

# MACEDONIAN AGENDA



**16 essays on the development of Macedonian culture in Australia. Includes cultural values, language, religion, arts, identity, women's issues, the elderly, immigration, politics, the "child refugees", human rights and more**

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*Front cover: February 2, 1960, Bitola Railway Station, Macedonia:  
Mr Aleksandar Kolupacev is farewelled by his village, Gjavato, as he  
sets out for a new life in Port Kembla, Australia.*

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# CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Macedonian Values in Multicultural Australia <i>Zoran Coseski</i>	9
Some Observations on the Speech of Bilingual Macedonian-Australians <i>Betty K Stewart</i>	15
The Australian-Macedonian Drama Group <i>Stefo Stojanovski</i>	27
The Macedonian Orthodox Church: Its Role in the Moulding and Maintenance of Ethnic Identity in Australia <i>Dr Christopher Popov and Michael Radin</i>	36
Barriers to Social Change for Macedonian Women <i>Malina Stankovska</i>	53
A Study of Women Activists in the Macedonian Community <i>Malina Stankovska</i>	62
The Macedonian Elderly: A Needs Study of the Macedonian Elderly in the Western Region of Melbourne <i>Macedonian Community Welfare Association of the Western Region Inc</i>	74
Features of Settlement in Australia by Macedonians from the Aegean Region <i>Michael Radin</i>	113
Proud of the Macedonian Heritage <i>Faye Kolev</i>	132
Assimilation and the Public and Private Identity of Macedonians: A Dialectical Expose <i>Pandora Petrovska</i>	135

Declaration of the "Child Refugees" <i>The Association of Refugee Children from the Aegean Part of Macedonia</i>	185
Submission on the 28,000 Ethnic Macedonian "Child Refugees" <i>Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia</i>	189
A Political Strategy for the Macedonian Diaspora <i>Victor Bivell</i>	204
The Political Future of the Macedonians in Australia <i>Zoran Coseski</i>	213
Australian Law, International Treaties and the Government's "Slav" Prefix <i>Risto Balalovski</i>	215
Why Australia? <i>Bob Spasenovski</i>	223
The Authors	226

# The Australian-Macedonian Drama Group

**Stefo Stojanovski**

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the inaugural Australian Macedonian National Conference held at the University of Melbourne in 1989*

While I will speak in general about the Australian Macedonian Drama Group, there will be three discernible threads that run through my talk. Firstly, I will outline the dramatic activities of the group in a chronological way; secondly, I will discuss our role as a specific community drama group working in a non-English community language; and thirdly, I will look at aspects of the writing being produced.

In 1983 a small group of people from the Macedonian Students Association in Melbourne, at the suggestion of Liljana Tasevska, arranged to hear a play written in Macedonian by a local writer, Jim Thomev. Called "Nashite" (Our People), the play was a five act "domestic" drama written in the Lerin dialect of Macedonian (Lerinsko). Its colourful expression, its colloquial vigour and the presentation of familiar issues from the life of Australian Macedonians convinced everyone of the dramatic potential of our language and lives.

It was decided that it would be a good idea to stage the play, and so through word of mouth a group of interested people met and started planning. The problem was that no Macedonian theatrical group existed. We weren't sure where to start. We decided to contact friends and acquaintances and see if we could get enough people interested. The organizational problems were made more difficult by the fact that the majority of Macedonians, mainly from rural backgrounds, did not have a theatrical tradition, either here or in Macedonia. The closest thing to a dramatic group were the numerous folkloric dance groups. Apart from this we did not get any support from the official church-based community organizations, so in effect we were starting from rock bottom, without anything except a script and the belief in the dramatic power of our language.

Through personal contacts and word of mouth we gathered a group of devoted people and painfully and gradually the ball started rolling in 1984. One person donated their house for rehearsals and someone else

introduced us to a then recently arrived Polish state director and we started rehearsals. We encouraged as broad a participation as possible. A number of members were teachers and students but we had people from all walks of life, and of all ages.

Very few people had had theatre experience apart from the odd school or university production. Because of this and the fact that we wanted to encourage as many participants as possible, we decided for our first production to put on a series of short plays instead of one long one. Five plays, each of about 25 minutes, allowed us to involve over 20 people, many with small roles. This suited our novice status.

The first show was staged in May 1984 in a local Town Hall. The show took the title "The Macedonians in Australia" - all the plays were about the efforts of Macedonians to settle into and make sense of life in Australia.

The first play, titled "Vlade", revolved around a home visit from a school co-ordinator who must pass on to the Macedonian parents the news that Vlade, their son, has been expelled from school. In the second play "Stram, Ces i Red" (Humility, Respect and Custom) a school teacher gives a hypocritical moral lesson based on the Macedonian dictum of humility, respect and custom. His outlandish students reveal the impracticality of such easy wisdom.

