Maternal Resilience and Preservative Love in Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Pennsylvania Avenue*

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Within this paper it is argued that Harper, the central character in Joanna Murray-Smith’s *Pennsylvania Avenue*, displays maternal resilience and further, that her choice to relinquish her child at birth might be understood as an act of preservative love.¹ Linda Liebenberg and Michael Ungar² state “The experience of health under stress, and the dynamic processes that contribute to positive development, have come to be known as resilience”. Within the context of their research they define resilience to be

...the positive end of the developmental continuum that occurs for children who experience both acute and chronic exposure to stressors like poverty, abuse, war, violence, neglect, drug addictions, mental illness, disability, marginalization, racism, and a myriad of other ways their well-being is threatened.³

Further, they propose “Increasingly, the study of resilience is moving beyond the study of individuals to consider individuals in interaction with their environments and the adaptive qualities of both”.⁴ In the case of *Pennsylvania Avenue* it is proposed that Murray-Smith’s central character Harper displays resilience in relation to her traumatic experience (rape resulting in pregnancy).

The Context

*Pennsylvania Avenue* premiered at the Melbourne Theatre Company’s Sumner Theatre on the 13th of November 2014. Pennsylvania Avenue is a jukebox musical; it consists of well-known songs and a plot. The music consists mostly of popular songs that were composed in the twentieth century. The songs in Pennsylvania Avenue interact with and further the narrative progression of the play. Many of the songs evoke specific periods in the history of twentieth century American politics. As Harper-as-Barbra sings *Don’t Rain on My Parade*, it is as if the music is suggesting that nothing will end the beauty of ‘the Kennedys’. It is after the conclusion of *Don’t Rain on My Parade* that Harper describes the events which led up to the assassination of President John F Kennedy. I recall hearing gunshots in the performance. However, the script does not specify gunshots in the stage directions. At the conclusion of Harper’s first verse of *Dear Lord, Forgive*, President Ford appears. President Ford asks Harper “what [she] consider[s] to be the greatest of all human capacities”. To President Ford’s question Harper responds, “Forgiveness”. This single word is suggested to have been the impetus for President Ford to grant former President Richard M. Nixon “a full and unconditional pardon”. Whilst Keith Gallasch and Laura Ginters argue “…the contents of Australian music theatre range widely across local issues, histories and personalities…”, *Pennsylvania Avenue* takes the other as its focus, specifically Americans and American politics.

Murray-Smith has received acclaim from large audiences, both in Australia and overseas. A number of her plays present mother characters who might be considered to fit Hansen’s “…fictional picture of not conventionally good enough mothers…”, and Harper is not the first character that Murray-Smith has written that has been a mother without child. Peta Tait’s analysis of maternal emotions in *Love Child* represents one of the very few publications in Australian theatre scholarship which considers maternal representation. It is argued that paying attention to the mother characters in theatre and drama might be considered to play an important role in the furtherance of feminist politics.

*Pennsylvania Avenue: Narrative*

Harper is the central character in Joanna Murray-Smith’s play *Pennsylvania Avenue*. She is a small town, southern ‘gal’. Her family took her to church every Sunday when she was growing
up. She left Thunderbolt – Georgia at the age of eighteen for a job which her aunt Abigail helped her to get; a job at The White House. Her story is not exactly a rags-to-riches tale, because whilst Harper brushes shoulders with the rich and famous she becomes neither herself.

The play commences with Harper’s dismissal from her position at The White House. The stage directions state that it is 2001. Harper informs the audience that she has been employed at The White House for forty years. Harper’s reminiscences transport her back in time to experience-again the encounters which she experienced over the decades she spent working at The White House. Harper encounters American Presidents, singers and other celebrities during her employment at The White House. As Harper recalls her encounters with famous singers she sings the songs that they are remembered for.

There is a secret in *Pennsylvania Avenue*. The secret might be said to be the driving force of the play. At the climax of the script it is revealed that Harper was raped by Curtis Fender when she was seventeen years old, and that she gave birth to a child as a result of that rape. Further, it is revealed that Harper gave that child away in response to the advice of others. It is not until the end of the play-and the end of Harper’s employment at The White House-that Harper chooses to try to contact the child that she gave up at birth (or shortly after). The child that she gave up in 1961 would be forty years old at this point. However, in the letter that she writes to him in the final scene she writes to him as if he were a little child. She writes, “My darling boy...”. This might be understood to suggest that for Harper, the child that she gave up at birth remains a child.

