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Political Theatre in the 'Climate of Fear': Censorship, Dissent, and Kennett's Victoria

Introduction

Between 1992 and 1999, the Victorian state Liberal government under the leadership of Premier Jeff Kennett carried out an extensive state-wide restructure. Under the slogan *Victoria: on the Move*, during this period the government engaged in widespread privatisation of state-owned assets and services; implemented unprecedented legislation effectively dismantling collective industrial protections; and conducted a widespread restructure of the public sector, education, health, community programs, and social services.[1] Occurring during an ongoing global context of economic recession, and a national context of wage restraint and high unemployment, the *Victoria: on the Move* project was, at first, met with a wave of protest across the state (Lennon and Boyle 1992). However, by Kennett's second term in 1996, the uproar that raged throughout the early 1990s was barely a whimper, with legislative and litigious action establishing a "climate of fear" among dissenting Victorians (Glow and Johanson 2004, 138; Bessant 1999, 9).

Against this context, two mainstays of the Australian community theatre scene, Stefo Nantsou and Steve Payne, began developing a play that would capture the lived experience of this period of neoliberal expansion.[2] Made in collaboration with community members, ambulance workers, trade unionists, and domestic violence survivors and support workers, *The Essentials* (1997) explores the occupational and domestic powerlessness felt throughout Kennett's Victoria. The play offers a concentrated look into this period through two interweaving narratives: one following a group of ambulance workers through a corporate team-building retreat and subsequent restructure; and the other following high-profile businessman John and his wife Judith over years of escalating domestic violence. In this article, I regard *The Essentials* as an archive of Kennett's Victoria, and I examine this from two vantage points. In the first half of this article, I will analyse the unpublished play script as an archive of the period, drawing upon its narrative and themes as insights into the lived experience of *Victoria:*

on the Move. I begin with a brief overview of some of the major changes introduced throughout this reform project with a specific focus on the restructuring of the Metropolitan Ambulance Service in 1993, before expanding upon this narrative by way of *The Essentials* script. In the second section, I turn to the *realpolitik* of creating political theatre in a "climate of fear". Indeed, while the play's themes and intent were political from the outset, as a reflection of Kennett's Victoria, *The Essentials* took on a new significance when it was subjected to censorship by its supporting bodies on grounds of defamation. This discussion is informed by the production archive of *The Essentials* housed in Zeal Theatre's private collection, which contains an up-close look into the processes by which censorship occurs. The focus of this section is largely on the philosophical issue of artistic censorship, however, for archival researchers, making sense of *The Essentials* archive raises a methodological issue: how does an archive capture the words left unsaid, the knowing glances and pregnant pauses that shape and inform the way events are experienced? How can one document a "climate of fear" when it is characterised by silence and self-censorship? In this article, I draw upon archival and labour history to argue that Victoria in the 1990s represents a period of significant neoliberal advancement, and that the suppression of dissenting art throughout this period reflects what former Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley identified as the "economic rationalist form of censorship" (Soorley 1997, 8).

Victoria: on the Move

After a decade under a state Labor government, the election of the Kennett Liberal government in October 1992 ushered in a transformative period for the state of Victoria. Throughout the 1980s, expansive economic and industrial reforms at the federal level had restructured the national economy in line with an emergent paradigm of neoliberal policy, then known as 'economic rationalism', which had become manifest through a protracted period of national deindustrialisation, inflation-first policy, and a significant diminution in organised labour power.

The *Victoria: on the Move* project commenced immediately following the election, exacerbating an already volatile social context. The full scope of this reform project is so vast there is not room here to detail the extent of changes introduced throughout this period, however, to contextualise *The Essentials*, an overview of a few significant areas are warranted. The first and major reform target was the public sector. Shortly after the election Kennett amended the *Public Sector Management Act*, transferring responsibility for the public sector from the independently managed Public Service Board directly to the Premier's office (Barton and van Onselen 2007, 31). This consolidated and significantly increased Kennett's power as Premier: state government departments were reduced from 22 to 13 and their governance restructured, with Chief Executive Officers appointed personally by Kennett assuming department leadership over all elected ministers (Barton and van Onselen 2007, 31). 210 local governments were consolidated to just 78, with 1,700 public servants retrenched and new commissioners appointed by the Premier were placed in charge of the local councils and their elected heads (Bessant 1999, 6). Elsewhere in the public service, education programs aimed at "fiscal responsibility" led to the retrenchment of 7,000 teaching roles and the closure of 350

public schools (Bessant 1999, 6). Formerly state-owned services and facilities such as electricity, gas, and prisons were tendered out to private corporations (see Cahill and Beder 2005; O'Neill 2000). Budget cuts to hospitals led to major reductions in community and health services including hospital beds, as well as the mass retrenchment of nurses and other hospital staff.

Beyond the public sector, industrial relations were the other major target in the state government's reform project. While industrial relations are typically the domain of the federal government, one of the earliest pieces of legislation introduced by the Kennett government, the *Employee Relations Act 1992* (ERA), intensified the limitations on organised labour at the state-level and fractured the unity of the national labour movement. At the time the Act was released, enterprise bargaining was rocking industrial relations across the country. The ERA decentralised union activity and restricted their reach even further by abolishing former state award wages and introducing individual employment agreements (IEA) in all unionised workplaces in the state (Barton and van Onselen 2007; O'Neill 2000; Barrett and Blackwell 1998). These IEA were most aggressively pushed in the public service, as Rowena Barrett and Jim Blackwell detail:

> […] on 1 March 1993 Victorian public servants […] had their terms and conditions, as governed by determinations and regulations of the Public Service Board, unilaterally transferred to 'deemed individual employment agreements' […] Despite the Premier's repeated assurances that 'no Victorian worker would be worse off' some existing working conditions were abolished including annual leave loading and two public holidays. […] Furthermore, the government's claims that employment contracts for executive officers would introduce greater efficiency and flexibility were inconsistent with the fact that the contracts they were presented with were largely non-negotiable […] (1998, 70)

A contentious area of this reform project was the privatisation of the state's ambulance dispatch service. Early in 1993, the service was tendered out to US software company, Intergraph, who specialised in GPS mapping technology. Intergraph was to create a bespoke map of the state's roads and use its GPS routing to find the best route to emergencies, thus reducing dispatch times. It was a controversial area for privatisation. The dispatch service was heavily unionised under the Ambulance Employees Australia Victoria (AEAV) and operated with great autonomy under the internal management of a team of qualified and experienced senior paramedics.

