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'Fire': An Australian Play Gives Voice to Animals Devastated by Catastrophic Bushfire

Rebecca Scollen
University of Southern Queensland

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Abstract

Animals on a grand scale are victims of climate change and of natural disaster. With no voice within human cultures, their plight can be silenced and forgotten once an extreme weather event is over and when media coverage of the devastation has ceased. The creative arts have an important role to play in raising public awareness of and empathy for animals impacted by natural disaster. This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of the Australian play Fire by Scott Alderdice (2017), framed by Animal Studies perspectives. The voices of the animals in Fire, as expressed through language – dialogue and narration – are the focus of the analysis to determine how the play engages in the concepts of considering other-than-human interests; imagining and representing animals and their significance; personifying species' presence using human speech to offset facelessness; and inspiring humans to take responsibility in this time of climate crisis and natural disaster. Fire provides an exemplar for theatrical expression giving voice to animals in times of crisis. An examination of the narration and dialogue of the animal characters reveals a respectful representation of native Australian animals, who are shown to be sentient and social beings intimately entwined with the environment in which they live. The language use by the animals throughout elicits recognition and empathy and subsequently feelings of grief and of guilt. The play inspires humans to take responsibility by considering animals' perspectives and interests; understanding their significance in the world; and performing our role to protect the natural environment.

Keywords

animals, Australia, bushfire, natural disaster, theatre, voice

Cover Page Footnote

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Keywords: Australia, fire, giving voice to animals, natural disaster, theatre

Extreme natural disasters, often labelled 'one-in-one-hundred-years' events, now occur with alarming regularity in Australia, each with devastating outcomes. Within the last 10 years alone, Australia has suffered from record-breaking bushfires, floods, cyclones, heatwaves, and droughts. Up until recently, Australian news coverage of such weather events has chiefly reported on the impact upon humans, reporting on deaths, injuries, and property damage. When it comes to the impact upon other-than-human-animals,[1] this content is often missing from news coverage, or typically concerns livestock losses as part of the overall damage incurred to humans. However, of late there has been a noticeable increase in media mentions of native (or wild) animal deaths, and of the emotional impact on humans of farmed animal deaths caused by natural disaster. Being exposed to such tragic scenes in the mainstream and social media has prompted the sympathy and generosity of many Australians. For example, the coverage of Australia's largest bushfire event, the 'Black Summer' bushfires (September 2019-March 2020), led to an outpouring of support of almost $100 million from the public to wildlife rehabilitation centres to assist the injured koalas and other native animal species who were fighting for survival (Mummery & Rodan 163).

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough) of selected sequences from the theatrical play *Fire* by Scott Alderdice (2017) that foreground the dialogue and narration of the animal characters. The larger play tells the story of a catastrophic bushfire in the Warrumbungle National Park, Australia in January 2013, sharing how the humans and animals responded to the crisis. I apply critical discourse analysis to reveal the powerful application of language in the play, and to identify the issues designed to 'persuade, alter perception, or legitimise practices' (Scollen & Mason 'Sea World' 9) with the intention to promote change (Griffin 98). The further application of Animal Studies' theoretical perspectives provides a lens through which to consider the ways the animals in the play are 'constructed, represented, understood and misunderstood'; a phenomenon termed *zooësis* (Chaudhuri 'Stage Lives' 5). 'Animal Studies is an interdisciplinary research field which considers animals seriously as subjects of investigation and explores the ways animals intersect with human cultures' (Scollen & Mason 'Shark Dive' 5). Thus, the voices of animals in *Fire*, as expressed through language – dialogue and narration – are the focus of my analysis, in order to determine how the play engages in the

concepts of considering other-than-human interests; imagining and representing animals and their significance; personifying species' presence using human speech to offset facelessness; and inspiring humans to take responsibility in this time of climate crisis and natural disaster.

Significant donations of money are proffered when the public sees tragic imagery via the media, such is its power to influence and shape community perceptions (Schauble 144). Once the initial disaster is over, there is little evidence to suggest that the care and consideration of animals by humans is ongoing. Seventy percent of Australia's koalas were killed in the Black Summer bushfires and koalas have since been registered as endangered, yet habitat destruction caused by housing development and transport corridors has increased since 2020 (Mummery & Rodan 170). This demonstrates that in the immediate face of natural disaster, humans feel horror and sorrow for the animals in distress, but after the media coverage has ceased, it is 'business as usual', with our primary focus firmly planted within an anthropocentric agenda. The strength and persuasiveness of stories and images are proven by the sympathetic reaction to the media coverage of animal suffering and death during natural disaster. The challenge is to retain the concern and the fervour of the public for animal welfare after the media has ceased reporting. This is where the creative arts, including live theatre, can play a strong role in animal advocacy and environmental action.

