

Candida Baker: Dorothy Hewett

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DOROTHY HEWETT was born in 1923, in Wickopin, Western Australia. Brought up on an isolated farm in the wheat belt, she was educated by correspondence. Later she attended the University of Western Australia, where she met her first husband, Lloyd Davies, a Perth barrister.

Dorothy Hewett started writing poems and short stories as a child. Her plays include the musical *Bon Bons and Roses for Dolly* and the play *Mrs Porter and the Angel* — based on the true story of a woman who burnt her baby in the oven. Her only novel, *Bobbin Up*, was published in 1959. The book was based on her own experience of working in a spinning mill, her membership at that time of the Communist Party, and life in an inner-city working class suburb of Sydney. *Bobbin Up* has been translated into many languages, and has recently been republished by Virago.

The 1970s were particularly productive for her. She wrote *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home* which prompted a *National Times* reviewer to comment, 'Surely management must recognize here, for God's sake, is a writer — even if a woman'. *The Chapel Perilous* (1974), was performed at the Sydney Opera House, *The Tatty Hollow Story* (1976), was produced at the Stables, and *The Golden Oldies* (1975), traced the lives of three generations of women.

More recent plays are *Pandora's Cross* (1978), *The Man from Muckinuppin* (1979), presented by The Sydney Theatre Company, and her first children's play *The Golden Valley* (1981). In 1984 she wrote the libretto for *Christina's World*, which was produced at the Seymour Centre.

Her poetry has also inspired some extreme reactions. Her first collection of poems, *Windmill Country* (1968), was published to critical acclaim, and *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975), seemed set to consolidate her reputation. It included a poem entitled *The Uninvited Guest*, which resulted in a libel suit being brought against her by her first husband. That book and two of her plays remain banned in Western Australia.

A pleasantly ramshackle Sydney terrace is Dorothy Hewett's home in Bourke St., Darlinghurst. The living quarters — a largish kitchen, big living-room and a sunroom — are upstairs, the bedrooms and Hewett's study, downstairs.

To ward off the damp cold of a Sydney winter's day, an open fire was blazing, and a cat was stretched luxuriously on the hearth rug. Possum had arrived as a stray kitten through a window some years before, and knew a good thing when she saw one. Two large and comfortable armchairs of the old-fashioned enveloping kind faced the fire, and Hewett was ensconced in one of them.

Creature comforts were catered to: cigarettes and an ashtray on the arm of her chair, a pot of tea and cake brought in for us by her husband, Merv Lilley.

Living on one of Sydney's busiest main roads does have its disadvantages, as Hewett conceded. The interview was punctuated by the squeal of brakes, the sound of sirens and horns and the revving of engines. A house with a brothel on one side in the middle of inner-city Darlinghurst could be said to be the ultimate urban location.

At the moment, both Hewett and Lilley work from home. Both of them are big, both have a commanding personality. As Hewett said: 'Merv reckons he has to get right away from here to work because I stop him doing anything by my very presence.'

'I'll tell you what,' came the response from the next room, 'I've lost all bloody day today.'

'She wants to know if we tread on each other's toes, Merv, what do you say?'

'Too right,' replied Lilley gloomily, 'too right.'

Hewett has a reputation for being unconventional. Even as a child, she was a rebel. In a school divinity class a pupil once asked, 'Will Dorothy Hewett go to hell?'. The nun taking the class replied, 'I've no doubt about it at all'. These days, after the extreme political activity of her early years, she is more settled, although her work has lost none of its sting.

During the afternoon, people wandered through the living room. Tom, one of Hewett's three sons, arrived with his girlfriend, and he and Lilley instantly began some complicated electric drilling in the kitchen — probably to hang one of the many large, bold abstracts which cover the walls, and the floors. At the same time, a letter arrived from Kate, their daughter living in London, the phone rang frequently, and over the traffic noise one could hear the local prostitutes negotiating deals with their clients. For Hewett it is a far cry from a wheat farm in Western Australia, but it suits her.

INTERVIEWER: Your only novel, *Bobbin Up*, has recently been re-published by Virago Press, and at the moment you're working on your autobiography for them. Are you finding it difficult to write about yourself?

HEWETT: Yes, I am. It's hard talking about me. Everybody is always going on about how everything I write is autobiographical; well that's what *they* think. When I'm writing about myself I find it extraordinarily difficult to write in the first person and use 'I', to do away with all those disguises and write what purports to be the truth.

INTERVIEWER: People *do* say that about your work. You obviously don't agree?

HEWETT: No I don't. Bits and pieces are autobiographical I suppose. But I suspect it's not nearly as autobiographical as David Williamson's work for example, and nobody ever says that about him.

