



# PETER KENNA'S *A HARD GOD*

by Frank Bladwell and Don Reid

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## 1. A sense of truth

### Frank Bladwell

Peter Kenna completed *A Hard God* in 1973 and has referred to it as 'the play I had been wanting to write for fifteen years'. It was the first play of the trilogy *The Cassidy Album* (comprising *A Hard God*, *Furtive Love* and *An Eager Hope*) and the reputation and stature the play has achieved are unique; *A Hard God* has given every sign of having established itself as a landmark in our dramatic literature.

Two important factors undoubtedly applied when *A Hard God* was written. One was the illness from which the playwright had been suffering for years, and which had brought the reality of death very close. He has explained in a radio interview with Katharine Brisbane:

I think one of the conditions that is terribly important in my writing at the moment is the fact that I am on a kidney machine and have been for about eight years, and this lowers my metabolism in a way ... and so I am rather anaemic, and I tend not to have as much energy as other people, and I think that this sometimes casts you into a sort of dream-like state in which remembering is easier than experiencing new things.<sup>2</sup>

The form which suggested itself for this new turn in his work was also a matter of timing, and the result of his continuing interest in and responsiveness to the work of his contemporaries.

I spent eight years in England, and then came back to see a whole lot of plays by the new Australian writers, and although my own idea of form had been developing in those years, certainly the new writing I saw and the productions I saw at the Nimrod Theatre ... encouraged me to

expand my form. That is just the difference. It's an experience of life, an experience in dramatic form, which fifteen years can bring.<sup>3</sup>

*A Hard God* is a dramatic account of a brief period in the lives of the Cassidy family. The setting is the western suburbs of Sydney in 1946, and the play is structured in two strands. The major strand deals with the marriage relationship of Dan and Aggie Cassidy, and with Dan's two brothers, Martin and Paddy, and their wives. The minor strand concerns the relationship between Joe Cassidy, Dan and Aggie's son, and Jack Shannon, a boy of his own age whom he meets at the Catholic Youth Organisation. The basic and thematic relationships in the play, however, are those between the characters and their 'hard' God, and it is this theme which links the two strands. The two strands also work on different time scales. The author's description of this unusual form is a simple one:

I've simply cut the normal cord between plot and sub-plot. I could have brought Joe into the play earlier and had a scene between him and his mother, but why?<sup>4</sup>

Some of the play's first critics, however, found this form disconcerting. H. G. Kippax referred disapprovingly to the drawn-out agonisings of the two adolescent boys, one (we know from the programme) a Cassidy, but otherwise in no way linked with the family until the very end. This lack of linkage is at present a serious weakness. It should be remedied quickly.<sup>5</sup>

The author ultimately did add a five-line scene between Joe and his father at the very beginning of the play as a concession to those not perceptive of the inherent relationship between the two skeins, and this appeared in the play when published. There were other criticisms of the play when it was first presented.

The *Sun* critic found that

*A Hard God* never has more impact than a dampening and gloomy rain shower ... The play drags out over an interminably harrowing three hours.<sup>6</sup>

Neither was the critic of the *Daily Telegraph* captivated:

Apart from some interminable speeches that leave other characters standing flatfooted, the dialogue is naturalistic and well enough written, but nearly three hours of one family disaster after another gets rather tiresome.<sup>7</sup>

There were critics, however, who were disposed to adopt more positive attitudes to the structural inventiveness and the dramatic poetry of the play.

Brian Hoad wrote in the *Bulletin*:

It is profoundly experimental play. Mr Kenna keeps the older and younger generations completely separated until the final moments of the play. It seems for a start like two plays running in parallel. But in the end it serves to mingle together past, present and future.<sup>8</sup>

A more sympathetic view of the compatibility of form and content was also taken by Katharine Brisbane who, perceiving the organic nature of the play's structure, wrote that *A Hard God*

combines all (Kenna's) experience in dramatic realism with an advanced and complex investigation of form ... In form the play is an experiment with time; the time that in youth whistles by one minute and crawls the next, and in age ticks by, never changing its pace. The form is central to the play because it defines a way of slicing right through the appurtenances of real life to the life itself. The play is realism rather than naturalism. It gives us the inward not the outward sign.<sup>9</sup>

This distinction between realism and naturalism is a useful one, and points to a particular characteristic of Kenna's writing which has not always been identified by his critics. This is his use of what he calls 'organic art, or making plays out of the things that happen to real people'.<sup>10</sup> One of the most obvious qualities of *A Hard God* is the sense of truth which pervades. The play's resonances stem largely from a 'rightness' about what the characters do and say how they think and react. The source of this quality is partly the extent to which the play is shaped from real life. Commenting on Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers* in a radio interview, Kenna observed

You only write two or three plays in your life which you write out of your veins. In other plays you have to invent stories or devise plots. Only occasionally do you write out of your veins.<sup>11</sup>

The characters of *A Hard God* are suggested by the lives of the playwright and his family, the play's situations by incidents and attitudes which they encountered. Kenna's statement of his purpose in writing the play makes this clear:

I wrote the major section of *A Hard God* as a tribute to my parents and the hardships they endured through the early years of this century. As a child I had been bored by the recounting of these stories of survival. Only as a mature man with a few 'survivals' of my own behind me did I fully appreciate their courage and resourcefulness. By then my father was dead and my mother a very old lady. So I hope the play says too: 'Forgive me for not caring earlier.'<sup>12</sup>

At an early age he had felt the need to make some record of the family history, as the following extract from a youthful scrap-book testifies:

My great grandfather Patrick Kenna was a farmer from Kilkenny, Ireland. He came to Australia with his wife and two children in a ship called the 'Boomerang'... He was met by his brother Richard, who had adopted the name of McKenna. The family departed the boat at Melbourne, where Richard had a lime kiln. He was afterwards a brewer, and indeed if the family had any trade which was a family occupation it appears to have been brewing or cooping (making the casks for beer).<sup>13</sup>

As the eleventh child of an Irish-Catholic family of thirteen, born during the Depression, growing up in Leichhardt during World War II, Kenna had a rich family tradition and life experience upon which to draw. The real achievement of *A Hard God* lies in the selection and shaping of that material; both the observed details of lives lived, and the stories of survival that had 'bored' him as a child. The playwright of the '70s was able to draw upon these resources most fruitfully, coming to them after years of the continuing practice of his craft, and with the mature artist's capacity to expand, edit and interpret the happenings and memories of the lives of real people. Much of the richness of the detail of the play is owed to this. Aggie's bitter reminiscence about the unshared salmon lunch near the beginning of the play is a case in point.

The character of Dan Cassidy is modelled closely on events in the life of the author's father: his eye burst, and was removed; he did pick up an infection as a carpenter working on boats, but he died some years later. Here the author has telescoped events from real life without impairing the solid basis in actual existence of his character. Kenna has been concerned not to distort, nor to risk the intrusion of fiction into the dramatic fabric of his play. He explains the decision to keep Paddy's wife, Sophie, offstage by admitting 'I did not bring Sophie on because I had never actually met her, so I decided on that device'.<sup>14</sup>

The play's emphasis on the characters of Dan and Aggie is illuminated by the author's recollection that

I was very lonely in the family. Our parents were very much in love, and the children were a bit left out.<sup>15</sup>

The character of Aggie Cassidy is closely modelled on the author's mother, whose wry, somewhat sardonic sense of humour in the face of life's problems seems to have informed a number of the female characters in his plays. Kenna recalls his mother's pragmatism in coping with the conflicts arising in the practice of her religion:

My mother was a convert (when she married my father), and very devout. But hers was a practical attitude to religion. She had a kind of humanist attitude to religion. She was pretty ambivalent about the faith. She really loved my father.<sup>16</sup>

and this is resonantly echoed in one of the most moving exchanges in the play:

DAN: I've never asked you before, Aggie. Not in all the years we've been married. What do you think about God?

AGGIE: Honestly! I don't think I think about him much at all. Dan, I believe I've always been a good Catholic doing everything I was told I should. I've never had much of a chance to do the things I was told I shouldn't. I was always too busy having kids and bringing them up. Just ... surviving. Do you know what, Dan? I think you've been my religion (pp. 64-5).

The playwright has remarked about *A Hard God* that 'Had I not written the play, I would have been capable of being shocked by it' (p. xi).

This shock would presumably have been the result of the play's dealing so basically with the relationships which exist between his characters

and their religion, and with the varying ways in which they attempt to adjust to the vagaries of life dictated by their 'hard' God. *A Hard God* is in the vanguard of works by contemporary Australian writers who have come to look critically at the precepts of a Catholic education and upbringing, and at the human agony often exacted in the active practice of the faith. The novels of Thomas Keneally — in particular *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968) — provide a means for their author to re-examine his faith and his religious training. Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers* (1976) examines the corrosive doubts of a middle-aged teaching brother, perhaps the product of the kind of institution depicted in Fred Schepisi's film *The Devil's Playground* (1976). All of these current works explore the paradoxes of what Katharine Brisbane, in reviewing *A Hard God*, has called 'the burden and the comfort of the Catholic religion'.<sup>17</sup>

These paradoxes bedevil all of the characters of Kenna's play. The unseen compulsive gambler, Sophie, is the only one who appears to have discontinued the active practice of her religion. To all of the others, with the exception of the fanatical Monica who finally lapses into a state of profound mental disturbance, religion is at best a mixed blessing. Dan and his brothers extol the value and comfort of their religion as a matter of form (p. 27). This mutual self-assurance has a hollow echo in the wider perspective of the play as a whole. Paddy is at this very moment fleeing from his drunken, razor-wielding wife, yet is obsessively concerned with preserving the illusion of decent, Catholic family respectability. When Aggie advises him to go to the police to restrain Sophie, he replies in horror:

The police! Do you think I want everyone to know? I'm ashamed enough as it is. If I brought charges against her it'd be in all the papers. What would the Christian Brothers say where the boys go to school? (p. 26).

Martin has fled the religious obsessions of his wife to work as a labourer on the Warragamba Dam. Here he can forget the activities which earned him six months' imprisonment during the Depression (and of which the family do not speak), and direct his energies against the Communist 'comrade' scapegoats on the dam site, and into his poetry. After his death, Aggie reads a plaintive

enunciation of the central problem of his life, and of all their lives, when she finds among his chaff bag of papers a quotation from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (p. 58). He has earlier expressed to Dan, after an emotional re-enactment of the accidental death of his small son, this central problem in the practice of his faith:

MARTIN: ...Oh, he's a hard God, Dan. He's a hard God.