Harper has an impact upon significant political events and important political choices. She is depicted as influencing President Ronald Reagan to tell Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. She is also depicted as influencing President Gerald R Ford to grant President Richard Nixon a full pardon. Harper is illustrated as having a significant impact upon a variety of world changing political decisions during her time at The White House. The life she lives after leaving Thunderbolt is a life of affect. However, though it is evident that Harper has positive experiences at The White House, she mourns for the child which she gave up at birth and the life which she might have had.
The Jukebox Musical

*Pennsylvania Avenue* straddles at least two dramatic genres, the genres of the jukebox musical and the cabaret. Further, it is suggested in this paper that *Pennsylvania Avenue*, like Nick Enright’s original version of *The Boy from Oz*, simultaneously resides within the genre of the jukebox musical and surpasses it. According to Fitzpatrick, “Enright sought to add psychological complexity to the characterisation of Peter Allen, and artistic depth to the show, rather than simply accepting the commercial priorities that customarily apply to the genre of the ‘jukebox musical’”. However, Fitzpatrick indicates that the producers of the show had an international imperative. It appears that their goal was less-to accurately represent Allen to their audiences, and more-to take their show to Broadway and beyond.

It appears that Enright’s desire to represent “…two Peter Allen’s [:] the seemingly invulnerable performer of sexual energy [and] the songwriter who mostly writes of the pain of abandonment, transience, solitude, lost love and faded dreams” was not compatible with the producers’ global vision for the play. However, according to Fitzpatrick, Enright’s original version of *The Boy from Oz* “…was convincingly better than the arena show that has now effectively replaced it”.

Fitzpatrick appears to make a value judgment regarding the jukebox musical. He suggests that Enright’s version of *The Boy from Oz* simultaneously occupies and surpasses this genre. Fitzpatrick writes “…the way in which the pieces were arranged to deepen Allen’s story emotionally, and to find psychological patterns in it, took it way beyond the standard territory of the jukebox musical”. Whilst Fitzpatrick describes Enright’s version of *The Boy from Oz* as simultaneously existing within and surpassing the genre of the jukebox musical, he describes the show which was staged on Broadway as an “arena show”. It seems apparent that Fitzpatrick perceives a hierarchy of genres as he identifies the different versions of *The Boy from Oz*. In this hierarchy it is evident that the arena show is the lowest form, the jukebox musical is a little higher, and the form which Enright’s version of *The Boy from Oz* attains is higher still. *Pennsylvania Avenue* is rooted in the genre of the jukebox musical. However, it is proposed here, like Enright’s version of *The Boy from Oz*, *Pennsylvania Avenue* surpasses the genre of the jukebox musical, to present Harper as a character that is complex and flawed.
Preservative Love

Ruddick\textsuperscript{21} describes preservative love as a maternal practice, an action of mother work performed in response to a demand made by a child, the demand for preservation. In order to explain what she means by preservative love Ruddick describes a story told by the mother of a child who slept poorly due to croup and bronchitis. The story tells of the mother’s suffering, spending days and nights alone with a screaming baby. In this story the mother’s partner is mostly absent. Ruddick describes one night in particular, a night when the mother’s partner could not come home. She describes how the child “...wail[ed] as usual.”\textsuperscript{22} Further, she goes on to describe the mother experiencing shortness of breath and an image which frightened her. Ruddick reveals that the mother imagined harming the child and was very disturbed by this. However, Ruddick\textsuperscript{23} states that instead of harming the child the mother changed the baby and gave the baby warm milk, before “...shut[ting] the door to the baby’s room, [and] barricading it against herself with a large armchair.” Ruddick begins her chapter on the nature of preservative love by offering a story of a mother who imagined harming her baby, but did not. It might be considered interesting that in her introduction to her chapter on preservative love Ruddick offers a story of a mother shutting a door between herself and her child as an example of the maternal practice of preservative love. If Ruddick considers this mother’s actions to be an example of preservative love perhaps it might be suggested that in the case of birthmothers who relinquish custody of their children a similar action may be occurring.

Ruddick makes a distinction between the role of the mother and the role of “the birthgiver”.\textsuperscript{24} Ruddick asserts “Neither pregnancy nor birth is much like mothering. Mothering is an ongoing, organised set of activities that require discipline and active attention”.\textsuperscript{25} However, Jean Keller\textsuperscript{26} suggests that Ruddick’s distinction between the role of the “birthgiver” and the identity of mother does disservice to the “birthmother”. Keller states,

