STUDY GUIDE

CURRENCY PRESS
The performing arts publisher
www.currency.com.au

ALMA DE GROEN'S *THE RIVERS OF CHINA*

by Elizabeth Perkins

1. Introducing the play

The Rivers of China is the seventh of the plays Alma De Groen has written for the stage, each of which is different from the others. Since her first script, however, De Groen's plays have always shown two specific interests, one related to their themes and the other related to the style of their staging and performance. The themes of her plays have always related to characters who are in some way different from most people, or are people who might be considered eccentric, more sensitive or gifted, some of whom are artists of different kinds.

The staging and the performance style of her plays, which of course relate to the themes and contribute to our ideas about what the plays mean, are important for their visual effect and they are often influenced by the techniques and forms of painting. The stage settings do not remind you of any particular painting—but if you were interested in graphic art, you might feel that had the director and theatre company captured what the author intended for *The Joss Adams Show*, the style might remind you of the blatantly modern, representational art style of American painters like Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenberg or Andy Warhol, or of British artists like Peter Blake and David Hockney. The style of other plays was influenced by the clear outlines and dramatic shapes and colours of the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Zurbaran.

The staging and performance style of *The Rivers of China* were influenced by the Russian constructionist art forms which entered theatre designs through the work of artists like Sonia Delaunay. The movement of shapes, like sculptures moving through space, and the focus on the textures of objects are features of constructionist art. When creating a mental image of the scenes in *The Rivers of China*, it is useful to imagine these ideas of shape, movement and texture, especially in the Fontainebleau scenes.

The theme of *The Rivers of China* concerns Katherine Mansfield's attempt to understand who she is, as a woman and an artist, by putting herself in the care of the spiritual leader, Georgei Gurdjieff, during the last months of her life. This theme is complemented or paralleled by events in an imagined society set in contemporary Australia, in which women have the dominant role and men are regarded as secondary citizens. This imagined society is the reverse of the society in which many believe women have always lived, with the difference that in this new society men are defined as women see them, and the 'inferiority' of men is made quite obvious.

One connection between the Katherine Mansfield story and the story of Rahel, Wayne and the Man, is that all three characters are under stress because they live in societies in which they are regarded as 'different' or inferior people. Katherine's tuberculosis is exacerbated by the stress she has always felt as a woman, because as a writer she wanted to live differently from most women, and make her living and reputation in a male-dominated art. In the imagined society, the hospital orderly, Wayne, who is sensitive and loves poetry, lives under the same stress, and so does

the Man, who is in a Sydney hospital recovering from a near fatal suicide attempt. One underlying theme of the play is that whenever society distinguishes between people so as to make some more 'normal' and 'important' than others, whether through sex, occupation (for example, sportsmen are more 'normal' than artists), race, religion or ally other means, there is something wrong with that society.

2. Synopsis

Act One

Scene One: The imagined present. Wayne's bedroom in living quarters at a Sydney hospital. Reversing stereotypical roles between men and women, Audra has been making love to Wayne before going on duty. Wayne shows cliched notions of 'female' behaviour by reciting and composing poetry, making dinner, getting upset and consoling himself with lollies! He tunes in to hear a radio news item about another suicide attempt by a young man.

Scene Two: Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau (France) in 1922. Katherine has been given a room above the cowshed — a warm, 'natural' environment. The dialogue introduces us to Gurdjieff, whose teaching tried to make his disciples realise that they were trapped in mechanical roles, habits and thought processes and had lost awareness of their real selves.

Scene Three: Katherine and Murry's London house some months before Scene Two. What do we learn of the relationship between them, and the kinds of simple things Katherine values? Why does she decide to go to Fontainebleau?

Scene Four: The hospital bed of the suicide victim ('the Man'). Wayne establishes one-way contact with the bandaged figure, and recites graffiti that he has copied on toilet paper from the toilet walls.

Scene Five: In Fontainebleau, Gurdjieff stops Katherine writing her letter to Murry because she is thinking with her mind instead of feeling with her body. How does this scene, and Katherine's last speech, suggest that Gurdjieff's methods could help her?

Scene Six: A programme note could help the audience with this scene, but without that, they experience something of the Man's sense of disorientation as he regains consciousness believing that he is Katherine Mansfield. The scene also indicates how Audra differs from Rahel, whom we meet for the first time.

Scene Seven: At Fontainebleau we learn more about Gurdjieff's 'Method' of helping people become more truly aware of their real selves. The scene is serious, but there is a witty rapport between Mansfield and Gurdjieff.