INTERVIEWER: You were a member of the Communist Party for a long time, and it seems to me that for some years your political interest and your writing interests were in conflict. It must have been difficult for you when you finally had to make the decision to leave the Party.

HEWETT: It was traumatic. But for eight years I didn't write anything except a bit of journalism for a few left-wing papers, so in one sense it was very liberating. One of the reasons I couldn't write was, I'm sure, because I was in the Communist Party — and I'll explain that later — and the other reason was because I was leading an extremely busy life, I had three children all quite close together and I was going through all sorts of emotional traumas, so the combination resulted in my not writing for eight years. And I hated that. I loathed it. I tried on a few occasions but everything that came out was such a load of crap that I decided to forget it. But as soon as I decided — or a little before I decided — to ask all the requisite questions which I think you have to ask before you break a political allegiance, it was as if all the flood-gates opened and I could write again. But of course what also happened was that something which had organised my life for something like twenty-three years had suddenly gone, and that was frightening and exhilarating at the same time. I know a lot of people who found that leaving the Communist Party after a long time almost destroyed them, because they had nothing left, but you see I did. I got back my identity, and it was as if I'd been somebody else for twenty-three years and had suddenly found who I was again.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think belonging to the Party stopped you from writing?

HEWETT: In those days the dogma which stemmed from the Russians was heavily into social realism

set down as holy writ by Maxim Gorky and Zdanhov. Because the Australian Communist Party was so much under the domination of the USSR and later China — we were always under the domination of some sort of political dogma, we never really worked out our own way of seeing things — we tended to regard this social realism stuff like the bible. If you didn't write like that then they disapproved, and weirdly enough, so did you. It was like self-censorship for me because I came from a wealthy middle-class background and I was always conscious that I had to live all that down. If you didn't come from a proletarian background you were supposed to go into purdah and do penance for years in order to prove that you weren't something dreadful and undersirable. You were always being accused of showing middle-class tendencies or being a revisionist so in a sense you had to be even holier-than-thou than if you had a good working-class pedigree. All of this affected you because most Communists didn't mix with anyone else much. It was an exclusive club and although it talked about having a 'united front with others', except for a few people in the trade unions, I suspect that very few Communists had a united front with anybody except other Communists. Being surrounded by that sort of atmosphere did have an effect on me. When I look back on it, I can't imagine that I could ever have been like that, but I was. This is another thing that I have to come to terms with, to try and explain—to myself—how I could *possibly* have fallen for all this nonsense.

INTERVIEWER: When did your involvement with the Communists begin?

HEWETT: When I was at the University of Western Australia. It was a time when a lot of so-called intellectuals were joining, because there was nowhere else much to go if you had any radical ideas at all, and for a while, during the war, before the cold war began, it was very fashionable. There was a big influx of young intellectuals from all over the world, probably because of disillusionment with other political parties or disillusionment generally. I had this idea that I was going to live a marvellously bohemian life and be a great writer and actress. However, doing all that in Perth in those days was a bit difficult and I'd come a bit of a cropper. I'd tried to commit suicide, I'd had several disastrous love affairs, I was at daggers drawn with my parents, and I really wasn't handling my life at all well. Joining the Communist Party was a way out on all sorts of levels. It was a way of structuring a life which was in tatters at the age of twenty-two and a very young twenty-two. Twenty-two then, comparing it with my own daughters, is like somebody of fifteen or sixteen now, particularly living in Western Australia which is so isolated and so far away from everything. Actually, I had joined once before when I was nineteen but I'd dropped out within a year because I felt I wasn't morally, spiritually or politically pure enough to belong to such a high-sounding and acting organisation. I re-joined when I was twenty-two and thought I could live up to their standards.

INTERVIEWER: Were you married by then?

HEWETT: Yes. I hadn't been married long, but the man I married, Lloyd Davies, was a law student and also a member of the Party. We got married after we'd been in love for only a month, then we spent one night together before he was sent to Darwin in Army Education and I didn't see him for a year. I'd met him again after I'd failed at my university course. I'd been chucked out and had done this suicide bid, so things were a bit grim, and we met while I was in hospital. When he left for Darwin a woman who was running a Communist newspaper, called *The Worker's Star*, rang me and said they were in a crisis and needed a journalist very badly. She asked me if I would consider working for them for a while—I'd worked for a short period as a journalist on a paper at a time when it was easy to get jobs because all the men had joined up so I had some experience—but I was nervous about rejoining and had to think it over. I went to some classes and moved into a house which used to be known as the Kremlin, and decided I'd take the plunge. By the time Lloyd came back I was well and truly a member of the Party.

INTERVIEWER: It's fairly well-known that Lloyd Davies brought a libel suit against you some years later after you'd separated. That must have been an unpleasant episode in your life . . .