Shortly after their acquisition, the newly appointed CEO of the Metropolitan Ambulance Service (MAS), Jack Firman, set about a broad "cultural change" among the ambulance officers. Between 1993 and 1994, what were formerly Station Manager and Assistant Station Manager positions were made redundant and consolidated into a single Team Manager position, complete with a new job description. This meant that Station Managers – men between 45 and 60, secure in their jobs with over 20 years' experience and a decade off from retirement – were made to reapply for their jobs. Those who were

retained would be required to relinquish their collective agreement and sign on to a new IEA with reduced conditions (see Barrett and Blackwell 1998).

The Intergraph takeover was disastrous. As a US firm, Intergraph had no existing Australian mapping data at the time of acquisition. Although they had quoted two years for a bespoke program to be built, as a condition of the tender the state government demanded that the program be built in nine months. As a result, the mapping software was riddled with programming issues – including simple spelling errors. This meant that paramedics were receiving incorrect directions and were unable to reach their emergencies, while the recent mass retrenchment of experienced paramedics meant the services were overrun with new and undertrained staff unfamiliar with the roads. Together, this resulted in numerous preventable deaths across the state, many of which led to negligence lawsuits in the Coroner's Court.[3] The Intergraph scandal was widely publicised in the media, and Firman subsequently disgraced in the wake of a Royal Commission into the MAS in 1994. While the Commission would investigate in depth the negligence of those involved in the takeover, it did not uncover the extent of the insidious means through which this "cultural change" was enforced. This is the Victoria in which *The Essentials* is set.

The Essentials

The Essentials is structured as two concurrent and eventually converging narratives, one following a group of ambulance officers and their experience of a corporate restructure, and the other following Judith, a high society photographer, and her relationship with wealthy businessman, John. These two narratives represent the lived experience of Kennett's Victoria from an occupational and domestic point-of-view. The script is laden with references to these changes. Across three acts, its dual narratives span approximately six years: the first follows ambulance workers through the beginnings and aftermath of a corporate takeover, with Act I taking place at Woodend, a "team building" retreat; the second follows the relationship between John and Judith and the trajectory of John's controlling and abusive behaviour as it escalates over the years into fatal domestic violence.[4]

<u>Plot A: Wood End</u>

In Act I, we meet ambulance workers, Nick, Keith, and Pete: white men at varying points along the spectrum of "middle age". They are three of forty otherwise unseen ambulance workers who have arrived at a four-day corporate retreat. The men share a warm rapport, their use of shortened first names and references to years of service establishes these three as colleagues of over thirty years. Shortly after their arrival, the group is joined by an older, well-dressed man, who introduces himself as Alan Geddes, the new CEO of the ambulance service. Moments later, the group is joined by a woman, Maggie Birrell, facilitator for the weekend workshop. Maggie takes over from Alan and explains to the group that over the next four days the men should feel able to freely express their ideas and contribute to discussions about the future direction of the service. If they do, she assures them, "a window of opportunity" will open. She continues, "at all times […] we

want you to speak your mind," she pauses momentarily, "and I'm sure we can secure maximum results" (Nantsou, S. 1997b, 6).

Over the course of four days, the ambulance officers are subjected to increasingly troubling, manipulative, and humiliating treatment by their workshop facilitators. Between gourmet dining and excessive drinking (Nick: "come on you pissheads, this party's *on the move*!" [10]), the group are taken through physical exercises such as rope courses and juggling, group therapy, and intensive late-night workshops. Throughout these sessions, the personalities of the ambulance officers become clearer. Keith, mild mannered and subservient, is compliant with the facilitators, where Nick, surly, assertive, and the most senior of the group, consistently questions what they are being told. Matriculation and performance indicators are the main weapons of choice for Maggie and Alan, who at once aggressively push this rhetoric to break the workers' confidence in their own performance, while hiding behind its mystifying properties to keep the officers in the dark about their fate, as in this cyclical exchange:

> Alan: It is no longer a service, gentlemen, it is a business. We have to be competitive. Our patients are clients. Each of your jobs, every one of your cases, is an event. You're not part of a Unit, or a Station anymore, you're part of a Team. […] I think you'll agree with me when I say that the Service needs a bit of a re-vamp. We're all going to have to really lift ourselves.
> […]
> Nick: In the "new order" that you're proposing, Alan, will there be a ranking structure?
> Alan: Do you think there should be a ranking structure, Nick?
> Nick: I'm asking you.
> Alan: I think in time we'll find that out. Keith?
> Nick: No, no, no. You're not answering my question. Will there or will there not be a ranking structure, a ranking hierarchy?
> Alan: Time will reveal all things to you. Yes, Keith?
> Keith: What about the pay, Alan?
> Alan: We'll be dealing with that a little later on Keith.
> (Nantsou, S. 1997b, 7).

Pete is more passive in these early workshops than the other officers, but in conversation with his colleagues makes his anxiety about the situation known: "He shafted Bertie the first week he came, chewed up Wilbur the second. And you blokes piss about talkin' hierarchies and pay when it's fuckin' obvious what's goin' on" (10). It does not take long for the plans for the new direction of the service to be revealed however, and by the second day it is confirmed that the new service intends to dissolve all existing positions of rank and will require the employees to sign new non-union employment contracts.