Scene Eight: In the hospital, Wayne and the Man also establish a rapport, and we see that the Man has acquired Katherine's dry humour. When Audra tells him that he and his friends died some fifty years ago, he also experiences some of Katherine's frustration when Gurdjieff tells her that Katherine Mansfield did not exist (p.21), so his Katherine-identity imagines he must be back at Fontainebleau (p.26) and immediately he feels the symptoms of Katherine's tuberculosis. His physical symptoms are relieved, as Katherine's are in Scene Five, by a simple drink of water. Is it understandable that the Man and Wayne feel homeless and alien (p.29) in their separate worlds that deny their existence or their importance?

Scene Nine: We learn that Rahel is responsible for the graffiti lines from poems written by men. Audra's reminder that women's words were once taken from them, expresses what many people now feel about the past suppression of women's writing.

Scene Ten: The two time-frames are brought together as Katherine continues her lessons in self-awareness, and the Man, semi-conscious, echoes her 'I'. At the end, Wayne becomes aware that he prefers the company of the Man to that of Audra, and Katherine recalls with critical self-awareness some of the critics' comments about her work.

Act Two

Scene One: The graffiti, 'A Man's Reach Should Exceed His Grasp', is changed to 'My Lord Fool'. The play does not dictate how the audience interprets the graffiti, and audience members may consider many possible meanings before the end of the play. This is a terrible scene in which

two men plan to film the rape and murder of a girl whom they have abducted. Such films or videos are sold as pornography. The play intends the audience to feel disorientated and shocked as a way of emphasising the horror and cruelty. When Wayne and the Man speak, the audience begins to realise what has been happening. How apt is this myth as a comment on pornography and contemporary violence, especially against women and children?

Scene Two: Gurdjieff conducts a class at Fontainbleau. What effect has Asanov on the group and on the audience? Does Gurdjieff's last instruction to Vera connect in any way with the preceding scene?

Scene Three: In this scene the friendship between Katherine and Lidia is important to show Katherine's greater understanding of her own sex and gender. Lidia's story of their escape from Russia emphasises, as an historical reality and as an image, the notion that women are dependent on men.

Scene Four: Wayne gives the Man a library book of Katherine's work published by Murry after her death. The scene contrasts ironically with Scene Three, since Murry has taken advantage of Katherine's death to make her posthumous identity and literary reputation dependent on his editing of her work. Why does the Man think Wayne is Asanov? The scene ends with the Man almost happy when he thinks of writing he admires and believing that he is Katherine at Fontainebleau.

Scene Five: At Fontainebleau Katherine is also feeling happier about writing, although we soon realise, as she does, that she has been moved to the main house because she is near death. Scenes Five and Seven echo the first meeting of Katherine and Gurdjieff in Act One Scene Two, and indicate the progress Katherine has made towards a better knowledge of herself under Gurdjieff's teaching. The scene is interrupted at Katherine's important question: what did Lidia mean when she said that a woman cannot act alone?

Scene Six: Audra's callousness at the thought that the Man may have jumped out the broken window and her authoritarian attitude, prompt Wayne to rebel and use physical force to frighten her into feeling how men feel in the imagined society. It is significant that in real life, even when treated callously by men, women can rarely use physical force, and when Audra cannot use the Medusa look, she is immediately vulnerable. The scene shows that no progress is made by dominance and physical force, whoever uses them.

Scene Seven: The uselessness of dominance and authoritarian attitudes is shown again in this climactic scene, where Katherine learns that all the help she has received from Gurdjieff's teaching is undermined by its basic contempt for women. Although she is shocked and angry, her dry humour returns in her last speech when she suggests magic, and one of Gurdjieff's other interests, his sale of Persian carpets, might be her last hope of escape.

Scene Eight: Katherine is on stage, but the focus is on the Man, Wayne and Rahel until her last speech. Rahel explains that she could save the Man's life by restoring his own identity. Why does Wayne choose to let him die in the identity by which he knows him? The play ends with the focus on Katherine, who speaks of her delight in her work, and in natural things, like the way light dies from a room, taking one with it. Her final sentence, however, is about the outdoors and life. The audience is left with her last vision: Katherine the woman and Murry the man, like the two parts of a scissors, silhouetted quite equally against the landscape.

3. Structure and character

The period before the imagined present

Act One Scenes Two, Three, Five and Seven, and Act Two Scenes Two, Three, Five and Seven are set in 1922–1923. Act One Scene Ten and Act Two Scene Eight, which are the last scenes in each act, show action set in 1923 and in the imagined present. Although scenes from each story seem to interrupt each other at random, we see when we examine them, that there is a pattern in the way they appear. Within the earlier time frame, however, scenes do not follow in the order they would have occurred in real life.

