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## The Beginnings — a note on La Mama (1973)

Provenance:

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Photo below: Two Buddhas: Kris Hemensley in his bookshop, Collected Works, Melbourne, 21 December 2010, photo by John Tranter



Paragraph 1 follows:

THE FIRST POETS WORKSHOP at the La Mama Cafe-Theatre in Carlton, Melbourne, on September 3, 1968, which 17 people attended (Mike Dugan filling in when Ken Taylor couldn't make the opening, reading a selection of new English poetry, MacSweeney, and the Liverpool poets, while I read my own poems), had been preceded by twelve months of no less memorable activity.

2:

In the early days, mid-67, Glen Tomasetti had been responsible for Sunday-afternoon poetry and song entertainments. Later in 1967, Betty Burstall organised a series of Sunday-evening readings involving poets associated with Melbourne University, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Andrew Taylor, Wilson Blackman, Jon Dawson and Jack Hibberd. There were two interlopers on this generally polite scene, radio-producer Ken Taylor, and myself. My base at the time was the New Theatre, Melbourne (along with Bill Beard,) but after the performance of my first play at La Mama in December, 1967, we gradually disassociated ourselves from New Theatre. Beard had just begun writing poetry, and prose à la Beckett, at this time. Although Taylor and myself read with Wallace-Crabbe on one occasion, and John Romeril (better known as a playwright today) also read there, it wasn't until Beard and I read as the curtain-raiser to a short Peter Schumann play (directed by Michael Hudson) throughout its run, that the seeds for a regular workshop were sown. The enthusiasm for the readings was obvious, and over the season we realised a following. When Betty Burstall offered me an evening at La Mama later in the year, we had no idea that what we envisaged as local community would become within a year, the hub of the new poetry in Australia. Ken Taylor had come to poetry while on a Harkness Fellowship in the US, in 1965-66. There he had

encountered John Gill, editor of NEW: American and Canadian Poetry (New York) who had encouraged and published Taylor's poems. Gill's suggestion that Taylor get things moving in Australia came at a ripe time. There was an infectious spirit abounding then, that now was the time to begin again. 'Vietnam' was the shorthand for all that was ugly, evil and obsolescent in the world. The need for the new was felt by many people in every situation from the socio-political to the literary. As a result, the continuous confusion of motives and modes was to be expected a merry maelstrom, an often beautiful anarchy! I heard Taylor twice in the winter and spring of 1967. He referred to John Ashbery, and Snyder, Ginsberg and others, and waved a copy of NEW. He was my man! When I appeared there in October, 1967, I read a poem For Ken Taylor. Word of that got to him, and around Christmas we met. When they need the word, it will be here, as Taylor sagely said. The fruits of our summer communions were, 1) to make a book together (which was finally published in June, 1968, a selection of my work 1966-67, and part one of his epic *At Valentines*), and 2) to read my poetry on Ken's series New Melbourne Writing, on ABC radio. I was also planning the first issue of a magazine, *Our Glass*, to be run-off on the New Theatre gestetner, a four-page type-sheet. I planned to publish the poets we encountered at La Mama, e.g. Taylor, myself, Beard, Romeril, the artist Elain Rushbrooke, plus friends in England, folk-singer Kal Fenton (the painter and writer Kelvin Bowers), and soul-mate Colin Symes.

3:

We had seen other new magazines (the established magazines didn't interest us in the slightest): *Crossbeat* which emanated from the famous Wayside Chapel, Sydney, a beat-religious mag; and *Mok*, from Adelaide: but neither of these seemed seriously engaged

to the issues as we apprehended them in Melbourne. We were thus excited to discover *Crosscurrents* magazine, edited in Melbourne by Michael Dugan, which appeared two weeks before my own. Both Taylor and I wrote to Dugan immediately, sending him our life work!, inviting him to our next La Mama reading. It is interesting that even in this small city, Dugan hadn't heard of the La Mama readings, that presumably without co-ordination groups might exist in mutual isolation.