By the last day of the workshop, the officers appear emotionally drained. After suffering an abusive tirade from Maggie the day prior ("You're not quite committed to the task are

you Keith? Are you Keith? That's why you'll never make Team Leader, Keith!" [19]) resulting in an unexpected snap from Keith, he returns to the workshop resolved to stay with the service, whatever new shape it may take. Pete is panicked, urging his colleagues to see this restructure as one part of a bigger move to privatisation ("The same'll happen to the firies, and the trammies, and the bus drivers, trains…everyone" [24]). Nick continues to show his resistance to the exercises, but seeing the writing on the wall for himself, his responses are now notably clipped.

At the end of Act I, the final exercise calls upon the men to reach consensus about what they think of the new structure of the service and compose a one paragraph statement of endorsement to be disseminated to all ambulance service personnel. Keith gently tries to register his opposition, but it becomes clear that the group's ability to leave the workshop is contingent upon their completion of the task. Over many hours, the men offer endless versions of their statements and are repeatedly rejected. They grow increasingly distressed as they reach a point of exhaustion; their postures growing more hunched, their hair mussed, and their legs restless as they pace around, trying to appease their superiors:

> Nick: "The ambulance service will in the future be embracing a series of positive directions…"
> Maggie: "series of positive directions"? No. You can do better than that.
> Nick: "Numerous positive directions"?
> Maggie: No.
> Nick: "Lots of positive directions"?
> Maggie: That's miles away.
> Nick: We'll be here the rest of the month at this rate.
> Alan: Well you won't be leaving until you finish it. Try again.
> *The scene shifts to later on.*
> Alan: What've you got now?
> Keith: "We urge all ambulance officers to have an open mind and to be positive about the changes proposed and we feel as a group they can work with the right will…"
> Maggie: No, that's unacceptable. You men aren't trying.
> Keith: Well, what do you want us to put down?
> Maggie: I want you to discover it for yourselves! Come on.
> (Nantsou, S. 1997b, 25)

When their statement is finally accepted, Keith and Pete's relief is exuberant. There is only one task left: they all must sign it. Alan holds a clipboard to the men. Keith and Pete waste no time striding across the stage to sign, while Nick remains seated. Eventually all eyes turn to him. As Alan reinforces that the group cannot leave until the signatures are unanimous, Keith and Pete grow increasingly frustrated with their colleague, with Keith wearily urging him to just "sign it and let's go" (26), while Pete, at breaking point, his hopes of organising his colleagues dashed, yells angrily at Nick to "fucking sign it!" (26). There is a long and drawn out pause as Nick contemplates, encircled by the group standing over him expectantly. Nick slowly stands, visibly fuming but ultimately resigned,

and signs the document. The men are a picture of exhaustion and defeat as Maggie stretches out her arms triumphantly and declares, "Thank you all very much. We've had a wonderful time" (26).

Former AEAV Assistant Secretary Steve McGhie, now Labor Member for the seat of Melton, contextualised this narrative for me in 2021. Indeed, the events depicted at these workshops in *The Essentials* were based on the true experience of many of the workers under the Intergraph takeover. Despite the decades gone by, McGhie recollects these extraordinary events with detail, and it is clear that he is still affected when reflecting on this time in the service. According to McGhie, these workshops – referred to as "Camp Waco" within the union at the time – were run by an outsourced consultancy firm who specialised in facilitating corporate restructuring via "neurolinguistic methods". As we see play out in *The Essentials*, participants were subjected to traumatising manipulation therapies regarding their performance and management of the ambulance service. The humiliating acts portrayed in the play, such as Keith (played by Colin Hall, a former ambulance worker phased out during restructuring) being made to juggle as Maggie berates him for failing, were true stories from participants. In fact, McGhie commented on the striking accuracy of the play in its portrayal of these events, down to the viraginous militant facilitator (played in *The Essentials* by Julianne Eveleigh). By the end of these workshops, these workers were offered an ultimatum: accept a redundancy package or sign a non-union individual agreement.[5] The majority accepted a package, though McGhie recalls that all the attendees returned to some degree "extremely vulnerable, mentally disturbed, brainwashed, insecure, and confused" (McGhie, interviewed 21 September 2021). Tragically, several participants committed suicide in the years shortly after, and from the many ambulance workers interviewed by Nantsou and Payne throughout the project's development, eight had attempted suicide, and a further twenty experienced marriage breakdowns that they directly attributed to these traumatic workshops.

Plot B: John and Judith

The second of the play's dual narratives follows John and Judith's relationship over the course of six years. In the script, their trajectory is broken up into eleven "stages" denoting behavioural phases in typical patterns of domestic violence. In Stage 1, 'Attraction', we see John and Judith meet at a high society event and leave the party together. In Stage 2, 'Honeymoon', about a month has passed and we see that their romance has developed quickly. They are in Rio de Janeiro, where they are enjoying an indulgent and romantic holiday. As Judith stands wrapped in sheets, a half-dressed John takes a phone call from an associate. The dialogue authenticates the characters' time and place: the call is to inform him of the earlier mentioned November 11 strike (JOHN: "150,000? Is that your estimation, the police's, or the TV's? Fucking ABC" [12]), at which he expresses his concern at how this might affect the "[Crown] Casino's grand opening" (13). This places us firmly in Kennett's Victoria.

By Stage 3, 'Pregnant', several more months have gone by, and John and Judith are at the casino. Engrossed in a game of roulette, John ignores Judith's requests to leave, and

throughout this exchange, he grows increasingly agitated and aggressive toward her. Eventually Judith faints beside him. Upon regaining consciousness, she reveals to John she is pregnant. In Stage 4, 'Confusion', we learn in a conversation between Judith and her friend Shirley that she is apprehensive about having John's baby; that she's unsure of the strength of their relationship and of taking on a mother role. Soon after, John shows up and, before a room of spectators, loudly proposes to her. Stage 5, 'Commitment', takes place at Judith and John's wedding, but throughout the event Judith's smile is visibly strained, particularly as John delivers an uncomfortable speech in which he draws comparison between their relationship and horse racing. Act I ends with Judith sitting on the ground centre stage, enveloped by her voluminous wedding dress, as John, visibly drunk, stands above her and issues the foreboding words: "I've got you now" (Nantsou, S. 1997b, 27).

