



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SENATE

Official Hansard

No. 4, 2004

THURSDAY, 13 MAY 2004

FORTIETH PARLIAMENT  
FIRST SESSION—SEVENTH PERIOD

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

**Senator FAULKNER:** Take, for example, the issue in this parliament that I think received the greatest focus in the Senate committee system, and that is the issue of children overboard. Remember what happened. There was extensive examination of government agencies in the estimates committees on matters relating to that incident, and following that the Senate Select Committee on A Certain Maritime Incident set about its work. I think that is a pretty reasonable model to adopt on a matter of such significance as the extraordinarily serious matter of children overboard.

**Senator Bartlett:** It was so good they made a play about it.

**Senator FAULKNER:** Yes, they did make a play about it, Senator Bartlett. I actually saw the play, and I know that you saw it because we saw the same production. I was told that that was the fourth time you had attended.

**Senator Bartlett:** The second.

**Senator FAULKNER:** Only the second! It just goes to show how people in politics exaggerate, doesn't it? You were so pleased about your characterisation in the play that you went on a couple of occasions. I was quite shocked that when I walked into the play I actually tripped over you, naked on the floor, on the way in.

**Senator Bartlett:** And that I had breasts.

**Senator FAULKNER:** That is true too, Senator Bartlett, but it was not actually you; it was an actor.

**Senator Minchin:** Thank God for that.

**Senator FAULKNER:** Yes, I was thankful. It was not actually you, Senator Bartlett; it was the actor who was playing you very well in that production. But I digress. I was interrupted by Senator Bartlett wanting to advertise the fact that he has become a cultural icon as a result of the play *CMI*.



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SENATE

Official Hansard

No. 4, 2004

THURSDAY, 25 MARCH 2004

FORTIETH PARLIAMENT  
FIRST SESSION—SEVENTH PERIOD

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

**Senator BARTLETT (Leader of the Australian Democrats)** — Probably the most blatant example of the public demonstration of politicisation of the Public Service in recent years has been the 'children overboard' inquiry or that known as the inquiry into a certain maritime incident. Such a surreal inquiry was that—and, probably quite appropriately, given Senator Mason's theatrical performance just then, and as I think he knows—that it has the distinction, perhaps not unique but certainly rare, of having been turned into a play, a piece of theatre, called CMI. I do not know whether Senator Mason gets a starring role or not. I think it starts tomorrow.

**Senator Mason** — I'm played by Brad Pitt, apparently.

**Senator BARTLETT** — Brad Pitt! Senator Mason is very cute, as I often say, but I have not seen whether he has a sixpack as good as Brad Pitt's! He probably has but, if he wants to display it to the Senate now, I am not sure whether we can incorporate sixpacks and abs in Hansard, so we will just take his word for it. I think that play gets under way in a theatre in Redfern tomorrow night, for those in Sydney. I have no idea whether it is any good or not, but I will let people know once I have seen it.

Senator Mason was part of the certain maritime incident inquiry and played a role in what was partly a piece of theatre and partly an important examination of very significant issues of public policy, very significant issues in terms of the way government went about exercising its power over the Public Service and the role of ministerial staffers as well.

## Review Quotes, CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)

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*"The skills of the cast are uniformly excellent... a provocative response to the concept expressed by politicians that UBAs (unauthorised boat arrivals) might be seeking to intimidate us with our own decency... CMI is a passionate, often humorous, and ultimately disturbing deconstruction of politicians at work"*

Mark Hopkins, Sydney Morning Herald 29/3/04

*"a must-see for anyone concerned with Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and the political process that allows it"*

Alan Mascarenhas, Sydney Morning Herald 5/4/04

*" breaks the mould of verbatim theatre's typically earnest style...a startling, highly kinetic, blackly comic and deeply provocative work of theatre"*

Linda Jaivin, The Bulletin 14/4/04

*"It is in turns a satire, a slapstick comedy, a stark tragedy, a wild loopy ride through the dark side of the Australian Senate. It packs in more essential truth about the CMI inquiry than anything I have read or seen so far. The version 1.0 team have brilliantly gone where most writers about Australian politics do not yet dare to go - deep into the treacherous drowning waters of Australia's Operation Relex."*