DAN: There's probably a pattern to it somewhere, Martin, if only we could see.

MARTIN: That *is* his hardness, Dan. He doesn't allow us to. We just have to stumble on blindly with his mercy raining down on us like thunderbolts. (p. 16).

Dan does not begin to 'see', and as his physical sight deteriorates, and as the personal demands on him of his family accumulate, he finds words which express his growing doubts in the dogma of the Church, along with the one unshakable tenet of his faith which sustains him (p. 65). It is this firmly-held personal faith which makes Dan the refuge and comfort for his shiftless brothers, and his home becomes a haven in their lives as their own families disintegrate. Dan's constant insistence on the sanctity of the family relationship, and his reiterated demand that Aggie forgive his brothers for their neglect during the hardships of the Depression, stamp him as the play's only true example of the Christian ethic in practice.

It is the stability of Dan's faith that permits Aggie to build her faith on him, still practising her religion, but regarding it in a detached, highly practical manner. The play abounds in Aggie's off-hand gibes at Monica's fanatical practice of her faith. When Paddy plans to flee to Monica after Sophie forces him out of their home, Aggie agrees that Monica is 'a very holy woman'.

AGGIE: Oh, yes, she's that all right. You'd think she had a private telephone through to the Holy Ghost.

PADDY: Aggie, that's blasphemous!

AGGIE: It's worse than that. It's a damn nuisance (p. 46).

Later, when Monica attempts to hang a crucifix in the dining room, Aggie demurs:

AGGIE: There's a place for everything, Paddy. And a dining room is no place for a crucifix, except in monasteries. And this isn't one of those.

MONICA: I'm sorry you feel that way about it, Aggie.

I hope Our Lord doesn't say the same thing to you when you present yourself at the gates of heaven. It would be a terrible thing if he decides that wasn't the place for you.

AGGIE: Well, I'll just have to depend on his idea of good taste, won't I? (p. 54).

In his programme note for the Sydney season of *The Cassidy Album* in 1978, Kenna referred to

the major drive which I believe motivates my every artistic gesture and which has, over the years, formed me into the type of writer I am: an inherited gift for yarn spinning and the desire to use yarns as an important part of my equipment in the making of plays ... The yarn is, after all, an integral part of our national culture. Surely no sophisticated society since the time of the Arabian Nights can have relied so heavily on yarns as an entertainment device. Together with dancing to the gum leaf it was practically the only social pleasure available to our early settlers imprisoned in their lonely wilderness ... I do not believe I am alone in my attempts to fuse this organic art form into the more rigid structure of the European play.

The use of these yarns in *A Hard God* and—in a more restricted way in *The Slaughter of Saint Teresa's Day*—is a source of some of the structural originality at which Kenna's critics have traditionally balked. In *Slaughter* the playwright deliberately suspends the action of the play for the party scene in Act II. Although critics in 1959 saw this apparent hiatus in the flow of the narrative as a major flaw, the scene might now be thought to constitute one of the play's more considerable achievements. For one thing, the party draws its vitality and authenticity from its roots in the author's real experience:

I went to at least a dozen parties like that one, where people (including my father) played the spoons up and down their arms and legs—a girl stuck a carnation behind her ear and did the hula—I sang. I remember particularly one party very like that one at the home of a Mrs Woolf, who lived in the same suburb as us—there were all sorts of Irish people there.<sup>18</sup>

The actual yarn which Paddy Maguire spins as his contribution to the entertainment is shown to have a kind of ritual significance. Most of the company has already heard it. Additionally, the resort to yarn-spinning in this play and in *A Hard God* seems to serve a therapeutic,

perhaps anaesthetic, purpose for the characters involved. It is perhaps as though men like Paddy Maguire and Martin Cassidy find in the vigorous recollection of the past some kind of defence against the emotional assaults of the present. The actual models from which the yarns in the play have been taken had their origins in hardship. Recounting the history of the Kenna family in earlier years, the playwright has recalled:

They eventually had some property up in the north of New South Wales and a great drought threw them off the land, and then the family split up and all the boys were forced to move about the country. They were droving, fencing, and—a matter of fact—the family was so totally split up that they didn't really see each other until the Depression drove three of the brothers to the city during the 1930s. And the stories that they told each other of the time when they had been absent from each other were one of the great memories of my childhood and indeed form the basis of a lot of *A Hard God*.<sup>19</sup>

The use of the integrated 'yarn' is far more marked in *A Hard God*. The author has remarked,

There are long stories all the way through *A Hard God*—much more than in *Slaughter*—but yet I dipped my toes into the water, as it were, in *Slaughter*, by having that long Irishman's speech.<sup>20</sup>

In *A Hard God* the degree of integration is such that the action never seems suspended. There are three sections of dialogue in the play which might be classified as 'yarns': Paddy's terrified account of Sophie's 'breaking out' in Act I, his ruefully amusing account of life with Monica in Act II, and Dan's breathless report on the three versions of Martin's death which he received on his trip to Warragamba. Apart from these, there is a variety of monologues which might be more usefully considered as 'arias'—the word which Peter Kenna uses in reference to them.