HEWETT: It certainly was. The original poem which was objected to had been published five years before in Grace Perry's *Poetry Australia*, and it hadn't seemed to cause much offence then.

INTERVIEWER: So you were surprised when the action was taken?

HEWETT: I was astonished. It remains one of the most astonishing things that has ever happened to me. But there's much more to it than that because when the poem came out in *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, the

editors were Bob and Cheryl Adamson and they got a writ. So we decided to re-print the book, take that poem out and put another one in, which we did. Then he objected to the poem we put in, plus three or four others that had been in the original book which he hadn't mentioned before, because strangely enough with libel laws you can keep on finding more and more things you object to. So that book also had to be withdrawn. Then he and his lawyer—and his wife—wrote to a massive number of bookshops, the ABC and a lot of universities warning them about me and my work. For a long time a lot of libraries and bookshops were nervous about carrying anything that I wrote at all. A friend of mine at the ABC actually showed me a piece of paper that had gone round saying not to use any of Dorothy Hewett's work on the ABC. It frightened people that much. And then there was a play of mine called *The Chapel Perilous* which had been performed in Perth in around 1970 and had quite a long season to which Davies had gone, and had apparently enjoyed it—with his wife. That had been published for some time, but he sent a letter to Currency Press and also to me saying that he was going to take action against that and the *Tatty Hollow Story*. This time we got out of it by making a deal by saying that neither play would ever be published or played in Western Australia. So those plays now have a sticker over the front of them saying, 'Not to be sold or taught in Western Australia'. A yellow sticker as if they had yellow fever or something. It just went on and on.

INTERVIEWER: But it must have been hurtful as well as surprising that he seemed to want to pursue you . . .

HEWETT: I found it incredibly hurtful because I felt that the person I had been married to for five years was not the sort of person who would do something like that. To this day I don't understand what the real motivation was. I think it was much more complex than it appeared on the surface. However, I think it's best to leave all that buried.

INTERVIEWER: We haven't talked much about your work yet. What about your work habits, if you have any?

HEWETT: My terrible work habits that I'm so ashamed of . . .

INTERVIEWER: Are you? Why?

HEWETT: Oh, I'd love to be one of those people that gets up in the morning and works for three hours and takes the dog for a walk and comes back refreshed and ready to go again. I'm not a bit like that. I work very intermittently and very hard when I do and usually when I've got some sort of a deadline—deadlines are very necessary for me because I'm inherently lazy, and whereas when I was younger I found writing fascinating and did it all the time, now I have to psych myself into it. No matter how much you hate to admit this, I think that it's something to do with the lowering of your emotional and physical energy as you get older, and writing takes a huge amount out of me, out of anybody. So I tend to throw myself into it completely and not think about anything else, become obsessive and a thoroughly nasty person to live with. I'm like a person who is possessed, I can't concentrate on anything else at all, and to knowingly and voluntarily commit yourself to this seems like self-flagellation sometimes. So in order to make myself work I have to play all these tricks on myself, and I've never learnt good work habits. I've tried to do a certain amount each day. Many, many times I've tried but I can't do it. So there are long periods where I don't write. I do things, give talks and take notes, and read incessantly, go to the movies and watch television, but as I say the actual times when I write are slabs of time when I work long, long hours.

INTERVIEWER: Do you work straight on to a typewriter?

HEWETT: Nearly always, except when I write poetry. With poetry I do handwritten rough drafts and then type them up. Although something funny has been happening with the auto-biography because I've found myself, for the first time in years and years, writing a lot of it in longhand. I don't know why, but there it is.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think of yourself as primarily a poet or a playwright?

HEWETT: Both. I don't make any distinction.

INTERVIEWER: I'd only been living in Australia for a year or so when I saw *Pandora's Cross* and I was knocked out by it. It was so lively and raucous, and so much more alive than the theatre in England at that time that I was astonished by the critics' reaction to it, which wasn't good . . .