This non-chronological juxtaposition of scenes occurs as 'flashbacks' in novels and films as well as plays, sometimes as a device to increase interest, because often attention and understanding are sharpened by watching an unusual sequence of events and by learning results before causes. Alma De Groen has another reason for the unusual juxtaposition of scenes. She wants the audience to keep asking themselves 'Where are we?' because she feels that this is how Katherine felt in her journey through life, a journey 'that all women go on from the time they are born, never quite being at home in the universe, and not having any maps and always being told to look to the male for a passport and guidance when the boundaries between this world and the next all have a male sentry' (De Groen 1989–90, 15).

The characters

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) was a gifted New Zealand short-story writer who lived in England and Europe from 1909 until her death in 1923. As a strong-minded, independent woman she was aware of the many restrictions in society which prevented women achieving the full possibilities of their lives. She wrote in her diary in May 1908, 'I feel that I do now realise, dimly, what women in the future will be capable of. They truly as yet have never had their chance … We are firmly held with the self-fashioned chains of slavery' (Mansfield, 35). Her stories do not represent women as all good and men as all bad, but they do show how women are repressed in a male-dominated society, how they help to fashion their own chains of repression, and how this kind of society may prevent men also from achieving the best life. When we meet Katherine Mansfield in *The Rivers of China* she has decided to join the Gurdjieff Institute, where she hopes the daily regime of diet, physical and mental exercises, lectures and meditation might prolong her life, and help her to become at peace with herself. Gurdjieff does help her to discard the 'persona' or mask with which she faced society, and to feel the real 'I' within herself. But when she begins to find this real 'I,' he tells her that compared with the real 'I' of any man, her woman's 'I' is of limited significance. Katherine Mansfield represents, among other things, all women who learn that every attempt to find their true identity is blocked by some restriction imposed by a society in which men are regarded as more important.

John Middleton Murry (1889–1957) was a critic and editor of the London literary journals, the *Athenaeum* and the *Adelphi*. He was a friend of D. H. Lawrence who represented him as Gerald (and Katherine as Gudrun) in his novel *Women in Love*. Murry married Katherine Mansfield in 1918, and after her death edited, published and marketed Katherine and her work in ways that she would not have approved. In her lifetime, she disliked his over-praising her work and representing her as a natural, innocent genius instead of the hard-working, experienced professional writer she really was: 'Unable to control her while she lived, Murry could not resist manipulating her after her death to fit the pattern he preferred' (Tomalin, 242). John Middleton Murry represents, among other things, a well-intentioned man who, in the present society, cannot help trying to control and exploit the woman he admires.

G.I. Gurdjieff (1866-1949) was a Russian-born teacher and mystic philosopher who developed a method or regime of life and teaching by which students could become more aware of their real selves. Gurdjieff's writing is supposed to have influenced Holden Caulfield, a character in the novel *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, which was popular with young readers in the 1960s. Some of De Groen's dialogue resembles reports written by students of Gurdjieff, and although the play presents his ideas in the playwright's terms, they are not misrepresented. His teaching represents, among other things, philosophies and religions to which women may turn to overcome the uncertainty of living in a male-dominated society but which, no matter how sincere their teaching may be, also allocate a secondary status to women.

Vera, **Lidia** and **Asanov** are fictional characters, followers of Gurdjieff who escaped from Russia with him about 1917.

The imagined present society

The imagined present society is set in the year in which any performance of the play takes place. Instead of setting the imagined female-dominated society in the future, as a science fiction writer might, Alma De Groen has set it

in the present, so that we realise this female dystopia is not intended as a prediction of what could happen in the future, but is a society imagined only for the purposes of the play. This society apparently evolved when women developed a special power in their gaze to compensate for their inferior physical strength which made them vulnerable to mistreatment by men. Act Two Scene One shows Wayne and the Man watching a video which enacts the moment at which a woman, about to be murdered to make a pornographic movie, discovers she has this special power.

Act One Scenes One, Four, Six, Eight, and Nine, and Act Two, Scenes One, Four, and Six are set in the imagined present. As noted above, the last scene in each act shows action from both time frames.

Audra is a fictional character, a doctor in a Sydney hospital to which the Man is brought. Because she remembers what life for women was like under the 'Horror' of male oppression (p.31), she is a conscientious and a disciplined member of the female-dominated society, and represents people who, even when aware that society is imperfect, fear change.

Rahel works at the same hospital. As a plastic surgeon she is also an artist (p.17), and she has a vision of a better society in which women and men are equal. She rebels by writing up lines by male poets whose work is suppressed in the female-dominated society, and she attempts to create 'a man who could be an equal without being a danger' (p.54). Although hypnosis is forbidden, she also rebels by using hypnosis to help the healing process and to make the Man believe he is Katherine Mansfield. The play suggests that the human mind cannot be manipulated entirely by art or by science, since the Man also takes on Katherine's tuberculosis. Rahel represents artists and imaginative people who attempt to improve society but cannot accomplish much without support from others.

