

## Malley country: Writers' note

*"He is like one of those minor characters in Shakespeare who gets a handful of lines but continues to glow in the mind."*

– Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*

I don't know when I first learnt about Malley hoax. He's almost the bogeyman of Australian letters, old Ern – indeed, of Australian culture; a bit of a whack-a-mole,<sup>1</sup> keeps popping up, always just there in the background, never too far away. When I look back through projects and notebooks for the better part of the past decade, he's always been lurking in the margins. Certainly reading Peter Carey's *My Life As A Fake* (in 2013, I think?) is an anchor point – but I can't be certain if I read that because of Malley or because I was on a Carey jag.

Eighteen months ago, I started to think about a new play about the Malley saga – what would it look like in the twenty-first century? (Could you still pull it off?) This led me down the rabbit hole of AI deep-fakes and cancel culture – how do you make it visually interesting on stage without resorting to screens and multimedia? I conceived of a way to play the story now and then – a journalist, eager to earn their stripes, gets their break on an artist painting a portrait of a person who may/not exist – if they never lived they can't die, and if they can't die then they must be alive. Still. In spite of all the attempts to 'bury' them. But, in true Malley fashion, what began life as a 'straight' play naturally became something else once the homuncular siblings took over.

What started out in 1943 as a somewhat mean-spirited and disingenuous hoax very quickly became a Frankenstein's monster of a lightning rod for all the fears and concerns of mid-century Australia. Eighty years on, I'd like to say these concerns aren't at play anymore, but they very much are. Maybe they've changed clothes, but those neuroses run deep – as Michael Heyward writes, "Ern still has much to reveal about our insecurity, our passion for art, our aggression, our philistinism, and our blinding wit."

Likewise, Ern's sister Ethel – originally a convenient by-product of the necessity for biographical information on the fabled poet – she seems like Edna Everage's cousin, a small-minded housewife who likes the yarts at a distance; she's only got more pertinent and prominent with age. I wonder if Ethel's hair has a mauve tint yet?

I'd love to turn it into a musical one day.

GS  
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<sup>1</sup> The other two whack-a-moles of Australian culture in the twentieth century seem to be the Reeds out at Heide, and Katherine Susannah Prichard; there are no concrete plans to write a play about KSP (yet).