**ADDRESS FOR KSP OPEN DAY 2023**:

The Lost Art of Katharine Susannah Prichard

My talk this year to celebrate Katharine Susannah Prichard’s birthday will focus on a somewhat neglected area of Prichard’s writing—her plays. Did you know that she wrote 17 in total? In particular, I want to re-visit the highly controversial 3-act play, ‘*Brumby Innes’*, 1926. Although the title was intended to hint at a notoriously womanising Pilbara station owner, the title’s use of the word ‘brumby’ or wild horse also echoes Katharine’s childhood passion for horses and horse-riding, as not uncommon in Australian teen-age girls. Her first novel, the prize-winning *The Pioneers*, (1916) certainly gave her scope to depict Australian horse-riding including mountain brumbies. Her other often published play, *Bid Me Love* (1929), has nothing to do with horses but is a domestic comedy. It is one with which I’m not familiar as it seems to have been rarely if ever performed yet it is set in this very house in Greenmount where I am now speaking.

*Brumby Innes* was finally performed in 1972 at the Pram Factory theatre in Melbourne, after being previously considered too controversial (or likely to invoke libel) for public offering, especially in Western Australia. No doubt this was due to fear its depiction of dubious relations between a white man and Aboriginal women would be unacceptable. This is rather ironic because back in 1927 it won the ‘Triad’ prize as a manuscript in a competition seeking a play ‘worthy of production in Australia’s capital cities’. The judges were unanimous and it was even said that *Brumby Innes* was comparable with the best work of the American dramatist Eugene O’Neill! Katharine had submitted it under the pen name of ‘Meroo’, which she may have known apparently could refer in Noongar language to a rock water hole or *gnamma*. Perhaps there is a hint of the subtitle of *Coonardoo*, ‘The Well in the Shadow’?

In 1972 her son, Ric Throssell, KSP’s first Patron, (and himself a respected writer and diplomat who was working with amateur dramatic groups in Canberra) was writing his own plays and was able to witness the first performance of *Brumby Innes.* As already mentioned, it was staged in Melbourne at the famous ‘Pram Factory’ theatre. The first performance I know of in Western Australia, was on the verandah of *Katharine’s Place* presented by the Darlington Players. It was a ‘dressed reading’ rather than stage performance that took place and I think in 1985 or 1986. I was away from WA at the time, probably overseas. Of course, the play’s creation came out of the same careful journalistic style research Katharine carried out in the Pilbara when preparing to write *Coonardoo.* When a much younger Katharine was writing for the Melbourne Herald, she went to London in 1907 but then returned to London as a freelance journalist in 1911, before the first World War. It was here in London in 1915 during the war she met the West Australian war hero and her future husband Hugo Throssell. But that is another story. Suffice to say that her fully developed journalistic skills were well employed some ten years later in the Pilbara preparing the groundwork for writing *Coonardoo* and *Brumby Innes*. In fact, all her novels excel most, I would say, where based on similar first-hand research. Maybe that’s still a lesson for our own budding KSP authors today.

Where did KSP develop her interest in theatre? If we go back to Katharine’s earlier life, we discover that her father was very interested in amateur theatricals and his ‘Katty’ was encouraged to be involved in them. In fact, as a very young girl she discovered her father’s set of Shakespearean plays and secretly pored over the illustrations. Long after the family left Tasmania and re-settled in Melbourne, Katharine went on to write *The Wild Oats of Han* as a novel based on her family history. I am dependent for more information on Katharine’s dramatic career on her son Ric’s account of in the Preface to Katharine Brisbane’s edition of *Brumby Innes* and *Bid Me To Love,* 1974. Here there is further information about Katharine developing a deeper interest in writing for the stage. Certainly, in her prize-winning novel *The Pioneers* (1916) Katharine gives us highly dramatic scenes of horse-riding settlers, convicts and bushrangers. No doubt these helped to make that novel a prize-winner. I note here that in 1923 she created a 3-act play based on *The Pioneers* although not performed or published. However, by that time at least two silent movies had been based on the novel. About the same time, she composed a light-hearted play based on the military and other experience of husband Hugo entitled *The Great Man*.