The Man apparently attempted suicide, like a number of young men in the imagined society, because with women in power, they find life too repressive (p.2). On stage, the Man is a very strong image and a strong character. He is first seen wrapped in bandages, like a cocoon, and emerges from them like a new form of human life. The play presents two Katherine Mansfields, both living in a society that represses them but one is a woman and one is a man, showing that there is nothing essential to women that makes them vulnerable to repression.

Wayne is an orderly in the hospital, and as Audra's lover he has much the same status as would a young woman orderly today, who was the lover of a male doctor. He is sensitive and loves poetry, but as a man he cannot expect to have it published. He is greatly attracted to the Man, because the Man represents a male who is also a writer. At the end of the play, Rahel offers to restore the Man to his former identity so that he will not die of the disease he inherited with the Katherine Mansfield identity. Wayne chooses that the Man should die with his writer's identity, perhaps because he has loved the Man in this identity, perhaps because the Man would revert to his former suicidal state of mind with his former identity.

It is not easy to generalise about what Wayne represents, but he represents not only many women in contemporary society, but all people who feel 'alien' in society and, although glimpsing the possibility of change, do not know what to do to bring it about.

Matthew, Mark and the Girl are actors playing these roles in a video movie made to remind men and women in the imagined society how their society evolved. The audience cannot know they are seeing an enactment until Wayne and the Man begin to discuss what they have been watching, and the Man comments, from Katherine Mansfield's point of view, on the strange, late twentieth-century economy of the dialogue. The play borrows from the Greek myth of Medusa, a woman whose hair was comprised of live snakes, whose gaze turned men (possibly women too, if they had been allowed such adventures) to stone. The video suggests that male violence against women increased to the point where nature presented women with a new, powerful weapon to ensure their survival. Alma De Groen said the grim humour of Matthew's and Mark's dialogue was inspired by reading a mediaeval mystery play depicting carpenters joking as they prepared the cross for Christ's crucifixion.

4. Poetry

Alma De Groen chose a poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830– 1886) as an epigraph for the play. The poem uses the image of the 'bandaged soul' or repressed spirit of women which sometimes breaks out and 'swings upon the hours,' but is retaken by 'the Horror.' This image is reproduced by the bandaged form of the Man in the first scene. The poem Wayne is writing (p.2) also refers to the repression of 'Words which have never been born'. The graffiti Rahel writes up includes lines from the poems 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer' by John Keats (1795– 1821), and 'Andrea del Sarto' by Robert Browning (1812– 1889).

The phrase 'My Lord Fool' comes from *Henry IV, Part One* by William Shakespeare (1564– 1616). See the Introduction (p. xiv) for the relevance of this quotation.

The Man quotes the 'Song: Rarely Rarely Comest Thou, Spirit of Delight' by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792– 1822). Audiences may decide for themselves how these lines affect their understanding of the play and its themes. Keats and Shelley were Romantic poets, in rebellion against the restrictions of their society, and Keats also died of tuberculosis.

'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer' expresses the poet's delight on reading for the first time a translation of the famous ancient Greek epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The phrase, 'a man's reach should exceed his grasp,' comes from Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto,' a monologue by a real Renaissance painter, aware that he has failed because, although he painted faultlessly, he never attempted anything he could not do perfectly. Among other things, this collection of lines suggest the delight of exploring new ideas and attempting to reach beyond ordinary, 'safe' limitations to achieve a greater good.

5. Feminism

In *The Rivers of China*, Alma De Groen is looking at the implications of the last months of Katherine Mansfield's life from a feminist perspective. Feminism is a philosophy and an active movement of social and other kinds of reform to bring about perfect equality of status for women and men. Feminism argues that women have always been defined by what the male-dominated societies (patriarchies) have required from them, and have been allocated social roles according to what best suits male purposes. But feminism also argues that men, although they gain by seeing women as the Other who exists to meet their needs, have also been disadvantaged by this. Feminists contend that we are born female or male, but that in society we become women or men. Feminism believes that although certain reforms have been made, so that in theory, in some societies, women and men can now create their identities in their own terms and share the same rights and responsibilities, there remain many kinds of discrimination which lead to great injustice and prevent the full development of both men and women.