Tony Kevin, [www.tonykevin.com](http://www.tonykevin.com) 31/3/04

*"CMI is very impressive theatre - a thoroughly absorbing and fast-paced performance... There are lots of laughs throughout the play, but the humour doesn't at any stage make light of the horror of the events."*

Sarah Stephen, Green Left Weekly 7/4/04

*"ingeniously staged and weirdly funny theatre...there's lots to ponder over and, in terms of public policy, be dismayed by, in this provocatively staged and commendably topical production."*

Colin Rose, The Sun Herald 4/4/04

*"a work that informs, shocks, moves, and regularly makes you laugh out loud....a powerful - and powerfully funny - deconstruction of history, memory and narrative.... CMI reminds us that Australians should not have the luxury of turning over this inglorious page of our nation's history."*

Jason Blake, City Hub, April 2004

*"CMI is rich and creative political theatre that is intelligent enough to avoid preaching, but still packs a great punch."*

Andrew Filmer, [www.vibewire.net](http://www.vibewire.net)

This was published 18 years ago

## CMI: A Certain Maritime Incident, Version 1.0

March 29, 2004 – 8.54pm

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### The Performance Space, March 26

It is not every theatre program that can quote the previous day's Senate Hansard transcript to reveal specific reference to the production. How surreal then to find the senator quoted sitting in the audience on opening night, listening now to other words he and colleagues had spoken almost two years ago to the day.

The explanation for such heightened awareness of *CMI* at Sydney's Performance Space among senators rests in its content and form. *CMI* is theatre by a collective of artists based on the 2200-plus pages of transcripts of hearings by the Senate select committee into a certain maritime incident - the children overboard inquiry.

Exploring an emotive topic through such potentially soporific material is a group called version 1.0. Since its formation in 1998 this group has sought to confront the big issues affecting the body politic. They worked with the Department of Performance Studies, Sydney University to produce *CMI*.

Dramaturge Paul Dwyer has been judiciously selective in quoting from the transcripts to capture in less than 100 minutes the essence of partisan party politics and obfuscation of witness testimonial. With a keen sense for the importance of what is not said, the performers take theatrical licence with their physical interpretation of the thoughts and intentions behind the words.

The skills of the cast are uniformly excellent. Senators and their furniture recoil literally from testimony laden with uncomfortable implication. Witnesses address the audience who in turn can read the reactions, non-verbal negotiations and ritual posturing of committee members upstage.

Great effort is made to avoid didacticism. Explicit reminders of the process of invention in theatre-making are everywhere. The performers' willingness to undercut the veracity of their own interpretation is particularly effective. Given the weighty nature of the source material, the pace is well sustained.

There are moments that drag but even these authenticate the boredom of committee work and heighten the gulf between a politician's daily grind and the hour by hour struggle for survival of people afloat in a SIEV (suspected illegal entry vessel).

Language laden with acronym takes on a dark irony.

A PII (potential illegal immigrant) saved from drowning is still a SUNC (suspected unauthorised non-citizen).

Those not rescued are represented by the actors, symbolically stripped of all protection, their naked bodies tagged in anonymity. A provocative response to the concept expressed by politicians that UBAs (unauthorised boat arrivals) might be seeking to intimidate us with our own decency.

*CMI* is a passionate, often humorous and ultimately disturbing deconstruction of politicians at work.

Until April 11

## Version 1.0 shares the shame

Bryoni Trezise



Version 1.0, CMI  
photo Heidrun Löhr

In 2002 a Senate Select Committee assembled to investigate claims that the Australian Government had lied to the public over the children overboard affair in the lead up to the 2001 election. The full-house season of CMI—A Certain Maritime Incident is Version 1.0's latest assault on the "sweaty armpits of the Australian body corporate", their very own performative inquiry into the murky waters of evidential hearsay and political obfuscation that the 15 days of Senate hearings and 2,200 pages of Hansard produced.