Much earlier, in 1909, Katharine composed for fellow dramatist Louis Esson a play she called *The Burglar* about a young woman confronted by a burglar who intends to steal her jewellery. The reaction of the girl is somewhat unexpectedly forgiving and reveals Katharine already had a social conscience for the downtrodden in society. According to Ric Throssell, this is an interesting clue, perhaps, to Katharine’s own later development of her socialist and communist commitments to social reform. In 1913 during her six-year residence in London, she wrote a ‘mildly’ class conscious play or sketch, *Her Place,* now lost, about a stolen necklace in a London household. Another play, *For Instance* isabout an English factory girl. According to Ric, his mother Katharine had discovered the *agitprop* (or politicalpropaganda in dramatic mode), no doubt from mixing with her new political friends during this period of workers’ and women’s agitation in England prior to the Russian Revolution of 1916. A third play, *A Miracle in the Street of Refugees* was also written during this period but never produced. Later in life Katharine entertained the idea of getting the ABC to take on this play for television.

It was in 1926, as already mentioned, that Katharine’s most successful play *Brumby Innes* was written while she was in the Pilbara gathering material for the novel *Coonardoo.* Everybody in the North West of WA at the time apparently knew that many white men amongst the pioneers were ‘keeping’ Aboriginal women as servants and sex slaves. Appalled, Katharine invented ‘Brumby Innes’ (rather like another version of Sam Geary in *Coonardoo,* but definitely based on the real Pilbara identity ‘Brumby’ Leake) as a brutish but not physically unattractive station owner. Innes has two local Aboriginal women in his household, the apparently compliant Polly and the much younger Wylba, whom Innes regards as another recruit to his harem, despite at first her every resistance. To complicate things further in this household, Innes has a white woman visitor Mary or May Hallinan. Though appalled at Innes’ domestic arrangements, she is nevertheless fascinated by his animal attractiveness and becomes a willing third member of the *mênage a quatre.* As Ric Throssell has observed, and many other commentators, Katharine recognised there was a natural animal magnetism involved in the attraction between men and women which could not be underestimated, even if would normally expect to be controlled. Brumby himself regards sex as a completely understandable urge ‘natural like the rain’. It could be concluded that Katharine had an agenda to demolish the proletarian concept of ‘romantic’ love. Indeed, Katharine Brisbane wrote in 1974 ‘Brumby Innes was half a century ahead of its time in the values it gives to romance vs sexuality’. For a contrasting glowing depiction of the real Brumby Leake, I note that WA historian Peter Bridge published in 2015 via his Hesperian Press an account of Leake as a leading and attractively masculine figure in the NW history of WA.

One other feature of the play, as written, is the opening scene featuring an Aboriginal corroboree for 11 performers—not an easy enactment to include without an available Aboriginal cast culturally related to the Pilbara area. For the 1972 performance in Melbourne, local Aboriginal people were recruited, though how true it was to Pilbara culture must remain in doubt. In fact, Sue Hosking said in 1992 that the play ‘is laden with cultural baggage’. At least one TV version of *Brumby Innes* has been screened many years ago by what is now Channel 10.

This reminds me of an occasion years ago when I was teaching the novel *Coonardoo* at Edith Cowan University and invited a staff-member of our Aboriginal Studies Faculty *Kurongkurl Katatjin* to give a talk on her response to the novel. While respecting Prichard as a pioneer in seriously including Aboriginal content in Australian Literature, she was scathing about the degree to which the novel could be categorised as cultural appropriation. At least in my classes we did also study the poetry and plays of the inimitable Nyoongar author Jack Davis.

In conclusion, my intention in this paper is to arouse renewed interest among our KSP members and supporters in the career of Prichard as a dramatist and also to hope that in the near future perhaps some post-graduate students in Australia or overseas will see fit to base even a masters degree on a study of her place in Australian literature among our dramatists.

After all, a total of some 17 plays is no small contribution to Aussie Drama. Therefore, I have listed what I consider to be the top dozen of Katharine’s plays or sketches.

Prof Glen Phillips, KSP Patron.

December, 2023

TWELVE LEADING PLAYS OF KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD

1909 *The Burglar*

1913 *Her Place*

1913 *For Instance*

1915 *A Miracle in the Street of Refugees*

1923 *The Pioneers* (3-Act)

1923 *The Great Man*

1926 *Brumby Innes*

1926 *Bid Me to Love*

1935 *Forward One*

1937 *Women of Spain*

1940 *Penalty Clause*

1957 *Persephone’s Baby*

*Seventeen plays were composed in total with eleven plays staged by non-commercial ‘little theatres’.*

My sincere thanks to the late Ric Throssell and to Dr Nathan Hobby for special information about Katharine and her plays