Alma De Groen's plays have always shared some feminist ideas, in that they show what happens to people when the right to equality and consideration of either men or women is denied. *The Joss Adams Show*, about a young mother who brings about the death of her baby; *Perfectly All Right*, about a housewife who becomes obsessed with enforced domesticity; *Going Home* about a wife housebound in a Canadian winter; and *Vocations*, about two women trying to balance their roles as a wife and mother with their vocation to write and act, have women as central figures. There are other themes in these plays, however, which are just as relevant to men, and her plays *The After-Life of Arthur Cravan* and *Chidley* centre on male characters.

The Rivers of China is perhaps the most thoroughly feminist of all the stage plays she has had published to date, and it attempts to reproduce for the audience something of the uncertainty that most women feel for a greater or lesser part of their life. This uncertainty may also be shared by men who do not wish to follow much of the conduct considered permissible or 'right' for the typical male.

It is courageous of any playwright to attempt a new form of play, and to attempt to make the audience enjoy the play even while they feel uncertain about where it is going. *The Rivers of China* proves that as a playwright, Alma De Groen is not afraid to reach for something which may be

beyond her grasp, if directors, actors and audience do not also try to reach with her.

6. Notes

Page references are to the play published by Currency Press.

p. 2: **AMP Building, Circular Quay**: a landmark building near the Sydney Harbour ferry terminal in Sydney.
Stevie Smith (1902– 1971) English poet and writer whose poem 'Not Waving but Drowning' epitomizes the sense of modern desperation.

p. 3: **Sir Thomas Browne** (1605– 1682) English writer and medical practitioner whose most famous work is *Religio Medici* and whose most learned is *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* or 'Vulgar Errors,' which contains this comment.

p. 6: **D. H. Lawrence** (1885– 1930). Novelist, short-story writer, poet and playwright whose relationship with Frieda Weekley, with whom he eloped, was as tempestuous as Katherine suggests in the play. Lawrence also died of tuberculosis.
Cornwall, St Ives: county and town in the South West of England. The comparatively mild climate is helpful to tubercular patients.

p. 7: **Virginia Woolf** (1882– 1941). One of the Bloomsbury group of artists and writers with whom Mansfield had contact. Woolf disapproved of, but also admired, Mansfield, and said of their relationship, 'never again shall I have one like it.' Woolf's novels, stories and essays are now regarded as leading feminist work, especially the essay, 'A Room of One's Own' (1929). She committed suicide by drowning.
Alistair Crowley (1875– 1947). A minor poet who dabbled in black magic.

p. 9: **Hydrotherapy etc.**: advertised as part of the regime at Gurdjieff's Institute. Duliotherapy is a lesser form of worship, derived from the Greek words meaning 'service' and 'slave'.

p. 11: **'Remember me ... into the silent land'**. The lines are from 'Remember' by Christina Rossetti (1830– 1894).

p. 18: **Botanical Gardens**: adjacent to Circular Quay, Sydney.

p. 19: **Dr Manhoukin**: Dr Ivan Manhoukin, a Russian in exile in Paris, claimed to cure tuberculosis by irradiating the spleen with x-rays.

p. 21: **Grand Lama of Tibet**: the Dalai or Grand Lama is the principal of the two highest religious leaders of Tibet and Mongolia.

p. 24: ***Palgrave's Golden Treasury of Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language***: A famous collection first published in 1861, and subsequently until 1965.

p. 29: **H.D.**: Hilda Doolittle (1886– 1961), American-born poet associated with the Bloomsbury Group and one of the chief Imagist poets, concentrating on 'a sharp, spare use of natural imagery,' and using images for their own sake, not as metaphors.

p. 41: **Bolshevik, White Army**: the Bolsheviks (Communists after 1918) overcame the Royalist White Army in the Russian Revolutionary War, 1917– 1922.
Pyatigorsk: an industrial and spa city in the south Caucasus.

p. 47: **Garsington**: Garsington Manor in Oxfordshire was, from 1915– 1927, the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell and her husband who entertained their distinguished literary and political guests. D. H. Lawrence includes a thinly-disguised scene at Garsington in *Women in Love*.

Research

1. Read at least one or two stories by Katherine Mansfield.
2. Read Katherine Mansfield's letters and journals, especially those relating to the period 1922– 1923.
3. Read some of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and the poems by other poets mentioned in the play.
4. Find out more about G. I. Gurdjieff or his student Ouspensky, who helped disseminate his work.
5. Find information about 'constructionist' art, especially the work of Sonia Delaunay.
6. Find out more about feminism, especially as it is written about and practised in Australian society. Try to find examples of different kinds of feminism and how it is affecting society through changes of attitudes and through legislation, and how feminism is itself evolving with changes in society.

