

# Australian theatre company stages *On the Beach*, Nevil Shute's nuclear-doomsday novel

Kaye Tucker  
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*On the Beach*, Nevil Shute's 1957 book, was recently staged by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) in a two-act adaptation by playwright Tommy Murphy (*Significant Others*, *Gwen in Purgatory*, *Holding the Man*). The show was directed by Kip Williams, the STC's artistic director.

Shute's story is set in the Australian city of Melbourne in 1963—in other words, a few years into the future—following a devastating nuclear war in the northern hemisphere, and what are the final months of human civilisation. All human life has been wiped out in North America, Europe, China and the Soviet Union, and a deadly radiation cloud is moving southward towards Australia.

City residents, along with the captain and crew of the visiting American nuclear submarine *USS Scorpion*, are preparing for their inevitable deaths with only state-sanctioned suicide pills to ease their final days.

Principal characters in the STC's production are Australian senior naval officer Peter Holmes (Ben O'Toole) and his wife Mary (Michelle Lim Davidson) who have a baby girl; Moira Davidson (Contessa Treffone), who falls in love with US submarine captain Dwight Towers (Tai Hara); and John Osborne (Matthew Backer), an Australian scientist.

Shute's novel was an immediate financial success in 1957, selling over a hundred thousand copies in the first weeks after its publication, and quickly becoming an international best seller. Twelve years after the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, millions of people around the world were deeply concerned about the possibility of nuclear war.

US director Stanley Kramer acquired the rights and the movie, shot in Melbourne and featuring some of Hollywood's greats—Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire and Anthony Perkins—was released in 1959. "It was a fictional scenario," Gardner said of the film, "but my God, everyone in the cast and crew knew it [nuclear war] could happen... I was proud of being part of this film."

Other film and television productions have since been made. These include a made-for-television version in 2000 with Armand Assante, Rachel Ward, and Bryan Brown, followed by a full-cast audio dramatisation in 2008. In 2013, Lawrence Johnston directed *Fallout*, a documentary about the production

of the Kramer's film.

The STC's staging of *On the Beach*—the first ever theatrical production—is timely and politically significant. Its four-week season at the 800-seat Roslyn Packer Theatre in central Sydney was well attended, indicating that Shute's frightening story still resonates, not just with those who read it in the late 1950s, but for a new generation.

In fact, the ongoing and increasingly public speculation by government and military officials about the possible use of nuclear weapons in the US-led NATO war against Russia in the Ukraine, make Shute's novel even more relevant than when it was released. Likewise, the Albanese government's deepening involvement in US-led preparations for war against China, with multi-billion dollar purchases of nuclear submarines and other deadly weaponry, and the hosting of major military exercises in northern Australia, is encountering growing popular opposition.

Underpinning Shute's book is his determination to raise awareness about the possibility and dangers of nuclear war. This is effectively presented in the opening pastiche of the STC production that gives a real sense of the impending danger that drives the author's narrative.

As audiences arrive and are seated, actors dressed in 1950s beach wear, gradually populate the stage in lackadaisical fashion. As they look upstage towards an imaginary sea, suggested on stage with the use of a huge white lightweight horizontal curtain. Subtle lighting changes occur as a gentle breeze develops, causing the giant curtain to flow, gently at first, then rising to a billow.

We hear a distant rumble and see a slightly out-of-focus image of an atomic bomb blast playing out behind the curtain which then slowly passes across the stage and the actors. It is a chilling and transformative moment, drawing in the cast and the audience, as they recognise that they are caught up in an unfolding tragedy.

Despite this powerful opening scene and the overarching "high stakes" of the story, many of the scenes that followed failed to capture or maintain this intensity.

STC marketing promoted its version of *On the Beach* as "a vast, poetic and haunting story of community, dignity and love in dark times" and one that highlights "resilience, family love

and communities rallying together in the face of the ultimate existential crisis.”

Director Kip Williams says, “This is undoubtedly a tragic story, but our version is also funny, charming, transporting and imbued with a sense of hope for the ways we, as a society, can circumvent the crises that are currently staring us in the face.” *On the Beach*, he continues, “is at its heart a piece about loss and learning to live on in the wake of grief.”

This is an odd and somewhat complacent take on Shute’s book, which was not about “learning to live on in the wake of grief” but the impending end of human civilisation, and, implicitly, how that possibility should be opposed.

On the flap of a 2010 edition of the novel, a *Guardian* reviewer rightly states, “*On the Beach* played an important role in raising awareness about the threat of nuclear war. We stared into the abyss and then stepped back from the brink.”

Rather than circumventing the crises “currently staring us in the face” or creating “a sense of hope,” as Williams suggests, Shute directly confronts his readers with the cataclysmic consequences of inaction.

As scientist John Osborne says in the original story, “Dogs will outlive us. Mice will last a lot longer, but not so long as rabbits. So far as we can see, the rabbit has them all licked—he’ll be the last... They’ll all go in the end, of course. There’ll be nothing left alive here by the end of the next year.” The most gripping scenes in the STC production were those that bluntly explored these issues.

The *USS Scorpion*’s reconnaissance trip to Cairns and the northern parts of Australia, and Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, is particularly effective.

The submarine scenes involved a long jetty-like structure on the central revolving stage with a periscope dropping from the fly above. The stripped back minimalist staging put the focus on the ensemble of actors, who create real intensity during their perilous journey towards the radiation clouds.

This was even more disturbing during a later voyage to San Francisco, Seattle, and Santa Maria Island in the Puget Sound. Travelling cautiously to avoid possible wreckage and detritus, the crew and the audience are faced directly with the horrendous consequences of nuclear war. Without revealing too much more about the story, all those who once lived in those areas had perished.

Many other scenes in the play, however, especially those dealing with the community, family and love interests, were flat and strangely unmoving. Some were marred by a tendency, particularly in the first act to find moments of comic relief. This gave the impression that either the director or the playwright did not trust the audience’s ability to handle the seriously tragic nature of the story.

The first act appears to have stuck closely to the book’s narrative, even using much of its dialogue, but the second act,

which involved some reworking of the principal female characters, was significantly compressed and rushed.

Modification of the female characters in the STC production to ‘modernise’ Shute’s novel is problematic. For example, Moira’s evolution from a racy, binge-drinking young woman to a reformed “party-girl,” placidly devoted to submarine captain Towers is not sufficiently drawn out or developed and is unconvincing.

Murphy says in the program notes that “Moira and Mary take the stage with more agency than their literary counterparts no longer relying on the instruction of male characters.”

Unsurprisingly the female characters in Shute’s novel are stylistically outdated but Murphy’s script and its preoccupation with providing them with “more agency,” muddies the waters, diverting from the story’s central focus.

The most problematic scene, however, in the STC’s play was the decision to end the play with a small girl dancing around a tree, an implausible and simplistic attempt to inject a sense of hope.

By contrast the last moments in Shute’s novel are genuinely moving and powerful. Moira sits in her car with a red box of suicide pills at her side, watching *USS Scorpion*—the last working ship left on the planet and carrying the man she loves—sail off into the distance. The reader is reminded of T.S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*, which Shute quotes at the beginning of his book, “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with a whimper.”

That scriptwriter Murphy and director Williams are grappling with Shute’s iconic work and the very existence of humanity after a nuclear war is to be commended. Their efforts, however, are uneven because the urgent warnings underpinning the novel are sidelined. Whether Murphy and Williams intend or not, the overall result is to suggest that nothing can be done to prevent such a catastrophe. Shute’s original novel is not animated by a ‘whistling past the graveyard’ sense of optimism but infused with genuine urgency and the need to prevent nuclear war.



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