4:

The poets published in the first issues of *Our Glass* and *Crosscurrents* make interesting reading: Beard, Hemensley, Dugan, Taylor, Shelton Lea (who joined with the short-lived rivals of La Mama, Sweeny Reed's glam-poets at Strines, Carlton, featuring that enigma, Russel Deeble!), Paul Smith (then a Cheshire's bookseller), Romeril, Rushbrooke, Charles Buckmaster (whose address, Gruyere, was so unlikely that I was sure it was a hoax, but on consulting Mike Dugan, found that the same young poet, experiencing problems at high school, inspired by a single line of William Golding's *Pincher Martin* he claimed, and a prolific poet if ever there was one, was real), Mal Morgan, Terry Gillmore ('influences — Pound, W.C. Williams, Olson, et al': reading that in *Crosscurrents* made my heart flutter!), Geoffrey Egglestone, Frances Yule, Andy Jach, Norman Campbell Thomson, Maurice Benton. Add to these, Ian Robertson, who was a friend of Buckmaster, whom Buckmaster published in his own type-sheet, *The Great Auk*, in September, 1968, just prior to the first La Mama Poets Workshop Reading, and you have the nucleus of the poets who gravitated towards La Mama and/ or the little magazines, type-sheets, that sprang out of the place.

5:

The readings and magazines were two parts of the same phenomenon. That is what we know as 'La Mama' or, 'tis whispered, 'The Carlton School'. After September, 1968, published and reading poets included Lorin Ford, John Jenkins (who corresponded with me even after he had attended La Mama, before overcoming shyness and introducing himself), Graeme Smith, Jeff Edmunds, Alison Hall, Andrew Donald, Paul Adler, Bill Green. Of course not all poets who read at La Mama or published in the little magazines were part of that La Mama influence. Cyril Goode, Wilma Hedley, Louis Clarke, Bill Downing, David Martin and umpteen others (90 in all before I gave it away in preparation for our overseas trip in August, 1969) joined in the fray. In 1969, Garrie Hutchinson and Marc Radyzner were first seen. Michael Dransfield, Richard Tipping, John Tranter also published in the magazines.

6:

Interstate visitors included Gillmore, Nigel Roberts, Rob Tillet, Bill Jones, Ken Hudson. That poets should come from Sydney or Adelaide or Perth (as Roberts responded to my question of news of Sydney poetry, aghast, 'but this is where it's at!'), was all the comfort La Mama required to continue; in fact, its own momentum saw to its survival, right through till 1970, when it combined with the Melbourne Arts Co-Operative. It is interesting to read the mss. submitted by poets from all over Australia and New Zealand, in 1970, to *Dark Ages Journal* (A Celebration), being gathered by Buckmaster, Hutchinson, and Tipping, and others, which unfortunately or otherwise never appeared, and find one editor's comment attached to an unknown's poem, 'mainstream-Melbourne which doesn't work.' For 'Melbourne' read 'La Mama', and for its format influence read the little magazines of the day, especially

*Auk*, *Flagstones*, who ran well into 1970, and so developed trends evident in the previously expired *Our Glass* and *Crosscurrents*.

7:

JUST BEFORE I left Melbourne in August 1969, I had seen a copy of *Poetry Magazine* (Sydney), which showed evidence of the insinuation of the New into the belly of the Establishment! There were tales reaching us of Sydney poet, Bob Adamson, a live-wire, fighting a battle 'up there'. It is well known now of the success Adamson achieved in Sydney, turning the magazine of the Poetry Society of Australia over to the legion of the new (a process which is still continuing to the present day), symbolically changing its name to *New Poetry*. Melbourne poetry's relations with Sydney were mixed. True, *Free Poetry* (edited in rotation by Roberts, Gillmore, and John Goodall), was inspired by *Our Glass* to 'make your own' and was in spirit 'one of us'. But John Tranter's hoax magazine, *Free Grass*, had us all mystified in 1968! He had us believing in it, but if it was intended as an Ern Malley it failed! It must be remembered that the bulk of the new poets were not heirs to the Australian Literary Tradition, but rather were an illiterati, unschooled, and read only as far as new writing of the post-war (and mostly American) epoch. They were the first movement of poets, artist, playwrights for 25 years. For the poets it was the beginning of a New Australian Poetry, that is to say, part of contemporary and modern world writing, localised in Australia. (In his reply to my off-the-cuff song in *Meanjin* 1970, Carl Harrison-Ford balked at naming the movement for what it was, the New Australian Poetry. We had no such doubts, although its title worried us somewhat. The reason for the ideological abstentions from Tom Shapcott's *Australian Poetry Now* being solicited in 1969, principally myself, Ken Taylor and Bill Beard, was that we knew that all the

poetry which was not of now, all the attitudes, parading and posturing would come in on our backs as it were. The whole idea seemed lamentably parochial. I suppose being children of the universe, nothing short of a constellation of white light would have sufficed! Penguin Books had approached Taylor and myself, to edit an anthology in their series of new writing around the world. We debated it for hours; rejecting the proposition on similar grounds as the other. It seemed to us that the community, the poets, La Mama, was what was important: that the introduction of commerce would be opposite to its principles; that again, other poets would be forced on us, for reasons of balance or the definitive. I had serious doubts as to the literary worthiness of our group, and the vanity of the biographical notes of the APN contributors, and the rarity of outstanding work, seemed to vindicate our stand a year or so later. On the other hand, it was a record of the diversity and degree of change amongst the new poets, and did attract other aspirant poets, was a focus for them, a bridgehead against isolation. But the 'Now' part of the title is today, pertinent only to nostalgia.