7. Questions for discussion

1. What is important about Wayne's remark in Act One Scene One, 'When I recite Emily Dickinson, I am Emily Dickinson'?
2. What are the differences between Audra and Rahel?
3. In Act One Scene Eight, the Man says he wants to go home, and Wayne says he does not feel at home anywhere, except with the Man, who seems to come from the 'real world'. What are some of the implications of this dialogue between them?
4. What do the characters Vera, Lidia and Asanov each contribute to the action and ideas of the play?
5. What are some of the ways in which Gurdjieff helped Katherine? What are the limitations of his assistance? Why might he think women are limited in what they can achieve? What are the limitations of Gurdjieff's teaching about self-knowledge, as it is represented in the play?
6. What do you understand about the relationship between Katherine and Murry as it is represented in the play?
7. Katherine's last lines in the play are taken from different parts of Katherine Mansfield's journal, and end with the entry for 8 January 1921. What effect do they have on the ending of the play?
8. The title of the play is taken from the journal entry for 27 December 1920: what are some of the implications of the title, even if you did not know where they came from? See also Act One Scene Three (p.6).
9. Construct in plasticine or another modelling material, the set for Act One Scene Ten, positioning the characters for the opening of the scene as you think appropriate. Write notes to explain the effect your design intends to make.
10. Write notes, or an essay, on the implications of the poetry used in the play. Comment also on its effect on an audience who might only hear the lines in a production, without knowing their background.

8. The critics' views

Brian Hoad, *Bulletin*, Sydney, 22 September 1987

Alma De Groen, the New Zealand-born Sydney-based playwright who has been persevering with her craft for close on 20 years, started work on *The Rivers of China* as long ago as 1974. A rough version was completed by 1985. And now, after a couple of years of polishing, it comes to the stage for the first time—presented by the Sydney Theatre Company at The Wharf. It was worth waiting for...

Under the influence of the feminist movement of the 1970s, [Katherine] Mansfield's life and work underwent a complete reassessment and only in the past couple of years has the dust began to settle. The main trouble was that after Mansfield's death her husband, John Middleton Murry, started publishing censored versions of her letters, diaries, notebooks and whatever other scribblings he could lay his hands on, presenting in the process the image of 'a terribly sensitive mind'—a sort of literary madonna, ethereal, innocent, poetic, romantic, childlike. The reality since unearthed is somewhat different. Mansfield can be seen now as often ruthless, reckless and passionate, wilful, sardonic, brave and tough, at the same time over-sensitive, often depressed and deeply unhappy. It is this Mansfield whom De Groen brings to the stage in the last months of the writer's tragically short life ...

Yet the play opens in an Australian hospital of the near future, in the period of the 'Medusa Restoration' when women have finally taken over and men are reduced to the status of second-class citizens as women were. And here a female surgeon somehow manages to reincarnate Mansfield in the body of a man. A strong streak of good humour runs through this play...

So the play flows freely between the hospital and the institute and to a lesser extent between the institute and Mansfield's previous life in London, gently dissolving all the cant of the battle of the sexes of the past twenty years to reveal in Mansfield a rich and remarkable portrait of a brave human being finally finding some sense of serenity at the end of a turbulent life.

Director Peter Kingston, who clearly knows and understands the complexities involved as well as De Groen herself, gives the play a beautifully smooth and eloquent

production—creating a seductive example of theatrical poetry in the process. The single, simple setting designed by Eamon D'Arcy (a few doors containing mirrors and a floor covered in a magician's chart reflecting Gurdjieff's unquestionable skills in the occult arts and sciences), catches the right metaphysical mood which allows the play to move so freely through time, as it must...

Above all, it's a remarkable night of theatre. For years now, Australian theatre has been trying to break down the time-honoured conventions of the-well-made-play to reach a new expressive freedom. None has achieved such a breakthrough quite so successfully as *The Rivers of China*. It might sound a bit too complicated in theory. In the event, it is absorbing.

Angela Bennie, *Australian*, 11 September 1987

One teaching of the 'guru-philosopher' Gurdjieff, to whom Mansfield turned in her last desperate months, was that one had to create a self, the single 'I'—before one could create true art. The notion of integrated elements, of unity, has been a premise on which almost all Western art in its various forms has sat and is the dominant model for Western thought; its antithesis, the notion of randomness, leads only to chaos.

There has been much in recent feminist literature (which De Groen draws on extensively in her program notes) that questions this concept. It is suggested that this is a concept inherent in the patriarchal model: as such, it denies status to that which may be random, spontaneous, illogical and disconnected. Yet much of experience is such and, in particular, much of what takes place in the mind. Using these feminist concerns and Mansfield's phrase 'the rivers of China'—her metaphor for a journey into the unknown—as her way in, De Groen attempts the dismemberment of the notion of a single, unified personality into one that is male-female through time, the dismemberment of one, unifying narrative into several.