These seem to be essential to the Australian character of his writing: a reflection of the story-telling propensity held to be an inherent part of the Australian (as well as the Irish) heritage. These 'arias' recurrently orchestrate the dialogue of *A Hard God*, and provide much of the lyricism which is a vital part of the play's total impression. All but one of these arias are to be found in the major strand of the play: that which involves Aggie, Dan

and Dan's brothers. Each is a reminiscence, and each recounting can be seen as an attempt by the character speaking to come to terms with the hard (on occasions, comically hard) experience of the past.

When, in the minor skein of the play, Jack explains to Joe the circumstances of his mother's death, the stage directions require that he 'bursts into speech with the relief of uttering thoughts suppressed' (p. 26). The older characters tend to reminisce with more serenity, but with an equal need to unburden themselves of some of the weight of the past. There is also, however, a clinging to these past experiences, which have become vital in the total fabric of each individual's life, and a source of sustenance and justification in the troubled present. Before Aggie's bitter recollection of Sophie's unshared salmon lunch, Dan tells her 'It's the past, Aggie', to be answered:

Not for me it isn't. Not while I have to look either of them in the face and smile and put a meal on the table in front of them (p. 8).

Dan argues against Martin's re-reading of the account of his son's death—'Why do you want to do that? That's only upsetting yourself'—but for Martin this apparently maudlin obsession with the past is a means of keeping a grip on reality. He says of the clipping:

I know it doesn't help. It's just that sometimes, I doubt it happened: then I've got it before me in black and white. Then I'm sure (p. 15).

The final section of the major strand in Act I unites the Cassidy brothers for the only time in the action of the play. This reflective sequence follows Paddy's yarn (prior to Martin's waking) about Sophie's violent gambling binge. Aggie is a silent listener for two pages of dialogue as the three brothers drift into a sustained reverie in which they ponder their religious heritage, and the destruction of their family unit and financial security by a three-year drought. The core of this scene is Martin's account of his dream, in which the brothers—'not young men like we were then. Middle-aged as we are now'—are again dislocated, forced off the land, by drought.

This lyrical aria—far from disrupting the development of the play—provides expository detail, and underlines one of the play's major themes, what Katharine Brisbane in her introduction calls 'the image of loss' (p. xiv) and

dislocation of the characters. Neither Paddy nor Martin is settled. Their only constant is found in the home for which Dan and Aggie have battled. Through their unsatisfactory marriages, Paddy and Martin have become victims of a continuing, spiritual drought, and the recollection of the past is used by both men as a refuge from this. Aggie's memories of the Depression years, however, are not as rosy as those enjoyed by her brothers-in-law. A tense scene develops, and Dan is mediator as his brothers quarrel. Sophie pays a traumatic offstage visit to the house, and the brothers are reconciled. Martin, the most meditative of the play's characters, proffers the view that their problems are concerned with the passage of time:

I believe it's like a germ we're breathing continually. Like the 'flu. Except that everybody catches it. And some catch it worse than others. And it affects them in different ways. (p. 35)

Paddy suggests that the city might be responsible for the change in their fortunes, and Martin moves into a sustained aria which recalls the Saturday night dances of their rural youth. There follows a loving, gentle communion which effectively translates into visual terms what has up to now been communicated in dialogue. The stage direction reads

MARTIN begins humming and tapping his foot. Gradually PADDY falls into a jig. It isn't rowdy: a quiet little dance of memory, almost inside the head. It fades to nothing. (p. 37)

The reflective mood evoked—'Oh, those days! The bloody drought!'—leads Aggie to a comic and characteristically wry account of how loneliness led her to lose herself in the city, and to seek street directions from a priest in a confessional. Her aria reinforces Kenna's characterisation of her: she is a less sentimental, less expansive person than her brothers-in-law. The sequence closes with a subtle underlining of the play's basic concern with dislocation and the passage of time:

PADDY: ... In a way, all these years, it's been like an exile.

MARTIN: Oh, they were grand old days when we were young before ... (He pauses. They all lose themselves in reverie for a moment.) (p. 38)

A close reading of this scene reveals not only the skill with which the playwright has woven these yarns and arias into the fabric of the play, but also the dramatic purposes they have been made to

serve: they act to advance the plot, to develop the characters and to bring into focus the play's themes. The two arias in Act II work to amplify what has been established earlier: Aggie's warning to Paddy about Monica develops the impression of this character initiated in the salmon anecdote, and Paddy's affectionate recollection of Martin's first love is used to highlight the lack of either love or charity in the Christian Monica's attitude to her late husband. Again, these reflections move beyond interpolation into the dynamic of the play.

The second strand, which involved Joe Cassidy and Jack Shannon, explores the problems of reconciling the demands of religion with the natural impulses of life, compounded by the problems of dealing with a 'hard' God.<sup>21</sup> Here the process traced in the major skein is reinforced, but these characters are young, and the play seems to assert that for them the conflicts encountered are even more destructive. They appear to be on an even more direct collision course with the demands of their faith and the requirements of the confessional.

