

High Stacks and Needles:

Wollongong, NSW

I wouldn't have gone back to Wollongong at all, except that I'd been 'commissioned' earlier in the year to do a week of workshops with the unemployment support group there. I came down over the weekend, straight from a similar exercise in Coffs Harbour the week before, running late and low on energy from the outset.

The Wollongong support project was located near the main street of town, in a converted warehouse down a laneway. It wasn't easy to find, and when I got there nobody seemed to know what I was there to do, although the general expectation that I would do something extraordinary was high. Patsy Campbell had invited some people from State Office in Sydney down to see the show.

No meeting had been set up, so I went around the Centre talking to the few people who were there. Most of them had no interest whatsoever in taking part. Alan, a young red-head kid who Patsy later told me was a chronic alcoholic, said that he would "be there" for a meeting. So did Rodney and Marie.

It wasn't much of a start, and things didn't improve in the afternoon. Alan didn't show, and the reaction from the few others who drifted in and dominated my attention throughout the meeting was distinctly hostile. It was a level of pure, total cynicism I'd never experienced before; as if two totally conflicting perspectives of reason existed – theirs and mine – which shared no fundamental assumptions. Everything was a fucked scene: making statements was fucked, hope was fucked, action was fucked.

It was only later, after the failed meeting, that I learned that these were heroin people. The memory of the crushing antipathy will stay with me a long time, along with images of the needles and the packet of white powder in the bathroom at Marie's, a 'support volunteer', or the ones in the fridge at the Centre.

A few participants finally got together. We workshopped a couple of scenes, but they were stilted and lacklustre. Rodney undertook to work on a mural as a back-piece for the play; another strong image, this time of blackness and a terrible concealed violence, night over the city.

On Wednesday night we attempted a rehearsal. It was superficial to say the least, drawing heavily on scenes from previous plays with a heavy imposition of devices that I knew to be effective with new audiences. There was no doubt the project was in trouble, and about the only way I could see of saving it was to look right down the throat of that black cynicism and reflect it back to the audience. At the end of the night Rodney came in and threw a can of red paint over the picture. I told myself that even that said something, and left the wreckage there.

By Friday night, with eighty of ninety people in the audience, I'd pieced together fifteen minutes of pretty shaky theatre. I was hyperactive, trying to sustain the desperate energy that the play would need for an effective performance when Rodney walked in with an armful of smack and said he couldn't go through with it.

There are some frontiers of understanding I haven't been able to cross, and that between myself and the heroin user is one of them. I have yet to devise an adequate technique for coping with the addict's ability to rationalise his or her cynicism, self destructiveness and total abuse of commitment. The only connection with the real world is the encounter with the Man downtown, and even that is prompted by the grim necessity of habit.

There's a lot of heroin in Wollongong, and it's tempting to speculate about cause and effect. Perhaps heroin is a cousin to the violence in the hotels, the attacks on Vietnamese, the school-girls along the Dollar Mile. Wollongong is a violent place, and at its centre are the steel mills.

Day and night, these behemoths rumble and grunt and hiss with ominous portent over the city; by day an image of invincibility, by night hadean. There is an aura of menace about them, and it seems more logical than not to assume that this influence has permeated, at least to some extent, the local sub-culture. In addition, the links between the mills and the local economy are umbilical; the town couldn't survive without them, and nobody with any sense of politics would dismiss the idea that, when the tough decisions are being made, the mills don't have the muscle to tip the balance a little....

I haven't figured it out yet, but I do remember how Bill described an accident he'd witnessed at the Mill the previous year:

"He'd only just started, see and when he jumped back he went straight into the spill-tray. The steel just ran down into the tray and poured all over him. His lowered arm was sticking up, but it was too hot to get anywhere near him. When I got hold of his hand, his arm came off at the elbow like a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken."