In Act II (Stage 6, 'Abuse'), time and place are clearly established with a voice over of Jeff Kennett's election speech from his second term victory, in March 1996. Four years have passed, and as the speech plays the scene forms into a decadent party. John moves about the space with an air of celebration, waving and toasting unseen guests, until Judith's loud voice cuts through the room. The moment he notices her his demeanour becomes noticeably stiff, while Judith stumbles onto the stage, yelling out to guests in a slurred voice, clearly drunk. As he tries to convince a defiant Judith to leave, the earlier signs of John's controlling behaviour are amplified. After roughly grabbing her arm and her pulling away, Judith recalls that they are in public, backs down, and leaves with John. When they return home, they are greeted by their daughter's babysitter, Monica. The tensions between Judith and John are palpable. While John tries to hurry Monica's exit along, Judith continues to stall her, desperate not to be left along with her husband. Her fears are confirmed after the babysitter leaves, when John emerges from their bedroom with a handgun and has her kneel before him with the barrel pointed at her head. After a long silence, John pulls the trigger, revealing that the gun is not loaded. He saunters away laughing, while Judith remains kneeling, paralysed in horror.

Stages 7 ('Cycle') and 8 ('Escape') are quick scenes showing the cycle of abuse that Judith is wrapped up in: we see John pounding at her door, apologising for another violent episode, and Judith eventually opening the door to let him in; only to later see Judith, badly beaten, show up at a women's refuge in desperate need of help. The receptionist, Angel (played by real domestic violence support worker Billi Clarke), registers her surprise when she gives her name, Judith Punch, and after she helps settle Judith down and convinces her to stay, pauses momentarily, and says, "Shit'd hit the bloody fan if the papers found out Johnnie Punch was beatin' his wife up, eh?" (Nantsou, S. 1997b, 41). The dual narratives converge in Act III as concurrent court proceedings play out. The scene is split between John and Judith, going through their divorce hearings; while Nick, Alan, and Maggie attend the Royal Commission inquiry into the privatisation of the emergency services. After Judith is granted full custody of their infant daughter, Victoria, and John is issued an Apprehended Violence Order, Judith returns home to celebrate. However, once she is alone, John emerges from shadows at the stage periphery, and the lights black out. By Stage 11, 'Chaos', we return to Nick in

the courtroom, and it is through his testimony that we learn he has now joined a private ambulance service as a paramedic. Rising from his seat in the courtroom stand, he narrates the scene of a recent emergency call as he acts it out. As Nick stands on the threshold of an apartment, Judith is revealed in the corner, balled up, and John has murdered their daughter.

The characters in *The Essentials* are portrayed with little subtlety. Wealth, status, and power are all performed with a clear *gestus*. John wears an expensive-looking tailored grey suit, while Judith wears a fur; all the men at the retreat wear button up shirts, but Alan's seniority is conveyed by his tie. Maggie-the-union-buster, no doubt a nod to Thatcher, teeters on the edge of parody: she stomps onto the stage in black combat boots, donning head-to-toe military camouflage. For these reasons, the impression formed by one reviewer that "*The Essentials* is an example of left-wing agitprop that exaggerates the policies and personalities of right-wing politicians and collaborators to the level of grotesquerie" is understandable (Scott-Norman 1997).[6] At the same time, this warrants some scrutiny. Notwithstanding these archetypal portrayals, to reduce the play to a work of agitprop overlooks the complexity and depth in the portrayal of workers undergoing workplace restructuring. Quiet Keith wants to bend to the new order and although he is kept on, shortly after returning to work he suffers a nervous breakdown that lands him hospitalised. Pete, sceptical and tense, can sense the trouble ahead but doesn't know what to do about it. Nick pushes back against what he sees as dangerous decisions and is ultimately pushed out of his job. The play does not offer simple solutions to the characters' problems, and domination and powerlessness are never made absolute. Although Maggie and Alan's coercive behaviour is blatant, their success is contingent upon the workers' manufactured consent to their new employment conditions. The same can be said for the dynamic between John and Judith.[7] Judith's struggle is not one of passive victimhood. She consistently exercises resistance against John's coercive control, and his power over her is never absolute. While, at times, the social realism of the play is theatrically stretched, as in the case of John holding Judith at gunpoint, this should not negate the reality of domestic violence in its entirety. Where the play has not so successfully authenticated its 'world' for the audience, as reflected in the reviewer's remarks above, the rhetorical conventions within which the production is framed – namely, that it is made with and features real ambulance workers, social workers, and domestic violence survivors – serve as a reminder that these are not "grotesque" theatrical archetypes staged for agitational, propagandistic purposes, but characters informed by, and grappling with, the same problems as the community the play was written for. I have noted above Steve McGhie's resonance with the depiction of the ambulance workers. Performance reports from the domestic violence auspice bodies express similar sentiments:

> *The Essentials* team, in interviewing and working closely with victim/survivors showed tremendous empathy and professionalism and were able to successfully honour the realities of not only the terror and the pain of violence, but the courage and strength of those experiences. The process involved in developing the script and delivering the performance provided an opportunity to survivors to come forward and

> share their experiences as part of their own healing processes. Indeed, a few individual women who were not involved directly in the play spoke with us in relation to the strength that the play provided in encouraging their own struggles against family violence. (Dimopoulos 1997)
>
> The depiction of a wealthy, Anglo Saxon, well-resourced woman of prominent statue being a victim of domestic violence was intentional. It is a common myth in our community that domestic violence is a result of drugs, alcohol, poverty, and is an issue specific to race and class. As a program it is our experience that domestic violence can happen to any woman in any circumstance. It is about power and control and has its roots in a social and political system that sustains its existence. (Clarke 1997)