Like the characters in the major skein, the boys seem dislocated. Joe, it appears, is estranged from any close family life, and has turned to the Catholic Youth Organisation as a preferable substitute for lonely nights spent in picture theatres. Joe makes the first advances of friendship to Jack Shannon, who has just made a return visit to the house in which his mother died three months earlier, shattering the family unit. Joe, eager for companionship, is a sympathetic listener to the stories that Jack's aunt prefers not to hear:

My aunt won't let me talk about it. She says it's a closed book. (p. 11)

This suppression of the realities of life which cannot be accounted for in terms of an idealised loving God echoes many of the attitudes expressed in the major strand, and is also demonstrated in Joe's shock and disapproval when Jack admits that he derives pleasure from discussing his sexual encounter with the girl in the bush at Parramatta. Joe recites the teaching of his faith ('You're not supposed to do that to people until you are married' (p. 18)) and is genuinely embarrassed and confused by the physical advances which Jack makes towards him. The holiday at Woy Woy, represented in the third

interlude with the boys (pp. 39-42), marks the turning point in their relationship. Joe sees no harm in the closeness that has developed between them, but Jack undergoes a mounting sense of guilt. He has awakened Joe's latent sexuality, and is alarmed by the emotions which have been aroused within himself, and by the apparent depth of Joe's affection for him:

We're going to stay away from each other from now on. I might have started it all but now I'm knocking it off. I'm not going to turn into anything I don't want to be. (p. 40)

To Joe their closeness is still just a game, but Jack is more conscious of the strictures of their religion, and he attaches a superstitious significance to a sudden storm in which he and Joe are caught.

JACK: ...Look. All of a sudden the storm's passed over. There isn't a wave on the bay now.

JOE: Isn't that strange? It came out of nowhere and it's cleared up in a moment.

JACK: (troubled) You don't think it was like... a warning, do you?

JOE: What for?

JACK: Like a punishment.

(Joe is still silent)

(Quietly). For what has happened last night, stupid. (p. 39)

Jack's cavalier attitude to the requirements of the confessions in the earlier stages of their relationship gives way to a zeal which he uses as a weapon against Joe in order to assuage his guilt and fear:

JACK: (half to himself) When I told [the priest] what I felt that night I thought he was going to jump out of the confessional. He said I wasn't ever to go near you again. That I was to positively avoid you. Next time I suppose I'll have to confess that I've asked you over here today. (p. 62)

To Joe, for whom the deepening relationship has meant security and affection without guilt, this reversal is totally bewildering. His inability to reconcile the demands of his faith and his need to give and to receive love begin to confound him.

JACK: What do you want from me? Do you want me to lose my soul?

JOE: I'm not afraid of losing my soul. One of us has to be wrong.

JACK: This isn't just something between you and I. I've got to take notice of the priest or I can't get

absolution. Come on. You're so clever, you tell me what I'm supposed to do about that.

JOE: (lowering his head again) I don't know. (pp. 62-3)

In their final meeting, which takes place on Jack's initiative, Jack is calm and serene, clearly absolved of the guilt which he has formally revealed both physically and emotionally. Joe's desperate pleas for Jack to stay amount to more than mere moral blackmail. They constitute a deep rejection of the demands of the faith which has ultimately proven to be an inadequate refuge for the lonely, alienated boy.

JOE: Just wait a bit, Jack. Listen, I want to tell you something. If you do go away without me I'm finished with the Church.

JACK: You wouldn't do such a thing.

JOE: I swear I would. Because it was the Church that said we shouldn't see each other again. (p. 70)

The final scene of the play, in which the parallel strands are formally drawn together, presents a mother and a son unaware of the deep sense of loss, isolation and incomprehension being suffered by the other. Both turn to some immediate form of numbing escape (for Aggie, the wireless; for Joe, the defeating return to the pictures), and for both the moral sustenance of their faith seems to prove inadequate. Joe refuses to accept the verdict of the Church on the love he has felt for Jack, and is alienated from his religion. Aggie comprehends that she is to lose the Dan who has been her religion, and her attempt to pray direct to God is tentative and faltering. She refuses to accept this latest cruel blow countenanced by her hard God, but maturity has taught her that this refusal can only be temporary, and that ultimately she will have to submit to the desolation of facing life, after Dan's death, divorced from her sustaining spiritual source.

AGGIE: I don't believe it! I don't believe any of it! How could I believe such a thing? Why, I might just as well believe the ground was going to open up and swallow me.

JOE: You might have to believe it.

AGGIE: I won't, I won't. At least ... not yet. I suppose ... eventually ... but, not yet, dear God. Not yet! (p. 72)

Their unawareness of each other's misery underlines the terrible isolation which each

character faces as the play ends. For neither has the Church nor the family relationship provided solace, or any certain hope. The play offers no solution to the universal dilemma with which it has been concerned, and the profundity of Aggie Cassidy's sense of loss is poignantly communicated in the play's closing moments. For one critic, this moving scene took on an even wider significance:

In the end as the play fades into darkness Aggie is left there utterly alone at the dawn of an unspeakable anguish of ultimate incomprehension and despair. As an allegory of our times that moment can claim to be one of the most deeply moving statements of contemporary art.<sup>22</sup>

No other playwright working in the Australian theatre today has echoed as faithfully as has Peter Kenna the aspirations, frustrations and life concerns of ordinary, working-class, urban Australians. He has worked out the themes of his plays in a dramatic language which is at once poetic and unfailingly reflective of the periods and people of whom he has written and assuredly, at the height of this notable achievement, stands *A Hard God*.