HEWETT: No, it wasn't. I can never understand why that play evoked such overall hostility from all the newspapers, and it really did. I remember one review, which was by Jill Neville, who I thought might have been more charitable, in which she really got stuck into the play. She said it was an anti-feminist play because there was a striptease in it, which I thought was ludicrous, especially since that was a rather graceful number with Geraldine Turner doing a classic strip complete with huge fans. They published a picture from the files of me looking particularly dopey—there are always dopey pictures in files—and underneath it the caption, 'Soft in the head?'. I thought that was awful. It had a terrible effect on me, all that Paris Theatre business; it nearly stopped me writing for the stage at the time because it was so traumatic. There was so much resting on it, for all of us, particularly for Jim Sharman. He and Rex Cramphorn had gone out on a limb telling everybody what they were going to do, which was possibly a bad idea because in Australia they love to put the mocker on anybody with ideas. Mine was the first play in their season and because mine failed it meant that Louis Nowra's could only have a very brief season and Patrick White's at that stage couldn't go on at all. The whole Paris experiment went down the drain with me feeling entirely responsible. I remember on the opening night—and this had never happened to me before—Jim had decided that the playwrights would go on to the stage and I didn't want to do that because I could sense the hostility of the audience. I'd said to my daughter who was sitting next to me, 'They hate it'. And they did. Anyway I made a speech and collected my flowers which was all very difficult, and as I walked out into the foyer there were all these young men standing there drinking champagne that Kate Fitzpatrick had managed to get because she was doing television ads for champagne, and they hissed me as I went past! I remember I slunk down on to a seat, and Patrick White—I've always loved him for this—came up and sat deliberately down with me because he saw what was happening. And the following day he sent me a huge bunch of flowers.

INTERVIEWER: What a kind gesture. You know, the line I remember best—which is fairly silly—was when Frangipani Waterfall, played by Julie McGregor, strolled across the stage saying, 'Crack a fat, or your money back. Crack a fat or your money back'. I thought it was a wonderfully lewd expression, and I'd never heard it before, I'd only been in Australia a short time.

HEWETT: I got that line from Bill Shanahan, the agent, who told me that there was a girl up at the Cross that he used to pass on his way to work who would say that. So it was a pinched line, that one.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a favourite play?

HEWETT: Well, you usually feel fondest of the last one, but that doesn't last very long. I suppose I feel fondest of the ones that were important to me for various reasons. Usually because I felt as if I'd broken through into some new territory or succeeded, at least partially, in doing something I'd set out to do. The first one that set up a style for me was *The Chapel Perilous*. It was the first time that I'd tried to work on an open stage with all those open stage techniques, and I learnt a lot doing it. I was working in a marvellous theatre in Perth, which is hardly ever used now, called The New Fortune. It had an enormous effect on me as a writer, because it was constructed as an attempt to copy Shakespeare's Fortune and it was a huge platform between two wings of the arts building at the university with the audience wrapped around three sides. It had three levels we could use and it was the first time any of us realised the depth and the vertical in that sort of theatre and how amazingly dramatic they are. That sort of ideal of a theatre has influenced me in every play I've written since then. The next important one was *The Tatty Hollow Story* which only had a brief season at the Stables, which was the wrong theatre for it in size, in every way, but I'd always had a problem with structure and with it I felt as if I'd got a structure and had overcome that particular problem. Since then, *The Man from Muckinuppin* was important because it proved that I could write a box-office play. I was always called the darling of the academics, and people said I couldn't fill a theatre, but with that one I did. Part of the reason for that was Rodney Fisher, who directed it, and that play was also important because it was an exhilarating and all too rare experience to work with a director who was on the same wavelength. We almost didn't have to talk, which is pretty rare in life, let alone in the theatre. Rodney's production of that play was so fantastic, and it made me feel that I wasn't some weird outsider who was never able to make anything work.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about *The Fields of Heaven*?

HEWETT: I was about to mention that one. I loved writing that play. It was full of things I'd wanted to say for a long time, and possibly I didn't quite succeed but it was a challenging play for me to write because I'd never dealt with a straight story like that and I'd always wanted to try. Another important one was *Golden Valley*. I'd never tried to write for children before, I'd thought about it and I found that a new experience, although in some ways less new than I thought it might be. I discovered, for instance, that a lot of the things you can do in adult theatre you can transfer for children without much hassle. But I liked creating that idealized utopian world of my childhood. Unfortunately there's a problem writing for kids which is that most of the big theatre companies are not interested, because there really isn't enough money in it. It costs just as much to mount as an adult play but you don't get the box office. I'd go on and write more, but really, I don't think there's much point in it.

INTERVIEWER: On the technical side, John Rayment's lighting for *The Fields of Heaven* was exceptional I thought.

HEWETT: It was wasn't it? Marvellous lighting. It's a privilege to have something like that to set off a production.

INTERVIEWER: I also enjoyed the wife very much, Joan Bruce's performance . . .

HEWETT: Well, I wrote that part for her funnily enough. I wrote it deliberately with her in mind, which I don't often do, and luckily she was available. The only other time I've done that was at the Paris, I knew who the actors were going to be and I wrote for them.

INTERVIEWER: In *Fields* you wrote about the destruction of the Western Australian countryside by the rising salt and it was obviously something you feel very strongly about . . .