This is not to suggest that the value of *The Essentials* lies in its claim to 'truth' or authenticity. However, returning to the review quoted above, it is worth noting that all the "[exaggerated grotesque] policies […] of right-wing politicians" referenced in the play *were* the real policies of the Kennett government. The aggressive push of individual employment contracts throughout the public sector is well-documented; the shambolic privatisation of the ambulance service was widely publicised; and the extent of its egregious negligence were brought into public view throughout the Royal Commission years ahead of this production. With regard to domestic violence, seldom are victims and survivors afforded national publicity or judicial recourse. *The Essentials* was one means of providing some visibility to these issues – until it was deemed libellous by the City of Port Phillip Council (CPPC).

Censorship in the "climate of fear"

By December 1996, after five months of research and development, *The Essentials* team exchanged contracts with the newly established CPPC to perform the show at their Gasworks Theatre the following April. By February 1997, the project had received public funding through the Australia Council, and a range of private funding from the Lance Reichstein foundation, trade unions, and various other community groups. The artistic team was growing. By late February, a script was completed and fifty of the projects' stakeholders gathered at the Gasworks to hear a reading of the first draft. A note in Nantsou's production reports describes the meeting as "well attended and highly successful. Overwhelming positive response to project and a general feeling that the play is heading in the right direction and now needs to be fleshed out more and connections between strands made clearer. Everyone positive." ('The Essentials' archive, 1997). This positive impression was affirmed when the Gasworks nominated the production for an Audience Development Project run by the Malthouse Theatre in partnership with the Gasworks, Theatreworks, and the Napier St Theatre.

To discuss the controversy surrounding *The Essentials* invites a difficult scholarly challenge. Anecdote is traditionally an illegitimate source in academic scholarship, though, if uncovered in a written archive, it takes on a more 'verifiable' quality. Gossip is

regarded as even less authoritative. In the case of *The Essentials* archive, the inspiration and research informing the industrial narrative is evidenced through newspaper clippings of the Intergraph scandal and tape recordings of interviews with paramedics, while support letters from social workers verify the extensive research conducted by the creative team with domestic violence survivors and support workers. The majority of the archive consists of documents detailing the censorship of the production, with legal documents, official correspondence, written timelines, and newspaper articles all concerned with the allegedly defamatory nature of the play. Throughout these documents, defamation is asserted unequivocally by CPPC representatives and journalists, and yet all specifics are strictly omitted. It is only on one line, buried in a six-page letter from a barrister hired by *The Essentials* team, that the allegedly defamed party is explicitly named.

As mentioned, the domestic violence narrative in *The Essentials* was in large part informed by research conducted with community members. It must be said, however, that at this time there was also a rumour circulating throughout the state that the Premier himself was a perpetrator of domestic violence. Importantly, there is no public evidence of Kennett's involvement with domestic violence, but to make sense of this archive, to understand the events that transpired throughout the production process, and to appreciate the heavy-handedness with which the play was censored by its official supporters requires that the rumour be stated plainly. For my purposes – and cautious to avoid perpetuating this rumour myself – the challenge is not to substantiate the claims made in this rumour but to substantiate *the existence of the rumour itself*. Indeed, in discussions with me, numerous collaborators on this project made unprompted reference to this rumour, and whether or not it was accepted, it seems it was widely circulated, nonetheless.

By mid-March, Malthouse personnel advised that they were rejecting the Gasworks' nomination on the basis of the production poster and the synopsis of the show. The graphic in question, designed by Peter Mumford, featured an image of Jeff Kennett, arm raised, holding a Punch and Judy mask. From here, an anxiety grew among the supporting bodies, and this trickled down to the artistic team. The script was heavily reworked. On March 18, another reading was held with all stakeholders, only this time, in light of the Malthouse's concerns, the team had arranged the presence of a barrister, former Director of Public Prosecutions, Bernard Bongiorno. Advice from the barrister was worked into script "draft 9", however, in this time, before this revised script could be shown to representatives from the CPPC, copies of the former "draft 8" as well as the poster graphic had been circulated by the Gasworks to the CPPC, the Reichstein Foundation, and community organisation, Gasworks Inc. On April 3, four days out from the intended commencement of rehearsals, Payne received a letter from CPPC, care of the Gasworks, advising that the script had been "referred to [CPPC] lawyers for legal advice together with the promotional material you supplied. […] [It] is [our] wish that rehearsals don't commence for your production until Council advise you of their final decision." (Dunn 1997a).