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14. Conversation with Kenna, 2 September 1975.
- 15, 16. Conversation with Kenna, 8 September 1976.
17. Katharine Brisbane, *Australian*, 27 August 1973.
18. Conversation with Kenna, 8 September 1976.
- 19, 20. ABC broadcast, 6 June 1975.
21. Kenna has explained, in his programme note for *The Cassidy Album*, that he intends 'hard' to mean 'difficult to understand'.
22. Brian Hoad, *Bulletin*, 15 September 1973.

## 2. The three questions most often asked about *A Hard God*

### Peter Kenna

Usually the first question I am asked about is why I split it into what is very nearly two plays. The answer is that I decided this was the simplest and best way of passing on what I wished to say about the Cassidys.

In a traditionally constructed play, the adults would have occupied the centre of the action while the boys would have been relegated to a less important sub-plot.

Certainly it would have been necessary for Joe to play more of a part in the action concerning his parents and uncles and this would have raised a number of problems. Aggie refers to other people living in the house, Joe's brothers and sisters. If Joe was involved in the house action why not them also?

The demands of strict realism would, in my opinion, have bogged the action down with trivial comings and goings and made it necessary for me to invent reasons why people had to leave the room so that other people could play a scene without them.

By cutting what would have been a sub-plot adrift from the major action I have given it an almost equal importance, as well as freeing both plays from the restrictions I mention above. After all, the audience knows it is not watching real life. It is watching a selection of events based on



reality, written down and presented by actors as an entertainment.

There is a story concerning a man who one day walked into the studio of the painter Pablo Picasso and boldly announced he did not like the artist's works because they were not realistic enough. Sometime later in his visit he showed Picasso a photograph of a woman. 'This is my wife', he said; and Picasso replied, 'She's a very small, flat, black and white person, isn't she?'

As far as the arts are concerned, reality is only what a certain group of people at a certain point in time agree will be allowed to represent reality. Whereas the characters in *A Hard God* seem to be real and so do the encounters between them, the form of the play tends towards abstraction.

A study of the first act will reveal that the three scenes involving the adults take place over a single evening while the three scenes involving the boys take place over a period of weeks: swiftly-moving time intersects normal time. This is another break with realism, yet I believe I have successfully twisted the rules to suit the needs of my particular purpose.

Next, people are usually curious to know about the relationship between Jack and Joe. They want to know exactly what happens between them physically.

What happens is exactly what Joe says happens: they sleep together in the same bed with their arms about each other. The trouble between them springs from their different sexual orientation. Jack is heterosexual, Joe homosexual. In the pre-pill Forties, when practically any form of intimacy between boys and girls was frowned on by their parents and elders, when it was almost necessary for a girl to marry a virgin, or, at least, have had sexual relations only with the man she was marrying, Jack carries an urgent need for sexual gratification about with him.

He responds to what he sees as feminine elements in Joe's nature: his extreme modesty, his quick condemnation of sexual crudeness, his sensitivity in understanding what Jack has been through with his family. Jack teases him as he would a girl, misbehaving to provoke a shocked response, finally developing a sexual attraction for Joe. But it is an attraction for a sexual substitute. As soon as he is allowed to develop a fulfilling

relationship with a girl, all thoughts of Joe as a sex object will disappear.

Joe is a naive homosexual. He falls deeply in love with Jack but, as yet, sex plays only a small part in his feelings for other men. It is an emotional security he craves. When he tells Jack he did not wish for a physical contact beyond lying beside him at Woy Woy he is speaking the truth and when this is branded a sin, he is outraged. It was, after all, Jack who hoped for sexual gratification and it is he who is warned by the priest in the confessional to stay away from Joe because he is a bad influence.

Both the boys are trapped in a difficult and painful situation and, considering what they are, there is really no solution beyond parting.

Finally, I am often asked what gave me the idea for the play. Actually, it was never just an idea. The bones of the work had been with me all my life, growing with my own bones.

*A Hard God* is based upon events involving my family and myself. These events have been altered and condensed, but, overall, I believe I have managed to retain the feeling of what it was like to be an Irish-Australian Catholic in the 1940s.

### 3. A period play

#### Don Reid

If a playwright couches his play in a period other than the contemporary one in which he is living at the time of writing, he has written a 'period play'. The playwright may write such a play either by drawing on his memory of an earlier part of his life (as with *A Hard God*), or by researching an historical period (as, say, Alexander Buzo did for the writing of *Macquarie*, or Shakespeare did for *Julius Caesar* or *Richard II*, for example). Such period plays as this latter kind tend, of course, to be called 'history plays'.

With the passage of time, nearly all plays cease to be contemporary. They become 'dated', and thus period plays. Congreve's plays reveal the Restoration period; Noel Coward's plays reflect the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s; Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is now a period play of the 1950s; and so on.