HEWETT: I lived on a farm until I was twelve, in a bush town in Western Australia, where the ecology is very finely balanced. The salt table is very close to the surface of the land, if you mess around with it you're asking for an appalling amount of trouble. The wheat and the sheep farmers deforested the land almost completely in order to make money and run a lot of sheep. They're paying for it now, of course, dearly.

The interview stopped here for ten minutes or so, while Merv Lilley served tea, and phone messages were relayed.

INTERVIEWER: Your house seems to be a bit of a transit lounge, there are so many people wandering through. How many children do you have?

HEWETT: I have two children living in Sydney, one in Melbourne, one in Perth and one in London. My three sons to the man I lived with for nine years in Sydney, who was the one I ran off with from Western Australia, and two daughters by Merv. Lloyd Davies and I did have a son, but he died when he was three, of leukaemia, which was a shocking experience.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find it a painful process, turning that sort of autobiographical material into fiction?

HEWETT: No, not really. I find it therapeutic and helpful. I don't understand how people live through all the traumas and pain and difficulties of life without having some sort of outlet. I suppose people use it all in other ways. Some people go to psychiatrists I guess, but I use writing. I think a lot of playwrights use their craft to try and make a pattern out of life. I think this is one of the driving forces behind writing, because life is so unpatterned. To be able to play God if you like, to take all that and turn it into some sort of web seems to me to be one of the prime motives for writing anything.

INTERVIEWER: Malouf describes it as the ability to make things happen that should have happened, and vice versa . . .

HEWETT: Exactly. You're in charge. You can twist that web any way that suits you as long as it makes literary sense. And that's a wonderful power to have.

INTERVIEWER: Your poems are more violent than your plays — in fact they are very violent. Does that ever take you by surprise?

HEWETT: Yes, sometimes I get a bit of a shock. Because I'm not in my life a particularly violent person, but there must be a great residue of violence and obsession and — what else — maybe guilt, and maybe anger, hidden away there which comes out in the poetry. Poetry taps all these hidden things in oneself more than any other form of writing. It's more difficult to hide things as a poet. To start off with, most poets are writing in the first person, or in the disguised first person, and also it is a very passionate and emotional medium — unless you're a cool sort of writer, which I'm not. So I suppose in many ways I do find writing poetry the most important form of writing that I've taken part in, and also the one I can least control. I couldn't, for instance, say, 'Right I'll go over there and sit down and write a poem'. Some people can, some people can sit down and write a poem a day but this is always a matter of great astonishment to me. I think it would be wonderful to be that much in control, but I can't do it. If somebody rang me with a deadline for a play, or an article I could make a start, but not with a poem. I write poetry in bursts, and if it has been a long time between poems the only method I can use to get myself going is to read a lot of poetry.

INTERVIEWER: Who do you read when you do that?

HEWETT: I'm mad keen on Berryman and Lowell. I get crazes on poets, for a while I was keen on Sylvia Plath, but I've got over that now. And I love Jan Harry's poetry, she's a Sydney poet. I think she's very good and terribly neglected. She runs a mile from interviews or literary do's which is probably why she's still so unknown. For her last book, *A Sunflower for Van Gogh*, she turned up to her own launch for five minutes and then ran away.

INTERVIEWER: *Bobbin Up* has just been re-published by Virago. Have you ever wanted to write other novels?

HEWETT: I've thought about it. I wrote *Bobbin Up* way back in 1959 and it sold out in about four weeks here, and went into four foreign editions. It was never reprinted in Australia, this is the first English reprint of it — except for the Seven Seas people in East Berlin. I had been writing a lot of short stories, and I decided to write this novel as a whole series of vignettes, which was considered a bit weird then, although of course it wouldn't be now. The trouble is, the didactic bits ruin it. I was still in the Communist Party then, but I was starting to ask a few questions.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get all your information about the mills? Did you ever work in one yourself, because it's a vivid account of what that sort of worker's life was like in the fifties.

HEWETT: When I first came to Sydney in 1949 I worked in a spinning mill, which was a great shock to me because I'd never done anything like that. I worked there for a year, and that's why I wrote about girls living in inner-city Sydney, and their love affairs — husbands, boyfriends, pregnancies etcetera. I was writing about people who had an enormous impact on me, because it was the first time I'd met people from that — what we used to call — lumpen proletariat strata of society. They were practically illiterate and they had nothing to call their own, or very little. And I think I've got them quite well, but as soon as I go off talking about my political ideas and philosophies, it drives me mad. Not because I've turned into an arch-conservative, but because it's done very badly and it's very preachy and irritating.

INTERVIEWER: When you say the didactic bits ruin it, did you take the opportunity to alter any of it before Virago brought it out?