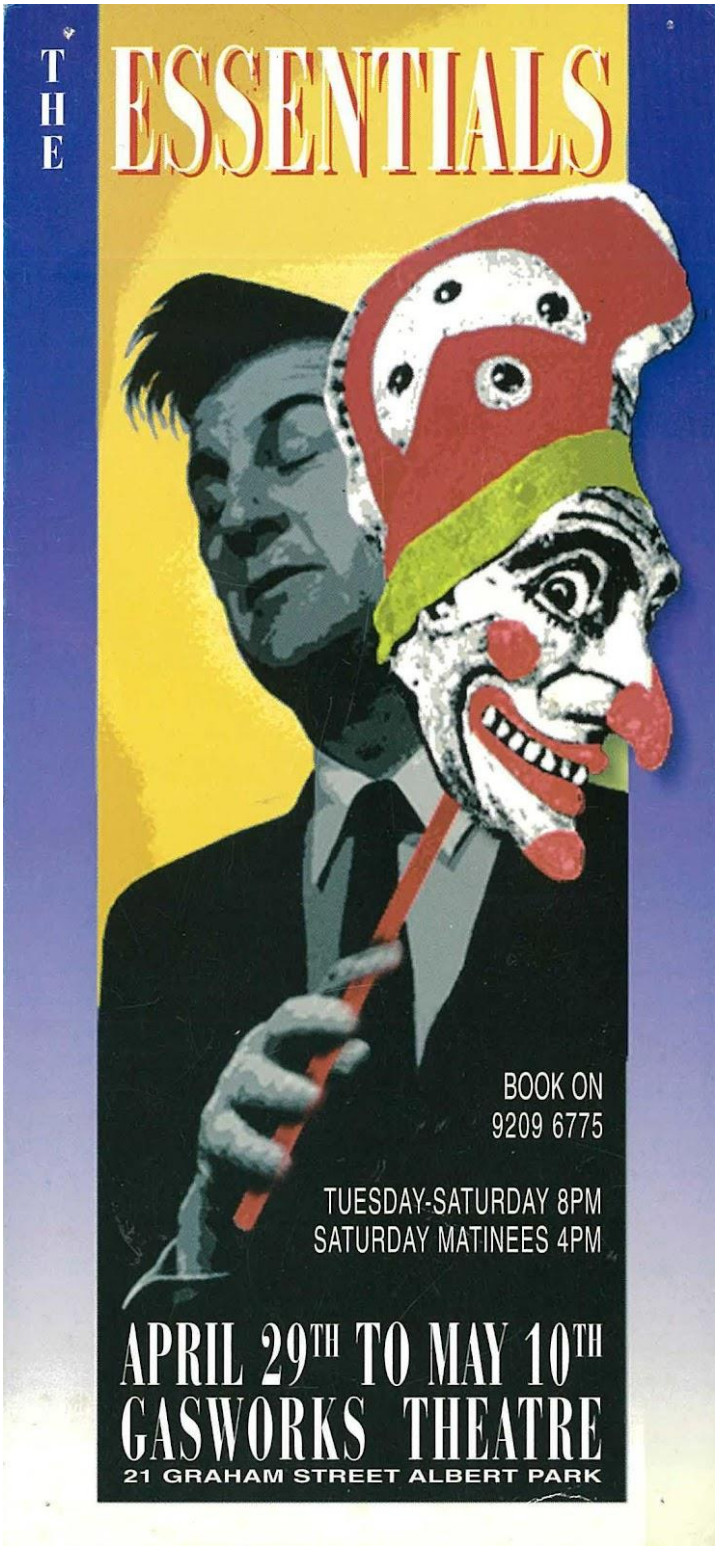

Figure 1. Original poster for *The Essentials* (1997), designed by Peter Mumford, who has generously provided permission to reproduce this work.

On April 9, Payne responded,

> This afternoon we have sought further legal advice from our barrister on the latest version of the script growing out of the rehearsal/workshop process we have continued to pursue. […] Counsel's advice is: **That the**

> **script (as at 9/4/97) can be performed publicly without any appreciable risk of liability for defamation.** […] We must emphasise that we have every intention of rehearsing and performing the show at the Gasworks Theatre as agreed. We believe that it will be a show that the City will feel proud of. (Payne 1997) [original emphasis]

Bongiorno's report is a crucial document. It is the only written evidence that states the defamatory concerns were regarding the Premier:

> I have read the script of a play entitled "The Essentials" with a view to advising as to whether any part of it is defamatory […] of the Premier of Victoria, Mr J. G. Kennett. Read as a play, the script is not defamatory. (Bongiorno 1997)

It is worth noting here that John Punch's career remains ambiguous throughout the play, though there are many rhetorical clues to imply his powerful status: dialogue from the election party scene suggests he is heavily steeped in the Liberal Party, though it is unclear in what capacity; Angel's remark establishes him as a public figure; and at numerous points he indicates his involvement in development ventures, such as the Crown Casino. Bongiorno's report recognises the potential for a comparison to be made between John Punch and the Premier and offers a range of suggestions for how this might be mitigated (for example, he notes that the play's brochure claims to "interweave two *true* stories" and advises they emphasise its fictional elements). Yet, in his assessment of the defamatory concerns his position is unequivocal:

> The play is about a political system as well as about domestic violence. The mere fact that the brochure advertising the play portrays the Premier does not make it defamatory […] [it is] merely an allusion to the fact that the context of the play is the era of Kennett Government in Victoria with such political implications as that conveys. Provided those implications are not defamatory (as they appear not to be as I read the play), no defamation follows. (Bongiorno 1997)

On the evening of April 9, an "emergency meeting" was called at the Council Chamber. The official meeting minutes reflect the high anxiety of the CPPC and the theatres involved in the audience development initiative. They are assertive in their claims of defamation, and the vague grounds upon which these strong claims are made are striking. It states explicitly, "The Malthouse Theatre has disassociated itself from the production on the basis of the content of the promotional materials and a perceived risk of litigation arising from the material" ('The Essentials' archive 1997, 2), while "The Chairperson of Gasworks Art Inc, a community-based management committee for the Gasworks Park, formed a sub-committee and examined the contents of the play. The committee unanimously supports the theatre's withdrawal from the publication of the production" ('The Essentials' archive 1997, 3). The following day, the new CPPC CEO, Anne Dunn, advised of the committee's unanimous decision:

> Dear Mr Payne,
>
> Council holds dearly the issues of free speech, artistic integrity and concerns for the honouring of women and is proud of its record in defending these matters.
>
> However, on the advice obtained from Council's legal representatives that the play *The Essentials* is defamatory, thus exposing the Council to potential liability in allowing the performance of the play to proceed on Council's premises, being the Gasworks Theatre, it is with regret that your application to stage the play *The Essentials* at Gasworks Theatre has been refused.
>
> As advised to you on the evening of the ninth of April 1997 you can no longer rehearse or conduct preparations or perform the play from Gasworks Theatre. (Dunn 1997b)

Over the next few weeks, headlines ran in the papers: "Council bans play over libel concerns" (Burchall 1997a), "City bans play over legal risk" (Whiffin 1997), with one article comparing the issue to the 1936 censorship of the New Theatre's production of Clifford Odet's *Till The Day I Die* (see Darby 2001).

