

Australian 'Doll', Not 'Mock British'

By DON ROSS

Ray Lawler, the author of "Summer of the 17th Doll," New York's first play by an Australian, with Australians and about Australians, which opens Wednesday, loves his native land as some men love strong drink and dark-eyed damsels.

As the principal actor in "Doll," a play about a couple of sugar cane cutters in the northern part of Australia who spend their vacations with a couple of fun-loving barmaids in the southern part, Mr. Lawler has to stay in New York during the play's run. He hopes it will at least match the successful seven-month run it recently had in London.

But the Lawler roots are back in Australia, and he feels a strong urge to return as soon as possible to regain his strength after his sojourn in alien lands. New York and London are nice to visit occasionally, he thinks, but as for living in either place, no thank you. Give him a little farm outside of Sidney.

He is a short, thirty-fiveish

man, with a bland, innocent face that masks a tough spirit and several passionate beliefs. The chief of these seems to be that Australian culture for too long has been derivative, accepting eagerly what came to it from England and the United States, and it's time it achieved an identity of its own.

"Piccadilly Bushmen"

Only, one suspects, as Australia achieves this identity will Mr. Lawler fully find his own.

There is a phrase Mr. Lawler uses for Australians who ape the English and other foreigners. "Mock English," he calls them. The Mock English come back from London with Savile Row suits and English accents. They are, to use another Lawler phrase, spoken with a slight curl of the lips, "Piccadilly Bushmen."

To be sure, Mr. Lawler bought himself a couple of suits while he was in England, but he points out that he did so only because he needed clothes and that they were "two-button jobs." The Savile Row suits, he said, have three-button jackets.

Tryce of Cockney

The Lawler accent is mostly university English. Though he stopped going to school at thirteen, he is not flattered if told that he sounds like an Oxonian. Actually, there is a little Cockney in his speech—just a trace, or tryce in a plyce or two, as he might say it. (In the play, the Cockney gets broader and there is no mystykeing it.)

Mr. Lawler's hands are smooth like a white collar man's. But they were once tough and calloused. He comes from the working class. His father was a truck driver in Footscray, an industrial suburb of Melbourne.

In the eighth grade Mr. Lawler left school and went to work as a machine operator. He

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Australia's Artistic Independence

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stayed at the factory for ten years and for the last several was interested in writing and acting. He hasn't the least notion why; maybe it was just because he happened one day, when he was feeling extraordinarily fed up with the factory, to see an advertisement for acting lessons.

There was no theatrical background in his family, no bookishness. He is one of eight children. His four brothers are, respectively, a welder, a builder, a truck driver and a salesman. His wife is Jacklyn Kelleher, an Australian actress.

At twenty-three, with a bit of cash he had saved, he left the factory and eventually turned up at Brisbane where he became a straight man and sketch writer for Will Mahoney, the American comic, who was holding forth at the Cremorne Theater.

Plays on the Side

On the side, Mr. Lawler wrote plays. He had caught the national disease. He was Mock English. He was also Mock American. His first plays were set in London, an English provincial city, and New York. He had never been in any of them.

"The plays were no ruddy good," he said. At this time, there was no real, indigenous Australian theater but there

were plenty of importations from the United States and England that a young Australian could try to imitate.

Then he began to write gradually about things closer to home, using local idioms and people. In 1950 and 1951 he did the book and lyrics for a couple of Christmas pageants based on a comic strip character called "Ginger Meggs," a sort of Australian Huck Finn. They attracted considerable attention.

Barmaids and Cane Cutters

At Will Mahoney's theater in Brisbane, Mr. Lawler got to know a couple of cane cutters who hung around waiting for the chorus girls. He was fascinated by these tough, swaggering men who spent seven months of hard labor in the cane fields each year and then, their pockets crammed full of money, drifted into the big cities for five months of fairly riotous loafing. He also knew some barmaids rather well. In 1953 he put the barmaids and the cane cutters together, and he had the principal characters of "Summer of the 17th Doll." These were people he knew in a setting he was familiar with. In the play there are references to real places, like Young and Jackson's pub in Melbourne, which has a famous nude called Chloe over the bar.

The play takes its name from the fact that one of the cane cutters brings a kewpie doll with a frilly skirt with him each summer when he and his friend spend the vacation months with the barmaids. The dolls are symbols of sterility, according to Mr. Lawler. The quartet have been together sixteen summers. The seventeenth summer the cane cutters find that one of the barmaids has gotten married while they were at work in the north. The seventeenth doll is smashed.

The play opened inauspiciously at the Union Theater of Melbourne University and went

on to larger houses, running for more than a year. Sir Laurence Olivier, who was touring Australia with the Old Vic, saw it, was struck by it and bought the English rights. "Doll's" highly successful run in London closed last month. The seven actors and John Sumner, the director, came here from London.

Mr. Lawler recalls that when "Doll" was selected to be shown in England, the proper Australians were dismayed.

"They kicked up a snobbish fuss and said the English would get the mistaken idea that all Australians were cane cutters and barmaids," said Mr. Lawler. "They wrote letters to the papers and they wrote letters to me, pleading with me not to do this dreadful thing to Australia. They were terribly snobbish, these people, terribly filled with feelings of inferiority."

Incidentally, the next play that Mr. Lawler has in mind is one about the proper Australians. Will it be satire? "I think not," he said. "They deserve more serious treatment than that." The bland face looked its most innocent.