The third play, "Kume-Krle-Trts" (Godfather Krle-Trts), deals with the Macedonian naming customs and the role of the godfather, which comes into question after the godfather in the play names a family's children: Tikvar (Pumpkin), Teneke (Tin Can), Tevekalia (Lout) and Torlak (Unkempt).

In the fourth play, titled "Zdrav-Ziv" (Healthy Life), a young boy faces up to interpreting at the doctor's for his irascible grandfather who suffers from "nervi" (his nerves).

And in the final play a family gets itself into trouble after an attempt to marry off their young daughter with the aid of a "stroinik" (a matchmaker) fails.

In style the material ranged from situation comedy to high farce. The tone ranged from warm sentimentality to incisive social commentary and satire.

All of the works dealt with experiences from the lives of the audience and this was a key ingredient for the success of the group. I will come back to this important point later.

When planning for the production we decided to include music, songs and a folkloric dance group between plays. The reasons for this were two-fold - firstly the fact that we have such a rich tradition in these areas

and secondly to give our audience something of what they were used to. As I said earlier, many of them had little or no experience of theatre so we put it in a form that presented some known elements. The mixture of folklore and drama was successful, there was no clash of mode or style. One of the reasons for this was that the plays themselves contained many folkloric or anthropological elements, colloquial language, folk sayings, customs and traditions.

Such was the first production and it was a major success. Over 2,000 people attended our two seasons of eight performances. The second season, later that year, was held in a theatre.

To many people in the audience, and certainly to those involved in the production, the experience was a very emotional one. The Drama Group's activities represented a cultural, or if you like, nationalistic affirmation that had not been thought possible in Australia. In front of their eyes was the culture and language that had been so oppressed in the Balkans and so often neglected in Australia - challenging and entertaining, drawing sustenance from our life in Australia.

The second show early in 1985 was similar in style to the first one - five short plays, with songs and music in between. This time we also had some poetry recitation and a choral group was organized. The emphasis in the plays was on comedy - much of it similar in style to that of the first production. However a new variety was established in the "over the top" send up of "Pogodi-Dogodi" (The Macedonian "Perfect Match"). This has gone on to be one of the best remembered pieces offered by the group and it may be interesting to speculate on the reasons why.

On the surface the play appears to be light in substance, a flippant send up of the popular TV program - a light throw away of belly laughs. But why has it stuck in people's minds so much, ahead of weightier, perhaps more polished work? The reason is, I think, a cultural one. "Pogodi-Dogodi" deals with one of the greatest preoccupations of our people - getting married off correctly. The wedding practices and customs from "strojnici" to marrying from the right "soi" are very central to our culture. "Pogodi-Dogodi" symbolizes a transmutation of this important part of Macedonian culture in the Australian context, and for this reason has a high intrinsic interest.

In the first two productions most of the material came from Jim Thomev, Stefo Stojanovski and Lupco Temelkovski.

The third production took place late in 1985 and in this one quite a few new directions were experimented with; in fact the plays were quite a departure from those of the first two productions. With the passing of time the Drama Group had inspired more people to write so a different

style was bound to emerge. I will return later to this positive role in encouraging writers in the community.

The third show, for the first time, included two plays on historical themes: "Kucinjata Lajat" (The Dogs Are Barking) and "Makedonecot" (The Macedonian). "Makedonecot" was a bold change of form for it was a verse drama. Its poetical form was a challenge for the actors and an effective medium for conveying the sense of Macedonia's tragic history. The other historical play "Kucinjata Lajat", in symbolic form, looked at the attractions, demands and ultimately the sacrifices that national allegiance can lead to. One other piece, "Zimi Vas" (I Swear By You) was the result of a collaborative effort of a group of women who workshopped the idea of the oppression of women. The final play in this mixed bag was "Do Koga" (Until When), a sentimental comedy about an elderly Macedonian couple aging in Australia.

For our 1986 production we decided that the time had come to attempt a full length play. We chose the five-act play "Krvta Ne Se Praj Voda" (Blood is Thicker than Water). With a much broader scope this play brought together many of the concerns that were raised in the first two productions. It also used the similar style of incisive social humour. Centred around a family living in Australia, it examined the various ways people see life in Australia when their relationships are tested by an illegitimate pregnancy. The play ends in reconciliation and a multicultural vision of Australia.

With this longer play were presented two shorter pieces "Aramijata" (The Thief) and "Intimi" (Intimacies).

Our 1987 production had a similar form - one longer play and two short pieces. This time however the long play, for the first time, was a tragedy. It was "Sushata" (The Drought) by Tom Petsinis, a play about family divisions following the return of one family member from Australia. "Sushata" presented the group with the greatest challenge to that point. The play had a much denser and more allusive text and contained a chorus of women which spoke in verse. The play was also a great challenge for the audience, for while the issues were familiar, its style was not. This play was performed professionally, in English, by Playbox Theatre Co in 1994.