How are these events to be understood? Read as an isolated incident, and taken at face value, the censorship of *The Essentials* is based upon the protection of an individual's reputation – and this was not without reason. At the time, marital issues between the Premier and his wife, Felicity, were circulating throughout the media. In this context, it is reasonable to expect that the allusion in the poster graphic between the Premier and the 'Punch' character, noted for 'punching' his puppet partner, Judy, might have unsettled the supporting bodies. At the same time, this reading overlooks the structural dynamics that are revealed when considering the supporters' responses. This censorship occurred during a period of increased state arts investment across Melbourne (see I. Nantsou 2023, 52–53). Moreover, the CPPC was a recent product of the Kennett governments' amalgamations, and their CEO was not an elected official, but appointed directly by the Premiers' office; finally, this was a time of rampant funding cuts across small-to-medium arts organisations, which meant that endorsement of the play from the audience development project may have held material ramifications for their funding streams. As I have argued elsewhere, if throughout the previous decade arts funding had become increasingly bound up with economic rationalism, this was a moment in which artistic *practice* became structurally entangled with the state government (see I. Nantsou 2023).

The censorship of *The Essentials* was not an isolated incident for artists at the time. In 1996, American artist Barbara Kruger and students at the Victorian College of the Arts had their series of commissioned billboards censored by the Premier and Minister for Planning when they were found to contain slogans loosely critical of the government (Glow and Johanson 2004, 137). Playwright Patricia Cornelius claims that her public criticism of *Arts 21* in 1994 cost MWT tens of thousands of dollars in state grant funding

(Glow and Johanson 2007b, 174). These events are examples of why Victoria in the 1990s is characterised by its "climate of fear" (see, for example, Bessant 1999; Glow and Johanson 2007a; 2007b; Mackinnon 2009). While, in these cases, censorship can be traced in terms of direct government actions with material consequences, this climate was also embodied by Victorians in a form of governmentality, as artists engaged in their own self-censorship ahead of the state's litigious response. For example, after commissioning playwright Stephen Sewell's satirical critique of the Kennett government, *Sodomy and Cigarettes: the Burlesque of a Ridiculous Man*, the Melbourne University Student Union cancelled the project after legal counsel expressed fears of defamatory content (Glow and Johanson 2004, 138). In response, Sewell claimed that Arts Victoria was "operating under a form of self-censorship that results in it denying or withdrawing funding to anything politically sensitive" (Burchall 1997b). With regard to *The Essentials*, despite the clarity of Bongiorno's legal assessment of the script, Nantsou himself took a black marker to the draft and redacted long excerpts and ultimately made the decision to remove Kennett from the poster graphic.[8]

In each of these examples there remains the question of an artist's obligation to the government that funds them, and whether state subsidy implies authority to impede on artistic freedom of expression (see Eltham 2016). In the case of the Barbara Kruger project, Kennett made clear his perception of the obligations of government subsidised artists when he openly accused the VCA students of "biting the hand of sponsorship" (Glow and Johanson 2004, 137). Similar sentiments have been expressed more recently at the federal level, when in 2014, artists in the Sydney Biennale protested the corporate sponsorship of Transfield Holdings due to the involvement of one its subsidiaries in the brutalising system of offshore detention of asylum-seekers. While Malcolm Turnbull, then in his role as federal Communications Minister, condemned the artists for their "sheer vicious ingratitude" (Caust 2019, 768), Arts Minister George Brandis sought punitive action for their intransigence. In an egregious breach of the arms-length principle, Brandis redistributed $105m in funding away from the former Australia Council to his centrally managed 'National Program for Excellence in the Arts' (see Eltham 2016; Caust 2019, 768–72). At the time of writing this article, in February 2025, Creative Australia selected artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale 2026. However, just a week later, Creative Australia rescinded their selection. In an unprecedented decision, the agency based this choice upon Sabsabi's past works, including a 2007 video installation featuring Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and a 2006 piece referencing the September 11 attacks, citing "prolonged and divisive debate" as an "unacceptable risk to public support for Australia's artistic community" (Creative Australia 2025).

It is important to note, however, that *The Essentials* was not censored by its funding bodies. On the contrary, although initially rattled by the Council's ban, the Lance Reichstein Foundation later increased their grant. While the Gasworks' Chairman at the time, James McCaughey, insisted the cancellation "was not an issue of infringing upon artistic freedom" (Burchall 1997b), if we are to accept the Brandis and Turnbull view, the absence of state subsidy begs the question as to what justification there was to censor the play. Crucially, at no point were the defamatory concerns clearly explained by the

CPPC, Gasworks personnel, or representatives from the Malthouse – they were taken for granted.

Post-script

Within hours of the CPPC's decision being handed down, phone calls went back and forth across the state, and by the following day, Victoria Trades Hall Council secretary, Leigh Hubbard, announced the play would be welcome at the Trades Hall Ballroom. To broadcast the update, the team issued a community "call to arms", and within 48 hours more than 150 community members assembled at Trades Hall to lend their support to the production. *The Essentials* premiered on May 7, 1997, and played a two-week, sold-out season at Trades Hall Ballroom to approximately 2,500 attendees. Despite some reviewers making note of its occasional rough edges (understandably, given the disruptions to the rehearsal period) and inexperienced performers, the production achieved critical success. However, media coverage of the play was almost entirely concerned with its surrounding controversy, and this likely played a significant role in increasing audience numbers. This is itself worth reflecting on. There is no engagement from reviewers with the industrial side of the narrative, but by this time, there was virtually no counterweight against the industrial assault of *Victoria: on the Move*.