HEWETT: No. I couldn't go back and change that book because I'm a different person. It would be impossible for me. I've been reading some of the English reviews and one of them said, 'Well, she's obviously a Stalinist'. And it's so weird reading that, because they're all reviewing it as if it had only just been written, but to me it's as if somebody else entirely wrote it. But that was the only novel I've written although I've planned several others. In fact *The Fields of Heaven* was going to be a novel originally, and I also wanted to write a novel based on my experiences as an advertising copy-writer for Walton's — where I worked for two years. I wrote about four chapters of it and never went on. I'm never quite sure why I stopped. I think what happened was I'd always wanted to write plays and because there was never any possibility when I started writing of getting them on — Australia never produced Australian plays

— I switched over to writing short stories and kept starting novels and not finishing them. I've just remembered I wrote a novel when I was eighteen and I burnt it. Probably just as well! I started writing quite late for the theatre, and it happened when all that explosion of Australian plays began in Melbourne and Sydney in 1967 and 1968 because at last it seemed possible to write for the theatre. I think I decided that I was coming to it so late and had such a lot to learn, that if I was going to be any good I'd better concentrate on that one thing, instead of being a Jack of all trades and master of none.

INTERVIEWER: What about writing prose for your autobiography, how are you finding that?

HEWETT: Well suddenly I've got interested in prose again. I haven't written prose for so long, not even short stories — only the occasional article and reviews — but I'm enjoying it. I'm enjoying the freedom it gives you. Because it seems to me — and maybe I'm wrong about this — that writing prose is a much freer activity than writing a play which has to be structured into two or three acts, or a poem which has to be even more structured. You have more leeway, and you can write about how you think, which is impossible on stage unless you give your characters endless monologues, which are fairly boring.

INTERVIEWER: So we might see a second novel one day?

HEWETT: God knows. I don't know. You might. I've always believed that I didn't have the gifts to be a novelist.

INTERVIEWER: But *Bobbin Up* was successful, and it's doing well again.

HEWETT: That's true. But I don't think it's a very good novel. It's got its moments. But the Communist bits let the whole thing down.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think Communists are better accepted now — that the attitude towards Communists has changed since you joined the Party?

HEWETT: Oh yes. The Communist Party has become a historical incident. Things are only considered frightening and destructive to a way of life when they've got some strength, and the Communist Party has become so fragmented that it's virtually disappeared as a political force in Australia. I suspect to have been or to be a Communist in Queensland would still put you beyond the pale. In Sydney I think it's regarded as a bit passé and endearingly old.

INTERVIEWER: Do you ever go back to Perth?

HEWETT: Yes. *The Man from Muckinuppin* was performed there because it was commissioned for the one hundred and fiftieth celebrations. I went back there for that, and then again with Rodney Fisher for *The Fields of Heaven* Which was also commissioned from there. I did a Writer-in-Residence stint at my old university about three years ago, and I went back late last year for an academic Australian drama conference, I was giving a paper.

INTERVIEWER: Do you enjoy going back?

HEWETT: As long as I know I can get out again, it's alright.

INTERVIEWER: You couldn't live much more differently here, could you? From a farm outside Perth, to the most inner-city suburb you could find on a major road, with a brothel next door . . .

HEWETT: I suspect that's why I like to live here, because I did come from such a different environment. When I go back I enjoy meeting my old friends again, and I like to see my sister who is a doctor in Perth, and I've got my son there so I like to see him. But I'm always ready to leave again, I could never live there again. It's too far away, it's too isolated, too paranoid and too self-congratulatory. When I go there, some people still say to me, 'Oh, you'll be back', they say, as if I hadn't cut myself off from the place years ago. It sounds like the knell of doom to me. They say, 'How can you possibly live in those dreadful Eastern States . . .' Mind you, they say that about Sydney everywhere, really. If you go to South Australia and a taxi-driver asks you where you come from and you say Sydney, they look at you

as if you're about to start a brothel up on the spot.

INTERVIEWER: Talking about brothels, you're in the heart of their area here, do you find it entertaining?

HEWETT: At first I did, but it's so bloody noisy, which is the worst part about living here. It's also fairly depressing because most of the girls are about fifteen, they've come from the country and they're nearly all on smack, which is what they're working to buy. People laugh at me because when they're out there in the middle of the winter in those mini-skirts and tights and nothing else I worry about them. I think they should have leg-warmers and umbrellas. It's all pretty sleazy really, the conversations I hear outside the window are mind-blowing. I know all the prices for everything.

INTERVIEWER: What are they?

HEWETT: It depends. It's twenty-five dollars for a suck-off, thirty dollars for a fuck and then the trimmings are more.

INTERVIEWER: *Pandora's Cross* was centred around a very different type of Cross—a bohemian, lively place . . .