After the two productions involving long plays, for 1988 we went back to a format of shorter plays. There were three comedies, including a new "Pogodi-Dogodi" and another new style of play, a "mystery". That play was "Familija Tuginci" (Family of Strangers) by Dorothy Siouclis, our first female writer.

In terms of writers we are now very well off with six or seven writers

who can contribute substantial work.

In giving this chronology, it might sound as if it has all been easily done. Far from it. Like most Macedonian groups or events we have our organizational problems. The time commitment involved in rehearsing and organizing theatre is major. As a consequence we have at times been undermanned. While we have extensive moral support from our community, it doesn't often enough translate into active involvement. But I don't want to go on about what is probably familiar to you all. I would like instead to concentrate on the more interesting positive aspects.

I would like to speculate about the reasons for the popularity of the Group's work. One reason is the fact that most of our material draws its inspiration from the daily life of our community. We encourage locally written work in the Macedonian language as used in Australia. The colloquial language of the dialects is not only the means of communication but also a rich source of inspiration in its own right.

In its specificity of language and theme, the drama provides a mirror for Macedonians to see themselves. However it is not just a mirror to admire oneself in but also one which confronts us with the images of ourselves. The Drama Group has allowed Macedonian-Australians to "indulge" themselves in a way that is not possible in the mainstream English-speaking society because it has given public expression to our specific world. This is certainly a rare experience for Macedonian-Australians. This public expression gives a kind of credence to our Australian-Macedonian culture because people see in objective terms, before their eyes, the substance of that culture. This feeling of being on show ("na seir" if you like) reinforces the empathy with that culture and promotes solidarity and belonging. It is this quality which has attracted such a range in our audience - from young children born and bred here to the truest of the patriots.

As well as presenting their world before their eyes, our plays have challenged the audience to look at themselves and how they relate to that world. Many of the plays deal with culture clash or conflicting viewpoints between generations, the changing role of women, tradition and change.

The play, "Toi Sho Znai" (He Who Knows) by Dorothy Siouclis, begins with two young people emptying out their wardrobe and sifting through their clothes, throwing out the useless clothes and only keeping what they will wear. The play looks at what from our past is valuable and what needs to be changed or discarded. I believe this image is also appropriate for the challenge that the drama offers our audience and for the nature of our life in Australia.

The affirmation of cultural identity is one of the great things about this Drama Group and the close relationship it has with its audience. As previously mentioned the other factor that keeps the audience close to us is the content of the plays - the material deals with issues close at heart to much of the audience. Thus for the audience there is an immediate emotional engagement with what is going on on the stage. The plays are more than an intellectual exercise or a mere piece of entertainment. I can illustrate this with one example from our more recent work. We staged the play "Sushata" (The Drought) in 1987. That play deals with the return to the family in Macedonia of a man who has been aimlessly wandering Australia for the last twenty years. Upon his return the question of inheritance and the division of family land between the two brothers is raised and through fear and misunderstanding a tragedy results. This basic conflict was very close to much of our audience, as it probably would be to most people who have migrated, whose families and country have been divided and who continue in various ways to live between two countries.

Thus when the audience see such close issues presented in the colloquial language they use, their level of involvement is heightened.

This of course happens in any audience where the issues will mean more to some people than to others. The pleasure of working in a community theatre group like this however is the fact that you can ensure that the material is personal for a much higher percentage of the audience.

This audience rapport has been commented on by all four of the non-Macedonian directors we have used. For all of them it has been a unique experience rarely found in the mainstream theatres. One other attribute of our audience is the fact that their behaviour is not determined by a tradition of theatre decorum. They do not follow standard theatre rules of how much, and when, to laugh or clap. They are quite spontaneous and often "participate" in the action, offering suggestions, compliments and taking sides. At first glance, particularly to those coming from a very decorous theatre tradition, this may appear to be rude behaviour, but for our audience the separation of audience and action does not hold. The audience's view of an event such as this is based on it being a participatory communal gathering. This of course is the folkloric heritage.

The other area of achievement has been in the participation of members from the community. For the first time there has been an outlet for a range of artistic, organizational and technical skills. We have over 70 financial members and more than 50 people have taken on acting roles.

We have also begun to encourage our own directors and as mentioned now have six or seven writers.