The provocation of CMI lies both in the inflammatory political situation it deals with and the fact that, as performance, it is attempting to critique the very real political machinations that caused the Tampa situation to develop. In this sense, the political theatrics of the nation's border 'protection' measures as played out by Tampa come to bear quite profoundly on questions such as how—and who—are we to engage in a performance of the national shame in which we are all to some degree complicit? It is tricky and dangerous territory. While politicians are masters of playing fiction as truth, of blurring the line between events as they happened and as they were imagined, performers in this context must be careful at every step to tread in just the right places.

Meet then, Peter Reith, roughly 7 years old, reading his statement as to the 'veracity' of children being thrown overboard (very cutely spoken into a lie detector by the young performer). As an introductory motif delivered before the backdrop of an inverted Australian flag, the child's recitation functions as more than a moment of wry mockery. It establishes a performance code in which voices and gestures sifted from the Senate transcript are assumed, dropped and wrestled with as a way of imagining the kind of dubious political operations that can make national headlines alternately happen or disappear.

The performers themselves strike an exquisitely ambiguous relationship to their personas. Not quite complete characters, their tentative attempts at boardroom mannerisms—a pen twiddle, a cup stir, water pouring from a jug—catch us on that peculiar cusp of watching self-consciously coded physicalities and wanting to fall into the world they suggest. Likewise, their repeated spinning on chairs, signalling a comic tedium in the business of Senate proceedings, becomes poetically suggestive of anonymous bodies spiralling into unknown depths.

Samuel James' widescreen video montage also holds its subject matter at an ambivalent distance. Circling Parliament House like a shark bearing down on its prey, then moving to the grainy interiors of an unnamed vessel at sea, the footage at once indicts the sites in which alleged events occurred and probes them as producers of fictitious national history. Within the theatre proper James' camera turns its live eye on the performers, positioning their bodies as objects that at any moment can let slip the game.

One very long table pinions the Senators to their lengthy process, yet also spins in the space like a ship giddily changing course. The table lurches alongside the linguistic rhythms of a political charade that is decontextualised and now exists in "quotation marks." We hear the ridiculous scrapings for definitions that separate recollection from narration, judgement from description. We witness the shield that language becomes as it writes bodies into acronyms such as SUNC (Suspected Un-authorized Non-Citizen) or PII (Potential Illegal Immigrant). We start in horror at the legislative logic that differentiates "these people" from "our culture" in a mission to find an "achievable and warranted" black and white answer.

Punctuated by projected meta-commentary and set against pop that emulates 1980s corporate musak, the performers undercut the sinister rhetorical backflips of the transcript with moments of comic fabrication. They waltz in a medley of mobile phone banter and militantly perform an aerobics class led by Senator Jane Halton. At the peak of their debauchery, a performer lists the group's rehearsal strategies: "pick a witness...play with storytelling modes...make it boring...make it up." As Serge Gainsbourg's sleazy *Je t'aime* oozes into this heady, drunken climax of Senators toasting "professionalism", their fluid and flailing antics of invention are starkly cut dry by the final and very real allegations regarding Australia's involvement in the sinking of SIEV X, in which 353 asylum seekers drowned. As the closing computerised voice of one SIEV X survivor flashes in subtitles across the screen, describing the real horror of the event, it seems that in this party the job of 'making it up' carries a heavy responsibility.

So, do we exit politically charged? Do we exit emotionally gutted, paled by the final voice we hear? I admit I twinged with a grim satisfaction. My cheeks rosy from the electric zing of good performance, my political sensibility gorged on the cynical grotesquery that hacks at politicians and makes them swim (or drown) in their own acronymic juices. I wondered what it means exactly to take pleasure in great art that deals with horrific national policy, and even more horrific events. If performance can 'do' politics, creating a world in which Senators play their own witnesses is surely how it should be done.

Version 1.0, CMI - A Certain Maritime Incident; performers Danielle Antaki, Stephen Klinder, Nikki Heywood, Deborah Pollard, Christopher Ryan, David Williams; lighting and production Simon Wise, video and design Sam James, dramaturg Paul Dwyer, sound design Jason Sweeney; Performance Space, Sydney, March 26-April 11

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