Later that year, in November, Nantsou was invited to speak on the experience of *The Essentials* at the Australia Council's National Community Cultural Development Fund conference, DARE. Censorship was so pressing an issue for community arts at the time that he was one of three artists presenting on this topic. Beyond censorship, the other dominant theme of the conference was economic rationalism. In his keynote address to the 300 delegates in attendance, Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley argued an interrelationship of these two issues, describing

> two forms of censorship that are emerging in terms of cultural activity. The first one is the moral right; those who think that that's not art and this is […] [The second form] I think is having a bigger impact is much more pernicious and less obvious, and that's the economic rationalist form of censorship; where if you do not agree with me, if you do not agree with the way I express myself, if you do not agree with the way I do anything, then I'll cut off your money. It's never as blatant as that, it's much more subtle, it just is that you disappear off the list. You never know why, there's never a reason, it's quite pernicious and vicious and across Australia the economic rationalist agenda is reaching its peak, I hope. I think there is a beginning of a winding back but you as artists, you as people of the community, you as people who represent the sense of culture, the sense of challenge, […] you have an important role to play. (Soorley 1997, 8)

Across three days of presentations, the theme of economic rationalism dominated conversations, and though the presenters expressed a diversity of views from those reflected in the Lord Mayor's above quotation, all speakers expressed an awareness that this economic rationalist paradigm was having a transformative impact on all aspects

of cultural life, noting with some urgency that its imperatives were becoming inextricably entwined with the nature and practice of community artists' work. Most commonly, presenters at the conference refer to economic rationalism not in terms of an economic system, but as a broader societal shift; a change in culture itself, imposed from something amorphous and somewhere external. As seen in Soorley's warning above, economic rationalism was expressing itself materially through money – that is, who was and was not being funded – but, more importantly, was how economic rationalism was expressing itself ideologically, through the extension of economic activity into non-economic spheres. Despite the clarity of Soorley's warning, drawing attention to this paradigm did little to quell its censoring effects. Indeed, in the official transcript of the DARE conference, Nantsou's speech is the only one which has been heavily redacted, once again burying the lived experience of making community theatre in a sector heavily bound up in the structure of the neoliberal state.

Conclusion

As is reflected in the Royal Commission into Intergraph, documentation of these traumatic events captures only the most liable and egregious instances of industrial negligence; it does not capture what it is to live and work under the increasing pressures of advanced capitalism. As both a play and a production, *The Essentials* captures the climate of anguish, powerlessness, and fear experienced by Victorians throughout this period. As a play, *The Essentials* not only brought necessary visibility to these true stories, but as a relic of the period constitutes vital documentation of this experience. Observing the parallels between the treatment of these ambulance workers and survivors of domestic violence, Maria Dimopoulos of the Women's Coalition Against Family Violence, echoed this view. "Theatre," Dimopoulos writes in her auspice report for the project, could "bring the issue [of domestic violence] to the public's attention […] [as it has been] historically provided with the immunity that is offered by the privatised nature of the family" ('The Essentials' archive, 1997). As a production, the censorship of *The Essentials* conveys the constraints under which independent artists work in an increasingly state-managed arts ecology. The unsubstantiated grounds upon which its censorship was based provide an alarming insight into how dissenting art can be silenced, but as Lord Mayor Soorley argued, silence is a crucial aspect of how censorship operates. Although more recent issues of artistic censorship have been principally expressed through funding actions, *The Essentials* shows that "the economic rationalist form of censorship" encompasses more than the provisioning of grants; it reflects that the constraints of making art under neoliberalism extend beyond the economic sphere.

Notes

1. I have detailed elsewhere the social, economic, and political environment of the Kennett years and elaborated upon the implications for the subsidised arts sector (see Nantsou 2023). For more on the industrial, economic, and public sector changes introduced during this period see Barton and van Onselen (2007); O'Neill (2000); and Barrett and Blackwell (1998).
2. To clear any confusion with our matching surnames, Stefo Nantsou is my father.
3. A 1996 special episode on the Intergraph scandal from current affairs program *Four Corners* captures the unconscionable negligence of the service during this time. In one especially

harrowing interview, a man describes watching his son die from an asthma attack while an ambulance, dispatched 7 minutes from his home, arrived 43 minutes later.
4. I have accessed *The Essentials* in two forms: as a series of draft scripts, and three (very poor quality) video recordings of a preview showing, opening night, and an undated performance later in the two-week season.
5. Beyond the testimony of those working in the service at the time, there is little evidence available to corroborate the stories from these workshops. Passing reference is made to this in a conference paper on the Intergraph scandal from Darren Dalcher in which he states: "Training middle management was facilitated through three-day, live-in courses, described by participants as 'mini-camp Wacos'. Participants who expressed opinions critical of new management policies were subjected to emotional and personal abuse which left them exhausted and traumatised. In a cost saving effort, the MAS Regional Training Unit was closed. Ambulance officers were coerced into improving their knowledge and skills in their own time." (2001, 339). Similarly, Barrett and Blackwell describe the aggressive means through which IEA were enforced in the public sector, and they bear striking similarity to the events described by those in the ambulance service: "Pressure was placed on employees to sign when they were told that there would be no review of salary and conditions for those who refused […] Similarly, any promotion, transfer or secondment was contingent upon signing an individual employment agreement. In some departments positions were declared vacant and employees were told that they must sign an agreement if they accepted a job, which was consistent with the requirement for newly appointed staff to sign individual employment contracts" (1998, 70).
6. This is not to mischaracterise the overall tone of this review, which is positive.
7. In employing such a metaphor a context of domestic violence, it should be emphasised that 'consent' is not to be conflated with 'rational choice' on the victims' part.
8. On this point, in his paper at DARE, the 1997 National Community Cultural Development Conference, Nantsou notes that this self-censorship was not supported by the rest of the team, who deemed him a "gutless bastard" for "[self-censoring] this thing that we're all really excited about and agree with, just so you can get the play on" (S. Nantsou 1997a, 48).

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