It is an attempt to give feminist theory theatrical voice. The irony is that it does not work for the very reasons Gurdjieff states above.

What eventuates is a series of unintegrated scenes whose links are tenuous at the best of times and nonexistent at the extreme. Fine for theory, a problem for theatrical expression. The result is a mixed jumble of pretentious nonsense.

H. G. Kippax, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1987

As for Mansfield, we have her waywardness—she refused orthodox medical treatment as her life neared its end and took refuge at Fontainebleau with Gurdjieff, the emigré Russian 'guru,' sometimes called a mystic, but here shown (justly, I am sure) as a quack. He, too, remains a lay figure...

The trouble with the play is that, though Mansfield is its principal character, she is there not as a historical person but as the embodiment of an abstract proposition. She could as well have been called Joan of Arc or Emily Bronte or any woman genius, fiercely independent who died young and unfulfilled in a man's world.

Mansfield's dilemma, not Mansfield's uniqueness, is the play's subject. It is dramatised ingeniously, and in one scene movingly, in two strands of plot which eventually intertwine to formulate and demonstrate, in the Euclidean sense, Alma De Groen's theorem.

One strand shows us Mansfield's slow dying in 1922. It is by its nature dramatically static. I think Helen Morse an actress of rare and precious talent, but this role, written in one key, that of pain, eventually defeats her.

The other strand is, in its mysterious and occasionally moving way, very dramatic. It is set in Sydney, in a hospital, in a future society evolved and ruled by women. The central character is a casualty brought back to life in a reconstructed body which 'he' finds unrecognisable.

We see a man, but we hear from 'him' the thoughts and pain of Mansfield. No, the play is not about transmigration of souls. It is a juxtaposition of reality—Mansfield's unfulfilled life nearing its end, a woman in a man's world—with its mirror-image ...

Alma De Groen has a good subject—not just women's rights but the interdependence of men and women as complementing equals—and she treats it with originality. The production serves her well in its necessarily chilly way. If I cannot be more enthusiastic this is because the play (except in that one scene) lacks the essence of drama—concrete, comprehensible life.

Pat Bishop, *Sun-Herald*, Sydney, 13 September 1987

The Rivers of China is a fascinating and perplexing work. Perhaps it has yet to achieve its final form. Nevertheless, even if it is a work

still in progress, it deserves recognition for its courage and vision.

Frank Gauntlett, *Daily*, Mirror, Sydney, 17 September 1987

Alma De Groen has an extraordinary capacity to weave distinct threads of action into a unified and intriguing whole, and Peter Kingston is the director to understand and capitalise on this and her other talents ...

Not everybody's cup of tea for sure, but *The Rivers of China* stimulated, provoked and fascinated me in a production of considerable merit.

Leonard Radic, *Age*, Melbourne, 29 November 1988

The Rivers of China is a dense and intellectually demanding work, and for that reason may not prove so popular with MTC audiences. If so, it would be a pity. For while Alma De Groen's play has its difficulties, it also has its rewards, chief among them being its adventurousness.

It does not treat the stage—as so many Australian playwrights do—as though it were a television set. Instead it takes a complex theme and develops it within a dramatically complex, non-linear framework...

The question of creativity is at the heart of De Groen's play. The ideal world, she seems to be saying—although she refrains from spelling it out in so many words—is one where men and women are free from the constraints of either history or gender stereotyping. In this sense, both the worlds conjured up in the play are aberrations - one where women are totally dependent on the goodwill and encouragement of men, the other where women are the controllers and men their playthings...

[Helen Morse as Katherine, Frank Gallacher as Gurdjieff and Robert Menzies as the Man] do credit to this bold exploratory play which breaks through the straitjacket of naturalism to achieve a new freedom of expression. It may leave audiences puzzled, but it will also leave them with something to think about, which is not something that can be said about very many Australian plays these days.

Geoffrey Milne, *Australian Listener*, 17 December 1988

[De Groen's] two narratives are laid out in parallel—sometimes overlapping, sometimes happening consecutively. More than one of the thematic threads is connected when the second Mansfield, finally sees 'her' husband's edited version of the predecessor's complete works, exclaiming: 'He's made an industry out of me!'.

Neither Mansfield, it would seem, can win. Further, neither a patriarchal nor a feminist utopia is seen as a solution. This is, in fact, not a play about solutions, but one whose purpose is to pose intriguing, if most difficult questions. And unlike most of the contemporary works we've seen lately this is one with the courage to match its open questions with an open structure...