[Ruddick’s birthgiver/adoptive mother distinction] fails adequately to consider the social complexities birthgivers face, and it misconstrues birthgivers’ experiences by denying their status as mothers.\textsuperscript{27}
It appears that Harper’s relationship with her child was “disrupt(ed) or endanger(ed)”\textsuperscript{28} from the outset. Hansen\textsuperscript{29} writes of the literature which she analyses, “The fictional circumstances that disrupt or endanger the mother-child relationship are usually traumatic, but highly various”. Further, Hansen states, “the lines between voluntary and involuntary loss are often, but not always, blurred, as are perceptions about motives”.\textsuperscript{30} Harper becomes pregnant at the age of seventeen as a result of rape. Furthermore, she is the child of Christian and morally conservative parents. She is an unwed pregnant teenager in the early 1960s in the state of Georgia. The fictional circumstances which surround Harper’s pregnancy are traumatic. It is evident that these circumstances “…disrupt or endanger the mother-child relationship.”\textsuperscript{31} It is from this position that Harper makes the decision to separate herself from her child and to give him to others to care for. Whilst it can be said that Harper chooses to pass her son “into another’s arms”\textsuperscript{32}, she does so in response to the advice of others. It might be suggested that Harper passes her son into the arms of another in an act of preservative love. She chooses another life for him, a life apart from her, because she is told that it is “for the better”.\textsuperscript{33} As Ruddick’s mother barricaded the door between herself and her baby to prevent herself from harming the child, Murray-Smith’s mother, Harper, passes her son into the arms of another for his preservation and for his benefit. Further, it might be suggested that Harper’s choice provides evidence of Harper responding to the demand for “social acceptability”.\textsuperscript{34} Whilst Ruddick proposes that the maternal practice and work of training is the response required to address the demand for social acceptability, and Harper’s passing her son into the arms of another could not be suggested to be training the child, in a sense, through Harper’s choice to give her child to a-presumably nuclear-family, Harper submits to social acceptability. She places her son into an acceptable family, in order to position him to be socially accepted.

**Resilience and Redemption**

Harper talks to Aretha Franklin about what happened in Thunderbolt when she was seventeen. As Harper describes the conversation it is as if she is confessing her self-perceived ‘sins’ to Franklin. In response to Harper’s confession Franklin says something of great weight to Harper, she says, “Baby, it Was Not Your Fault”.\textsuperscript{35} She does not say what she means by ‘it’, whether that be conceiving a child at the age of seventeen as a result of rape, or giving that child up at the advice of others. Whatever ‘it’ may mean, this brief statement acts as a sort of

absolution for Harper. Franklin tells her that her sins are forgiven, or rather, that there was nothing to forgive in the first place. Franklin spends a few moments with Harper. However, in those few moments Franklin offers Harper friendship and kindness. Harper’s encounter with Franklin gives her the strength to articulate her thoughts and her grief, to both Franklin and the audience. Harper raises the issue of judgment, declaring, “It wasn’t God’s judgment I needed to assuage – it was my own”. Harper judged herself. However, with Franklin’s declaration that “it Was Not [her] Fault” Harper seems to put down the great weight of guilt and regret she has been carrying and begin to look to the future. With this future in mind, Harper begins to sing *Amazing Grace*.

Harper’s singing of *Amazing Grace* seems to suggest that there has been a divine intervention; that something has saved her; and that she is, or was, a wretch. This identification of herself as a wretch is not compatible with Franklin’s declaration that “it Was Not [her] Fault”. The lyrics state that Harper has gone from a state of being lost and blind, to a state of being found, seeing and understanding. It might be suggested that Harper’s journey from blindness to sight may not describe a journey of salvation, but rather, an instant of self-awareness. Through Harper’s interaction with Franklin, she discovers that which has been holding her back, that which has been causing her grief and sorrow. She has unresolved feelings regarding what happened in Thunderbolt. She still feels a bond to her son, and seems to regret her choice to give him up, or perhaps, she regrets that she was not permitted to make an independent, informed personal choice regarding whether to mother him herself or give him to others to care for.

It might be expected that if Harper were going to choose to make contact with her adult son she would choose to do so following her very transformative conversation with Franklin. This does not appear to be the case. The script states that Harper meets Franklin and confesses her sins to her in 1993. However, the play appears to begin and end in 2001. Whilst Harper’s interaction with Franklin causes her to think “about the child, passed into another’s arms”, it does not seem to inspire her to write to him. There is a gap in Harper’s memories and Harper’s narration of the twentieth century and that gap exists between her fiftieth and fifty-eighth birthdays. What occurs between 1993 and 2001 is not narrated. What prevents Harper from acting upon the feelings which Franklin inspired in her in 1993 is not revealed. It seems

simply that whilst Harper experienced a revelatory moment in 1993, this moment did not prompt action until her dismissal from The White House in 2001. It appears that Harper’s environment facilitates her resilience, providing her with positive interactions and permitting her to contribute to her community and global politics.

NOTES

3 *Ibid* 3.
7 *Ibid* 33.
8 *Ibid* 33.
14 Murray-Smith *Pennsylvania Avenue*, 43.
16 *Ibid* 27.
18 *Ibid* 44.
19 *Ibid* 44.
20 *Ibid* 44.
23 Ibid 67.
24 Ibid 51.
25 Ibid 50.
27 Ibid 175.
28 Hansen, *Mother without Child*, 16.
29 Ibid 16-17.
30 Ibid 16.
31 Ibid 16.
32 Murray-Smith, *Pennsylvania Avenue*, 42.
33 Ibid 42.
35 Murray-Smith, *Pennsylvania Avenue*, 40.
36 Ibid 42.
37 Ibid 40.
38 Ibid 40.
39 Ibid 42.