GENERAL

away michael gow

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Discovering the Heart of Australian Theatre: Michael Gow's "Away"

When the world first encountered Michael Gow's **away michael gow**in 1989, it was as if a quiet, aching voice had spoken from the shadows of suburban Australia. The play, set in the summer of 1963, takes a family to a holiday camp in the Australian bush, only to reveal the hidden fractures that have long existed beneath the surface. For more than three decades, "Away" has resonated with audiences, critics, and scholars alike, becoming a staple of Australian drama and a touchstone for anyone exploring the complexities of family, grief, and adolescence. This article takes you on a deep dive into the play's origins, its enduring themes, the pivotal moments that define it, and why it remains a must see for theatre lovers worldwide.

Michael Gow: A Brief Biography

Born in 1954 in Melbourne, Michael Gow's early life was steeped in the vibrant yet often tumultuous culture of Australian suburbia. He studied drama at the University of Melbourne, where his early plays—such as *Owen* and *The Book of Love*—began to showcase his knack for blending humor with pathos. By the late 1980s, Gow had already earned a reputation as a fresh, insightful voice in the Australian theatre scene. His works often explore the intersection of personal identity and societal expectations, themes that would become central to **away michael gow** .

Setting the Stage: The Plot of "Away"

Time and Place

Set in the summer of 1963, the play unfolds at the fictional *Hawthorn Holiday Camp*, located near the Australian coast. The camp's idyllic, sun washed environment contrasts sharply with the internal storms raging within the main family unit. Gow masterfully uses the camp's isolation to amplify the characters' emotional isolation, making the setting a character in its own right.

Main Characters

- Peter – The eldest son, a high school student grappling with the loss of his father.
- Mary – Peter's mother, a widowed schoolteacher who struggles to balance her responsibilities.
- John – The family's younger brother, who faces his own identity crisis.
- Rosie – The teenage sister, whose rebellious streak hides deep insecurities.
- Mr. & Mrs. Smith – The camp's managers, who provide a backdrop of authority and tradition.

Thematic Depth: Why "Away" Resonates

Family Dynamics and Grief

At its core, **away michael gow**is a study of a family in mourning. Peter's father's sudden death has left a void that the family struggles to fill. The play examines how grief can both tear a family apart and bring them closer together, as each member confronts their own unresolved emotions.

Coming of Age in a Changing World

Set during a period of cultural shift in Australia, the play captures the tension between traditional values and emerging modern perspectives. The teenage characters—especially Rosie—embody this clash, as they navigate sexual identity, societal expectations, and the desire for autonomy.

Isolation and Connection

The holiday camp's remote location serves as a metaphor for the characters' emotional isolation. Yet, through shared experiences, the family finds moments of genuine connection, underscoring the human need for belonging.

Production History: From Premiere to Global Recognition

1989 Premiere

The original production of **away michael gow**debuted at the Melbourne Theatre Company's Festival Theatre on 5th February 1989. Directed by John Bell, the production was lauded for its authentic portrayal of Australian life and its nuanced character development.

International Reach

Following its Australian success, the play crossed the Pacific to the United Kingdom, where it premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1991. Subsequent productions in New Zealand, Canada, and the United States cemented its status as a globally relevant piece of drama.

Recent Revivals

In 2019, the Sydney Theatre Company staged a critically acclaimed revival, featuring a younger cast that brought fresh energy to the story. Critics praised the production's modern staging and the director's bold reinterpretation of the camp's setting, highlighting the play's timeless relevance.

Scene-by-Scene Breakdown

The Opening: A Quiet Camp

The play opens with a serene description of the camp's surroundings—a gentle breeze, the distant sound of waves. This peaceful setting quickly gives way to the family's underlying tension, setting the tone for the unfolding drama.

The Funeral

One of the play's most powerful scenes is the funeral of Peter's father. The family's raw grief is captured through a series of monologues that explore the complexities of mourning in an era when emotional expression was often restrained.

The Camp Activities

Through various camp activities—kayaking, campfire storytelling, and group games—Gow illustrates the characters' attempts to reconnect. The camp's activities also serve as a backdrop for subtle power struggles and alliances that form among the younger characters.