In a very real sense, *A Hard God* is a sociological document. It is a history play, or at least a play

in which a period—its language, habits, values, mores—is as integral to the drama as the plot and character development. I am certain that this element in the play alone will guarantee the play's survival.

You should certainly evaluate the action and the characters against the background of the times in which they are placed. You cannot expect to understand fully what the author is saying in *A Hard God* without having some appreciation of (a) the Depression period in Australia, which shaped the destinies of and the relationships between the various members of the Cassidy family; (b) the post-World War II period of the 1940s, which is the 'present' time of the play. These were both hard times.

It is through such things as language (vocabulary, allusions, syntax), manners and social values that an author builds a sense of 'period' into his writing.

Here is a short commentary on some of the linguistic and social elements in Act I of *A Hard God* which build this sense of period (you might well find it profitable to research Act II in the same way):

### Language

Cyril Angles (p. 6): a famous racing broadcaster in the 1940s.

Warragamba (p. 6): the big dam was under construction then and, of course, employed a lot of labour on the site.

Reffos (p. 7): Australian migrants in the early post-World War II period were commonly called 'reffos', a colloquial diminutive of 'refugees'.

He's got the miseries on him (p. 16): a dated colloquialism for 'He's depressed' or 'He's down in the dumps'.

Bloomers (p. 18): girls' underpants.

Doss down (p. 26): 'to put together a make-shift bed', 'to camp down'.

We struck things plushy (p. 29): a situation in which it was easy to make money.

Fivers, tenners, a green one, ten bob (p. 35): colloquial terms for five pounds, ten pounds, one pound and ten shillings.

### Social Matters

'Paddy was coining it in the bootmaking business' (p.8): Before cars became widespread, people

did a lot more walking, and bootmaking could be a lucrative small business.

'A big tin of Captain brand salmon' (p. 8): A tin of salmon (especially Captain brand red salmon) was a luxury item in the Depression era.

'the club' (p. 9 and also p. 5: 'the Catholic Youth Organisation'): A night out for an adolescent today would hardly be at a Youth Club to take part in a debate on 'The age of chivalry is not dead'.

'a bulging chaff bag' (p. 12): It was not uncommon in these times for a worker to have his possessions in a chaff bag (a bag used for storing and transporting grain). Such a practice reflected the poverty of the times.

'Have you ever gone all the way with a girl?' (p. 17): Jack's sexual explicitness is rather daring for an adolescent in the 1940s, and naturally shocks Joe, a more conventional representative of his age.

'I'm going to Woy Woy' (p. 21): Woy Woy has become a large residential area today. In the 1940s it was a very popular, and even exotic, seaside resort for working-class holidays.

'the buggy-whip he held' (p. 27): Paddy's memory of his stern father's use of a buggy-whip to instil Catholic disciplines into his children certainly belongs to a former period.

'We'd have been there yet, lords of the land' (p. 27): It was common to find in the 1930s and 1940s that many families living in the city had been driven there because the struggle in the bush against drought and the Depression had proved too much.

'Saturday night dances' (p. 36): Women starching their petticoats, men 'plastering' their hair down with hair oil—these things reflect the pre-1920 period.

## 4. Questions for discussion

### Don Reid

1. In what way does Aggie suggest that being a good Catholic was an impediment during the Depression?
2. What makes Paddy a much more comic character than his brothers?
3. The argument that develops between Martin and Paddy (pp. 30-31) seems to be not just

one of the moment, but rather one that goes back a long way. How is this suggested in the play?

4. What is indicated about working conditions and union conflict in the 1940s (pp. 47-49)?
5. The verse on p. 58 is taken from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam* translated by Edward Fitzgerald. Find out what you can about this poem. What is the dramatic significance of the stanza quoted in the play?
6. How does the discussion between Aggie and Dan on the subject of God add to your understanding of their characters and of the central meaning of the play? (pp. 64-65).
7. Can you relate the third Joe/Jack scene of Act I to the title of the play? In what way is Martin's final prayer a dramatic comment on the scene?
8. '*A Hard God* is a play in which people are human and God is inhuman' (Bill Chiles, *Mirror*, September 1973). Do you agree?
9. In what sense is Dan the central character of *A Hard God*?
10. 'MARTIN: Ah, time, Time! Time!', (p. 39). To what extent is time a theme in the play?
11. What can you say about the dramatic effect of the way in which the author switches abruptly from the Dan/Aggie scene in Act II to the Joe/Jack scene? Why do you think the author has chosen such a transition at this point in the play?

## 5. The critics' views

Susan Dermody, *Showbusiness*, September 1973

The family is found at that moment when the threats are more remembered than pressing, and there is the possibility for working over them and even understanding them, in quietness. But it is difficult to face the past without welling up into sentimentalism or bitterness, and neither help understanding. The play is largely poised about this moment of waiting to understand and then goes on to present the procrastinations and events that steal the opportunity away forever. So it leaves you, through its finely controlled dramatic understatement, somehow slightly bereft and yet in the possession of a knowledge that doesn't bear being dragged into a critical light and dissected ... these interruptive

and alternate scenes, and the ultimate effect of the intrusions seems to be a forcing away from the details of the play to its social issues.