HEWETT: Well Jim came to me and said that he'd always wanted to do a play about the Cross and he thought it might interest me, which it did. I'd always wanted to do that too. He wanted a contrast between the old Cross which he thought I might remember—which I did to a certain extent—and the Cross as it was then in 1978. So I thought that the best thing I could do was to take an old group of bohemians and see what was impacting on them years later.

INTERVIEWER: Did you base the main character on Rosaleen Norton—the Witch of the Cross?

HEWETT: Very vaguely. I was trying to think of a group which would be fairly basic around the Cross during that period and I'd never met Rosaleen Norton, but I'd heard all about her, as everybody had. So I went down to the Mitchell Library and looked up that book of hers—which you still have to sign for, you know, it's got people fucking panthers, you wouldn't think anybody would worry about it any more—and I read newspaper clippings, and I used that basis to start from.

INTERVIEWER: As a playwright, what do you think on a first night when you see people walking around as the characters you've created? Do you think, 'Yes, that's exactly as I saw them', or 'No, that's quite wrong' . . .

HEWETT: Both of those things. But I always go to rehearsals, some playwrights don't, but I always do, I go to the lot. In fact that's one of the most enjoyable periods for me, and I suspect that one of the reasons I like rehearsals is that they are a chance to get away from that solitary loneliness. You become part of a co-operative, and I love that. It's great fun. It can be hard work too, and painful, when you have to do re-writes and you're struggling with every word, but I love it, and I don't mind re-writing—some people do but I don't. I'd be loath to alter a poem or a short story, but theatre must work, and when you see it up there in rehearsals things become clear to you that you weren't able to imagine when you were writing. Actors, too, sometimes have an input into a character which takes it in quite a different direction. Sometimes it's better, sometimes it's worse, but it's always interesting. Actors often pick up on something which is there in the script that you—as the writer—weren't terribly aware of, or they'll pick up on one facet of the character and build on it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, a different director and a different cast can completely change the same play, can't they?

HEWETT: Absolutely. That's why theatre is such a fluid medium. Even the theatre space can alter a play. It depends on the input of so many different people—the lighting, the costumes, everything. In that way it's quite dissimilar to any other form of writing. If you think as a writer that every word you write is sacred and that only your vision can work then it probably isn't a good idea to write for the theatre and it would be an even worse idea to write films.

INTERVIEWER: Are you tempted to write film-scripts?

HEWETT: I've always wanted to. My grandfather had a picture show when I was a little girl, which he had right through my teenage years and I used to work in it giving out tickets and that sort of thing, for my pocket-money. I went to all those movies for free, it was great. I grew up with movies even though we lived in the country and only went to Perth—the big city—once a year for the Royal Show and stayed up there for a month or so. I used to go to the movies all the time while we were there. When my children watch the old movies on television they say, 'Who's that?', and I know who the actors are, who they married, when they divorced, all that stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still go to them a lot now?

HEWETT: A fair bit. I'm trying to write this movie script now—which is overdue of course—I love the challenge of new things. I suppose it's related marginally to writing for the theatre, but only marginally. I've had to learn to shut up and have visuals rather than talking. I suppose in my early old age I've found something new, although I'd never leave the theatre. With film scripts you don't have much control, and when the film appears it might not seem to have anything to do with your words at all, and I do find that worrying, but there's no way I can change that.

INTERVIEWER: You obviously have a great love of music, where does that come from?

HEWETT: Well, it probably goes back to the films too. All those Hollywood musicals and Busby Berkeley numbers, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, they had an enormous effect on me as a child and I think that's where it all began. You know, you can get away with a lot of things on the stage using music that you would never be able to get away with otherwise. Because I write this open form of theatre where you don't have a curtain going clunk at the end of a scene, I like one set to stand symbolically for what's happening, because of all of that, you need breaks for the audience to get their breath, and songs make wonderful breaks. They also mean that the character can sing things that they couldn't possibly say in speech, and it works, partly because Australians—I think—have a great affinity for musicals, they like them and they're able to relate to them. I like the extension music gives to a play, even though I've never played an instrument. I used to sing a bit when I was younger, the blues, stuff like that. I still make up dreadful tunes, in the bath usually, and everybody laughs at me. So I have to have somebody to write my music. I've worked quite a lot with Jim Cotter, a young Australian composer, and I've worked with a few others. In *The Fields of Heaven* my daughter wrote the two songs because she's a good singer—she used to sing in a band—and she can also read music. My youngest son used to play in a rock band, and my eldest son in a very good guitarist, so the interest has continued down the line.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think children and writing go together?