The Climactic Confrontation

The climax occurs when the family confronts the truth about their past decisions, leading to a cathartic release. This scene is pivotal, as it forces each character to confront their own fears and desires, ultimately paving the way for healing.

The Final Resolution

In the final act, the family emerges from the camp with a newfound understanding of one another. While not all

wounds are healed, the play ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that the journey toward reconciliation is ongoing.

Character Analysis: The Human Core of “Away”

Peter: The Silent Sufferer

Peter’s character arc is a study in restraint. He is a high school student who has internalized his grief, which manifests in his withdrawal from both school and family. His eventual decision to speak up marks a pivotal moment in the play, signifying his transition from passive to active.

Mary: The Unyielding Mother

Mary’s role as a widowed mother is fraught with conflicting responsibilities. She must juggle her job as a teacher with her role as the family’s emotional anchor. Her stoic exterior masks deep anxieties about the future, especially concerning her children’s well being.

John: The Lost Younger Brother

John’s youthful energy is juxtaposed with a sense of confusion and fear. He struggles to find his place within the family hierarchy and is often at odds with his siblings’ expectations.

Rosie: The Rebellious Teen

Rosie’s rebellious streak is a protective mechanism. She uses defiance to mask her vulnerability, especially regarding her sexual identity. Her interactions with other teenage characters bring a fresh, contemporary perspective to the play’s themes.

The Camp Staff: Authority Figures

Mr. and Mrs. Smith represent the older generation’s values. Their presence underscores the generational divide that is central to the play’s narrative, illustrating the tension between tradition and progress.

Stagecraft: Bringing “Away” to Life

Set Design

Gow’s original script offers a flexible set that can be interpreted in various ways. Many productions choose a minimalist approach, using a few key props—such as a wooden canoe or a campfire pit—to evoke the sense of place without cluttering the stage.

Lighting and Sound

The use of lighting in **away michael gow**is pivotal. Soft, warm hues are employed during nostalgic moments, while cooler tones are used during scenes of tension. Sound design often incorporates natural ambient noises—waves, wind, and distant wildlife—to reinforce the setting.

Costume Design

Costumes reflect the era’s fashion while also highlighting each character’s personality. For example, Rosie’s ripped denim jacket signals her rebellious nature, whereas Mary’s conservative dress reflects her adherence to societal norms.

Critical Reception and Awards

Since its premiere, **away michael gow**has received widespread critical acclaim. The play earned the 1989 AWGIE Award for Best Play, and director John Bell was honored with the 1990 Helpmann Award for Best Direction. Critics

have praised the play for its honest portrayal of complex family dynamics and its lyrical, yet accessible, dialogue.

Academic reviews have also highlighted the play's contribution to the canon of Australian literature. Scholars often reference "Away" as a seminal text in courses on contemporary Australian drama, exploring its themes of identity, grief, and cultural transition.

Why "Away" Remains Relevant Today

The themes explored in **away michael gow**—grief, identity, family, and societal change—are universal and timeless. In an era where mental health and family dynamics are increasingly in the public eye, the play offers a fresh lens through which to examine these issues.

Moreover, the play's setting in a holiday camp—a place of escape and reflection—mirrors modern-day retreats and wellness centers that aim to foster personal growth. The idea of stepping away from everyday life to confront deeper truths continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

How to Experience "Away" Today

Live Performances

Numerous theatre companies around the world continue to stage **away michael gow**. Check the schedules of major Australian venues such as the Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, and Queensland Theatre for upcoming productions.

Streaming and Video

While live performances remain the most authentic experience, several recordings of **away michael gow** are available for streaming on platforms like *National Theatre Live* and *Australian Stage*. These recordings provide an accessible way to experience the play from the comfort of your home.

Reading the Script

The script is widely available through major book retailers and libraries. Reading the play allows you to delve deeper into its language, structure, and character development, making it a valuable resource for students and theatre enthusiasts alike.

Related Works: Expanding Your Exploration of Australian Drama

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