asking questions also helps them to avoid questions being asked of them and keeps the blame away from them.

Ray and Sylvie seek security in pretending. In their world of make believe they can release fears, doubts, uncertainties, anger through the mechanism of a 'character' or 'role'.

Ray and Sylvie play lots of games to create a sense of normality and predictability e.g.; pretending the mannequin is a version of their real daughter, Ray 'going off to work each day', Sylvie playing the jealous wife.

The word "Baby" is repeated many times by Ray. Why is "Baby" chosen as a term of endearment? It is used to placate- to remind Sylvie that Ray is in charge, in control, and she is protected. It is used by him to relax, calm, care, as a father figure would. We discover in the epilogue that this is the same term used when he would speak to Ruby. This becomes even more unsettling. Perhaps Ray is trying to fill the hole of fatherhood by relating to Sylvie more as a protective father than as a partner.

Discussion questions:

What are the rules of the game that is "Ruby"? What must be said? What is non- negotiable?

Each character in the neighbourhood clings to safety in their individual ways. They have a method of seeing the world, packaging it up to make it easier to deal with, more palatable. What does each character use to make them feel safe/ in control/ like they know truth?

How does Sylvie respond to the neighbours to placate/ calm them?

How does Ray respond to the neighbours to placate/ calm them?

When do I feel unsafe? In danger? What is my usual mechanism for regaining a sense of security?

Workshop Exercises:

- 1) Find an image from a magazine that you think shows how Sylvie/Ray saw her/himself before Ruby went missing. Now find one for how they see themselves after Ruby's disappearance. Are these images congruent with how the world/ their neighbourhood view them?
- 2) Find an image from a magazine that conveys what you think Ruby looked like.
- 3) The play is filled with varied recounts about what happened the day Ruby went missing. What if the parents and neighbours found another method to enact the past? Try extending the moments of childlike play by using toys and dolls as puppets to perform whenever events are recounted. Just as a child becomes less inhibited when controlling and directing toys, what character traits, emotions and events are more heightened in this new delivery? In this new mode, the actor is removed one step further. How does this allow Ray/ Sylvie to express themselves more honestly? What specific toys/ objects will you choose to represent different characters- e.g.; Sylvie, the police, the detective, Ruby?
- 4) We divided the entire show up into major beats. We shifted to a new beat where a significant change occurred due to new information being revealed. We used dialogue from each section to name each beat. They are listed below.

Use a selection of these 'titles' to create a series of freeze frames that tell the story of the play visually. Next, connect together the images like a pop up storybook being looked through. A body percussion or vocal soundscape could be added to strengthen the transitions. A narrator or the chorus could announce each title.

This exercise could be used to explore the skill of transformational acting, as well as to create a summarised version of the play that clarifies the structure and events of the text.



How do we do this again?
Still no sign of her
Can you hear her?
Tell me the story, Ray
It doesn't end well
Tell me what we know, Ray
We have to accept that.
This changes everything
Just like the story
Are you sure she was innocent?
Time to move on
Does it end well?
Let me pretend
Are you afraid of me, Mrs Moon?
I didn't hurt her!
Do you know where she is?
Set your mind at ease

She could be trying to get in
Were living the wrong lives
Come for another cup of sugar, Ray?
All that untouched youth
I think you've got the wrong idea
One man will stand alone to fight for freedom
He rides the train all day
It's called Mother
It's a mystery, Missus
We can resurrect her
We could try again
Maybe it's time we put this to bed
Don't play games with me
One day dolly was gone
You're imagining things
I could come with you
I can't harbour it any longer
Professor Ogles Portable Black Hole
Everyone seems to disappear
Did you miss me, Daddy?
You made it up
The games over
This is our train
Well get him tomorrow night
Don't let it end like that



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