HEWETT: They don't. Well, it certainly makes it harder, particularly when they're little. They're useful to me now, they bring me information. Kate writes poetry, so we have that in common. Tom, my youngest son, has just started writing—short stories, and now a novel. My eldest son is a pure mathematician working for the CSIRO, but he's always been interested in writing. When the boys were little, and we were living in dire poverty and I was trying to be a Communist Party functionary and God knows what else, I didn't write a word, but when the girls were little all those years later, it was a different situation. I went back to university to finish my degree when I was thirty-six, and then I worked at the university as a senior tutor for nine years, in the English Department. Which was always a great shock to me, I constantly thought that somebody would come in and tell me I was a fraud and throw me out!

INTERVIEWER: Why?

HEWETT: Because I could never pass French. It was always the bug-bear. I tried to pass it for three years, and never could. I always thought the woman who tried to teach me French—who was still there all those years later—would come in and say, 'Dorothy Hewett, you are a fraud. I tried to teach you, and you could never pass French. Leave now'.

INTERVIEWER: Did you enjoy teaching?

HEWETT: I loved it. It's the only other job apart from writing that I've ever truly loved. *But* I got so enthusiastic about it, and it took up so much of my time, that the only time I ever had to write was in the vacations. So when I got a grant—I put in for one when Whitlam got in and to my astonishment I got three years—and my mother had died and left me the house I lived in and her own house, so for the first time with all these kids and everything, it became possible to move back to Sydney which is what I wanted to do, and to also give up working full-time at the university. But I only managed to write at all when I was studying at the university because my mother paid for a part-time babysitter, and then when I was working there I had a house-keeper in four days a week. There is nothing more liberating for women with children who want to write than a good house-keeper, but you have to have the money to pay them. I had some bad ones, but I had some good ones, and I finally finished up with this astonishing Scotch lady who was fabulous and who stayed with me for years. She not only helped me bring up my daughters but she understood about my writing. She would stop people ringing up, and she would take messages in this wonderfully la-di-la telephone voice, which deflected *everybody*. Without her I never would have been able to work and write. Also, when Merv and I married, I was thirty-six and he was forty, I'd been married once and lived with this other guy for nine years and Merv had never been married before; therefore one would think that he wasn't a very good candidate for all this. He inherited three stepsons and then had two daughters, but he was great, fantastic with kids. He loved cooking, still does, and was a bit of a treasure all in all.

INTERVIEWER: What does he do?

HEWETT: He works from home now. But he's had all sorts of jobs. He's been a seaman, a timber cutter, a cane cutter, a fencer, a painter and docker—all that sort of thing. He's sixty-five now, although he doesn't look it. He's an enormously strong, healthy man, and I envy him his tremendous energy.

INTERVIEWER: We've touched on this before, but what do you think drew you from the country to the cities, which you've since written about in so many plays, like *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, for example . . .

HEWETT: Life. The sense of being part of some sort of energy and life going on in the world, rather than being separated from it. If I hadn't been brought up in such an isolated environment, perhaps the city wouldn't have been so fascinating to me, although I still quite often long for the country. My ideal existence would be to have a house in the country as well and be able to escape to it. But financially that's pretty impossible, so if I've got to make a choice I'd rather be in the city. Anyway, if you're going to be a playwright you've got to be where the theatre is. You might be able to be a novelist or a poet miles away from anywhere, but to be a playwright and not to be near the centre of things is not really valid. And I can't remember a time—even as a young girl—when I didn't want to escape from Western Australia, although then I wanted to go to London or New York, or Paris, anywhere that sounded romantic. But the war broke out when I was sixteen and at the time when I might have done something like that it was impossible. In fact just before I married Lloyd Davies my parents were so despairing of me and the mess I'd made of my life, they were going to pay for me to go to London, to drama school—because what I really wanted to do then was be an actress. Then the war broke out, and a little later I got married—which was a fairly perverse thing to do now I come to think about it—and after that I was embroiled up to my neck in the Communist Party, and you certainly didn't run off to Paris or anywhere when you were in the Party. You stayed and slogged it out, and that was your role in life. So I suppose Sydney is the closest I've ever come to leading what I would call a cosmopolitan existence.

INTERVIEWER: Have you travelled a lot?

HEWETT: I went away a couple of times but I went behind the Iron or Bamboo Curtain. I went on some delegations and they were good experiences. I went to China in 1962, and twice to Moscow and Leningrad, but anywhere else was considered rather wicked, so I didn't get to London until about four years ago. I loved it too, other people kept saying, 'Oh, London's terrible now, it's all depressing and boring and awful', but to me it seemed wonderful. Then I went to Canada a few years ago, and spent a week-end in New York, but you couldn't really say I've travelled a lot. I still have a love affair with Sydney though. It's a marvellous place.

—Sydney, June 1985

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