John Larkin, *Sunday Press*, Melbourne, 11 December 1988

The last thing desired is to criticise [*The Rivers of China*] for being dense and daring to break through theatrical convention. But simply, it does not work well enough. It disappears into its own cleverness in an unfortunate way, with its shape, its rhythms and its echoes simply too pat. The levels come across as contrived ... Mansfield and Gurdjieff by themselves would have been enough to more than hold us, enough to create a whole play, conventional though that might sound. Instead, we have a rather bizarre gathering which after our first taste of Mansfield and Gurdjieff seems to swallow them. By the end of it, despite an impassioned statement by Mansfield about finding freedom at last, we seem hardly to know her, or her guide.

Chris Boyd, *Melbourne Times*, 30 December 1988

Alma De Groen's play has picked up two Premier's Literary Awards for Drama. *The Rivers of China* is very much a 'literary' drama. By that I don't mean that you have to be an intellectual to enjoy it, this play can be appreciated on dozens of levels. Its themes are diverse and complex. A handful of dramatic contrivances are easily overlooked...

De Groen's play is tantalisingly incomplete. The loose ends drift in many directions and stimulate the reviewer into further voyages of the mind. All in all, this is electrifying theatre. Highly recommended.

Susan Budd, *Dominion*, Wellington N.Z., 8 October 1988

A Man, a Frankenstein monster, is brought into being by a woman doctor, another Mary Shelley,

in the interests of barren scientific curiosity, a playful abuse of power. He is granted the mind and soul of Katherine Mansfield, and, like her, he becomes the Artist as Christ, the artistic obsession a religion, sacrificed for the tawdry sins of the world.

The message of the play, it seems to me, is that no matter which group holds power, it will be abused— unless we can accept that life is composed of dualities, not dichotomies, and encompasses all of these; that the mind and body, male and female, sickness and health be accepted as one. Only then will annihilation not have to precede spiritual wholeness and growth.

This is a heavy message for such a frail vehicle as a two-hour play to carry. And it is not always equal to it. At times profundity becomes inexplicably ambiguous and the characters simply ciphers in the cosmic plan. But it is always thought-provoking and often compelling.

Jennifer Ludlum plays with great sensitivity a frail, questioning Katherine old before her time, striving to find the truth. Bruce Phillips as the Man, fragile and doomed, plays with intelligence, and Mark Wright, as the archetypal dumb broad, plays with a simplicity which makes his character real.

Laurie Atkinson, *Evening Post*, Wellington N.Z., 8 October 1988

At the hospital a plastic surgeon, Dr Rahel, carries out an operation in the body of a man. She not only reconstructs the man but also uses illegal hypnotism to give him Katherine Mansfield's thoughts and feelings. Her experiment is intended to make a man an equal with a woman, 'without being a danger.' Dr Rahel, like Mansfield at Fontainebleau, attempts to find a new way for men and women to live freely and truly.

It is dangerous, uncharted territory, but Rahel and Mansfield both believe that 'out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety'.

Rivers of China is a demanding play but in Cathy Downes' taut, precise production it grips one's attention ... As Mansfield, Jennifer Ludlum is passionate and fiery and anguished; Ray Henwood as Gurdjieff is enigmatic and powerful; Mark Wright as the put-upon, would-be young writer is confused, funny and appealing; Bruce Phillips as the man who becomes Katherine Mansfield (a role that could easily be risible) is magnificent.

Discussing the critics

1. Suggest some of the reasons for the different opinions of critics reviewing the same production. On the evidence of these excerpts, where does it appear that some critics have obviously done background work before writing their reviews? What are some difficulties facing reviewers of a new play, especially if they must file their review within a few hours of seeing the production?
2. Discuss the critics' different opinions about the structure of the play.
3. What are some of the most frequent comments about the play?
4. What do these extracts suggest about Australian theatre other than *The Rivers of China*?
5. Make a collection, from different reviews, of the comments with which you agree: how well do these comments stand together? Are there any contradictory comments, and if so, how can they be reconciled?

9. Further reading

Works cited

De Groen, Alma, *The Rivers of China*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1988.

De Groen, Alma, 'Walking Around in Other Times: An interview with Alma De Groen', interviewed by Helen Gilbert, *Australasian Drama Studies*, October 1989– April 1990.

Mansfield, Katherine, *The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield: A Selection*, edited by C. K. Stead, London: Allen Lane, 1977.

Tomalin, Claire, *Katherine Mansfield. A Secret Life*. London: Viking, 1987.

See also references listed in the play, page xv.

Other resources

Perkins, Elizabeth, *Alma De Groen*, Australian Playwrights Series, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992.

A video interview with Alma De Groen is available for purchase or hire from the Australian Film Institute: www.afi.org.au.