8:

Tranter's rejection of some of our number from his magazine *Transit* was interpreted then as inter-city political spite: I for one couldn't understand his criticism of my work as nice, sincere, descriptive but not of the 'subtle use of complexities' he was seeking. However, if one seeks to ascertain differences between the Melbourne and Sydney schools, which prevail to an extent even now, five glorious years on!, Melbourne as the home of the 'Honest Joe' poem, and Sydney as the seat of sophisticated, attitudinal, and 'abstract' poetry, is a fair enough assessment, which can be traced right back to Tranter's 1968 criteria. Adelaide and Melbourne were always politically involved, and referred to readings and magazines

as 'free areas'. The new poets in Melbourne were mostly always isolated from the Academy and from the literary pages. Sydney, on the other hand, had sympathetic academics participating in the new writing, and today has its men and women regularly reviewing. Most of the Sydney poets have a collection under their belts. In Melbourne as many of the originals have stopped writing, as has been collected.

9:

Geoff Egglestone in an essay in the *Whole Earth Sun Moon Catalogue*, October, 1973, refers to Ken Taylor and myself as 'elder brothers'. Ken Taylor occupied a sage-position, father-councillor, away from the actual readings. He was a mixture of the grave, and the humorous. He was not a literary man. He was a man from outside. The past tense is due to his absence from writing and publication for three years. He was a strong presence behind myself, Bill Beard, Charles Buckmaster, Ian Robertson, John Jenkins and others doubtless after 'my time', e.g. Jenkins 'A School-Story for Ken Taylor' is resonant with Taylor's voice. He never sought to influence, and we probably underestimated his modesty and participatory reluctance. That there exists no collection of his work is the biggest omission in present-day publishing. My own relationship with the La Mama poets was intense to say the least. I knew La Mama in terms of literary group as well as a family. I lamented being out of the country at the time they were all piling into Taylor's VW and taking off to the coast. Taylor's Pranksters I imagined. I was closest poetically to Beard, Buckmaster, Robertson, Taylor, Jenkins, Adler, Hutchinson and the Gillmores. I was as friendly with Benton, Egglestone, Dugan, and Morgan. When *Our Glass* finished, I saw the flame kept alight in *Flagstones* (Robertson's

magazine). The politics was a kind of commune-ism, the power of poets being unquestioned.

10:

When I returned to Melbourne in November, 1972, I found what I had suspected, that La Mama, as far as poetry was concerned, existed neither in body nor spirit. Within a month of the return, the youngest of our 1968 group, who in the previous three years had received a measure of acceptance, publishing two small collections and anthologised in Heseltine's Penguin anthology (*Australian Verse*, 1972) Charles Buckmaster, killed himself. This was the final straw in the disintegration of the Melbourne group. Ken Taylor, involved in demanding and successful television work, had stopped writing, as too had Ian Robertson. Bill Beard was in NSW. Some poets had gone to the country, and never returned in an active sense (Terry and Alison Gillmore for example). Maurice Benton was killed by a tram mid-72. There were stories of personality and faction fights, or the abdication of poets from poetry to careerism. The only magazine in the city (and there were only two) to keep a link with the old community, was Mal Morgan's *Parachute*. What desolation.

11:

In the sense that the national gathering in *Mok* No. 5, August 1969, was not only a coming of age for the Adelaide magazine but for the hitherto underground Australian poetry, that the spadework over, La Mama alumni in company with their Sydney and Adelaide contemporaries could emerge in a new and meaningful Australian poetry, then La Mama is alive today. Its contribution to the New Australian Poetry cannot be underestimated. In the sense of it as that particular time, it is past. The lesson is, that communities live

and die, and poets are as mortal as any other citizen. The rider is from Seed by Charles Buckmaster: 'And write no epitaph, lay seed.'

— Kris Hemensley, December, 1973

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