This is one of the great strengths and achievements of the Group. The Drama Group has been a catalyst, it has inspired people who might not consider themselves writers to put pen to paper and the Group has given a public forum for their work. The writing produced has also been of a remarkably high standard. It is very rare for a small amateur group to have such quality writing at their disposal. The quality of the writing has been commented on by all our directors and is evident in the choice of two of our plays by a professional company - Anthill - for their annual staged readings. Those plays were "Sushata" and "Aramijata" by Tom Petsinis. Another writer, Jim Thomev, has received a Literature Board grant for his dramatic work and has been used as a script consultant for a TV series. The Group has received financial assistance from the Victorian Ministry of Arts and from the Australia Council with whom we enjoy a good relationship and which is very pleased with our work.

Videos of two of our productions have been broadcast in the Republic of Macedonia. Channel 0-28 in 1984 produced a report on the Group for a current affairs program.

The strength of the writing has been the basis for these successes, and I think that there are specific reasons for the quality of the writing being produced. I don't think that it is just a coincidence of talented individuals. Firstly I think it is because migrants who belong to a transplanted culture have a richness of experience that can feed their creativity. Living in and watching the convergence of two cultures produces much tension, humour and heightened perception of social processes.

I also think that there is a "nationalistic" reason - what we may call a national creativity. Literary movements and creative periods have often been associated with national and cultural issues. The Irish for instance dominated the English language literary scene in the first decades of this century - at a time of political chaos and oppression of Irish culture. Writers such as WB Yeats, James Joyce, Synge, O'Casey, Lady Gregory and others took inspiration from Irish themes. Many writers were involved in the National Revival Movement.

In more recent times Jewish writers, particularly from the USA, have created a similar phenomenon. Chaim Potok, Phillip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Ella Wiesel and Saul Bellow have all been preoccupied with Jewish culture and history. It has been a major focus and a source of inspiration to them. I think that this sort of process has happened with our writers also.

The final area that I'd like to talk about concerns the linguistic content

of the plays. The first point is that the scripts of our writers are in one sense social and linguistic documents. They are recording or "canning" language in process, because largely we use the colloquial language as spoken here. For instance some of the dialectical and colloquial features used in the scripts may perhaps no longer be heard in Macedonia. The Macedonian migrants to Australia, through the well-known process of "culture freeze", have preserved features that may have changed in the place of origin.

What we also have is a written record of the emergence of a new dialect of Macedonian - Australian-Macedonian. As Italian linguists have shown with Italo-Australian, this is a fruitful area for research.

One other area concerns the linguistic and grammatical patterns and the way they relate to culture. Some of our writers write in Macedonian, others write first in English and then translate the text into Macedonian. The interesting thing about some of the English texts is that they still sound so Macedonian, and this is not just a matter of content or subject matter; the Macedonian mind is reflected in the grammar and constructions used. This subliminal influence can also be found in a reverse manner in our Macedonian scripts. As products of an Anglo-Celtic education system it is not surprising to find certain constructions that are not Macedonian. Again some interesting work in this area of sociolinguistics may offer itself.

Over its 10 year performance history the Australian Macedonian Drama Group has attracted an audience of over 11,000 people, many of whom eagerly await and attend the event every year. The videos of the productions have reached almost every Macedonian household with access to video. These videos have been distributed interstate and overseas in Macedonia and in Canada where the Group is also known.

The AMDG is a non-profit group and surplus funds from one show are put towards the next year's productions. The Group also contributes to the community: on many occasions they have donated money to other organizations and causes they consider worthy of support. The group recently held a fund raising party to raise money towards the Medical Supplies for Macedonia Fund, and were able to donate a substantial amount.

The Australian Macedonian Drama Group places great emphasis on serving the Macedonian community. The Group is made up of Macedonians from all walks of life and with backgrounds from all parts of Macedonia. From the beginning it has adhered to its primary objectives. Firstly, to encourage and spread the Macedonian name, language and culture throughout Australia and secondly, to provide an outlet for

the artistic talents and theatrical interests of people of Macedonian origin and others willing to work towards the same ends.

The Group has given many people an outlet for their talents in scripting, acting, directing, designing, stage production, singing, musical composition and in developing organizational skills in theatre management. Above all, it gives all the participants a strong sense of purpose with a worthwhile and highly appreciated community activity.

The Group began with most people having little or no previous theatrical experience, and in the early years theatre professionals were hired to train and share their expertise with members of the group. For the past several years the AMDG has become self sufficient. All artistic and production skills can now be met from within the Group. Outside technical personnel are engaged only if absolutely necessary. So impressive has been this development that professional actors have joined the Group, a clear sign of its growing reputation in the wider performing arts industry.

Because an increasing number of members in the Group wish to make performing arts their career, a smaller sub-group called Kacamak has been formed. This consists of Macedonian-Australians working full time in theatre. They will be an ongoing creative development and performance group while the AMDG will continue to work on the major annual production. Kacamak's first project was to prepare a piece of theatre for Macedonian students and others in Victorian schools. This touring play has been performed in 15 schools where it was eagerly greeted by the students. Kacamak hopes to continue this sort of community development work.