Kenna forces into consciousness the almost criminal stupidity of a rigidly Catholic doctrinal program for living ... Only Dan and Aggie's pragmatic and human version of their faith, which comprehends and can live with Martin's reflection that it is indeed 'A Hard God' we're dealing with ... survives as anything like a possible way of dealing with reality.

Brian Hoad, *Bulletin*, 15 September 1973

You could say that *The Doll* is no more and no less than about ordinary people's relationships with themselves and with others; in *A Hard God* Mr Kenna's new maturity has been able to add relationships with conscience, with spirit and with a God ...

It is a profoundly experimental play ... It seems for a start like two plays running in parallel. But in the end it serves to mingle together past, present and future—the nostalgic reminiscences of the older generation somehow link up with the present circumstances of the two young boys; the hopes for the future of the boys connect with the present lot of the older generation. A sense of cycles and seasons pervades the piece ...

The God is indeed a hard God. But for those who accept his burden of pain there is finally strength and comfort. Only the mother revolts against him and denies him. And in the end as the play fades into darkness she is left there utterly alone at the dawn of an unspeakable anguish of ultimate incomprehension and despair. As an allegory of our times that moment can claim to be one of the most deeply moving statements in contemporary art.

H.G. Kippax, *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 1973

... As the play progresses we have the meaningless, intolerable disasters—a death by accident, the break-up of a marriage, Dan's increasingly ominous eye trouble—which throw into relief the main theme of the play, the mysterious ways of the 'hard God' to whom they are bound.

That this is the main theme becomes clearer as the second strand of the play nears its denouement—a teenage Cassidy boy's love affair with a handsome schoolmate, Jack Shannon; Shannon's guilt and renunciation of

his friend; the boy's renunciation of the church which condemns feelings he holds to be pure.

You may feel there is thematic material here to make several plays. There is... For too long the play wanders... and matters are not improved by the drawn out agonisings of the two adolescent boys, one (we know from the programme) a Cassidy, but otherwise in no way linked to the family until the very end. This lack of linkage is at present a serious weakness.

**H.G. Kippax, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 1982**

... This is a production to compel re-evaluation—yet again—of a play of tingling humanity that stands four-square with *The Doll* and *The One Day of the Year* as one of the three achievements of Australian realistic drama.

I use realism only as a convenient term of classification, as with O'Neill's best plays. In the theatre its quasi-symphonic development of resounding themes—time, chance and change, Christian faith and human fortitudes, town and country, age and youth, the family as prison and sanctuary—transcend reportage...

**David Wade, *The Times*, 6 December 1975 (on a BBC Radio broadcast of *A Hard God*)**

... One may judge a play, among other ways, by how it crosses chasms and I suppose there is none wider nor deeper than the treatment of teenage homosexuality. With this as test, Mr Kenna passed brilliantly; all his characterisation was good, but his account of the relationship between these two young men was really masterly. He conveyed at once the passion, the self-doubt and remorse, the wilful infliction of pain, the oscillations between joy and despair.

**Barry Oakley, *National Times*, 20-25 March 1978 (on the production of *The Cassidy Album*, Adelaide Festival 1978)**

... The production of *A Hard God* reinforces its status as a key work in the Australian repertoire ... it confronts and defines basic elements of our inheritance within a realistic frame.

Journalists can tell us what we are, historians can explain what we are, but only dramatists can thrust our chromosomes on the womb of the stage and bring them into being as dynamic actions; our myths are foetal unless they're enacted ...

The final decline of expectation is the main current of the play, while running beside it is a tributary of a more subtle and complex kind: Aggie's son Joe's steadily developing attachment to his friend Jack Shannon. One of Kenna's many achievements is the way the flow of this emotional force is made to swell, baffle and grow again. As life dries up for the older generation on centre stage, it saps and buds with the two boys at the side.

... (the characters) have flesh and spirit, though forces physical and psychological wage relentless war on both, and they have the power of generality—all of us have in some way experienced their pilgrimage—from bush to city, from city to bewilderment and failure, and from failure to hammering against the marbled outlines of the hard God.

## 6. Further reading

### Plays

All plays are published by Currency Press.

*The Slaughter of Saint Teresa's Day*, 1972 (in *Plays of the 50s Volume 2*)

*Three Plays: Talk to the Moon, Listen Closely, Trespassers Will be Prosecuted*, 1977

*Mates*, 1977 (in *Australian Gay and Lesbian Plays*)

*Furtive Love*, 1980

### General

Brisbane, Katharine, *New Currents in Australian Writing*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1978

Dutton, Geoffrey (ed.), *The Literature of Australia*, Penguin, Melbourne, revised ed. 1976 (see particularly Part 1, 'Australian Drama' by Katharine Brisbane)

Fitzpatrick, Peter, *After The Doll: Australian Drama Since 1955*, Melbourne, Edward Arnold, 1979

Holloway, Peter (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Drama: Perspectives Since 1955*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1981. This book is a useful general sourcebook for Australian drama.

McCallum, John, 'Peter Kenna and the Search for Intimacy', *Meanjin*, xxxvii (1978)

Sturm, Terry, 'Drama' in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, (Leonie Kramer ed.), Melbourne, OUP, 1981

Williams, Margaret, *Drama in Australian Writers and Their Work Series*, Melbourne, OUP, 1977