Eco art emerged in the 1960s with the goal to raise awareness of the harm humans cause to the natural environment and to animals, entering 'debates on climate science, government policy, and both corporate and individual responsibility' (Cheetham 4). As climate change continues to negatively impact flora and fauna on Earth at an accelerated pace, all artforms have adopted the challenge to entertain, educate, and inspire humans to take positive action to save the planet and to consider the lives of other animals (Chaudhuri 'Animal Acts' 1). As a result, 'the arts have often reminded people that they live in a more-than-human world' (Waldau 127). The stories told in the creative arts engage audiences emotionally, intellectually and sensorily as each person makes meaning from the artforms and interprets these through the lenses of their lived experience. Humans communicate through storytelling, sharing information and learning from each other, contributing to culture (Whitehead & Rendell 21). Cultures (whether human or of some other animal) generate behaviours and values within a species derived from observing

and interacting with each other and from their outputs over time, in other words, via social learning (Whitehead & Rendell 13). Thus, the creative arts play an important role in culture-building and culture-reformation by demonstrating how human actions and attitudes may need to change and evolve as audiences engage with the works as social learners. The arts 'can facilitate awareness and connection' (Waldau 131), and Paul Waldau suggests, 'free up imaginations, invite hearts, tantalize minds, and reveal communities […] thereby making change possible' (129). This opportunity provides the backdrop to the analysis of the play *Fire*.

Bushfire 'is arguably the quintessential Australian disaster, pivotal to the national psyche and looming large in the community imagination … [(yet it)] remains largely absent from the nation's fictional narratives' (Schauble 143). The recently retired Inspector-General for Emergency Management John Schauble, who also holds journalism and history qualifications, states that while there may be a history of bushfire represented in Australian visual arts, poetry, and children's literature, there has been limited meaningful engagement with it in adult fiction including live theatre (143). However, over the last 20 years there have been a number of significant Australian plays written about bushfires and the impact they have on community and the environment. These include *Embers* by Campion Decent (2006) about the fires in Victoria and Gippsland in 2003; *Tinderbox* by Alana Valentine (2012) about no one particular Australian bushfire; *Fire* by Scott Alderdice (2017) concerning the Warrumbungle National Park bushfire in 2013; *Ravaged* by Kylie Rackham (2018) and *Hearth* by Fleur Murphy (2022) both centred on the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009; and *Unprecedented* by Campion Decent (2023) responding to the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020 that spread throughout south-eastern Australia.

Most of these plays typically draw upon the real or imagined personal experiences of local community members to tell the stories of humans' terror and loss, along with their bravery and hope as is incurred by such natural disasters. However, Decent's play *Unprecedented* (2023) widens the scope of the bushfire story by actively engaging in a dialogue about climate change, the increasing number and scale of natural disasters in Australia, and the action required to stem this. This is in keeping with Rachel Fetherstone's assertion that there has been a shift away from the traditional bushfire narrative, that has considered the phenomenon 'natural or normal', to

instead 'drawing connections between climate crisis and bushfire' (1). Alderdice's play *Fire* also stands out from the others because it gives voice to the animals caught in a devastating bushfire, telling their stories of the catastrophe and thus giving precedence to their experiences. This approach aligns with Kathryn Gillespie's view that 'Telling the stories of those whose lives often go unremarked is an act of resistance that makes a statement about whose lives matter and have meaning' (577).

However, examples of theatre in Australia giving voice to animals is rare. Framing this voice within the context of an extreme climatic event is even rarer. Denise Varney confirms that 'in the Australian context, theatre and drama lag behind performance art and installations, as well as other art forms, including film, visual arts, literature and digital media' (24) when it comes to presenting other-than-human interests. Peta Tait agrees that 'the dominant identity in drama and its theatre was and is human' ('Animals in Drama' 220). For the eco-evolution of the Australian theatre industry, Varney extends upon Lara Stevens' (89) argument by recommending that in order for theatre to 'play a productive role in responding to climate emergency […] it might relinquish the centrality of the human drama, and restore an active role for the non-human […] that underpin the scenarios that play out onstage' (15). There is a history of animals physically featuring in theatrical spectacles over many hundreds of years: in Ancient Roman religious festivals and circuses and in Ancient Greek dramas (Orozco 10); in English Medieval cycle plays and early modern plays of the Renaissance (Raber & Mattfield 2-3); in travelling menageries and war shows throughout the world in the 1800s (Tait 'Fighting Nature' xi); and in Western theatre of the 20th century (Chaudhuri 'Stage Lives' 3). Beyond the direct inclusion of live animals on stage, animal characters have been performed by human actors or discussed as offstage references, but never seen. Whether as a live animal or as a portrayed animal on stage, their presence in performance 'has highlighted ethical and moral questions about their agency and their objectification' (Orozco 6). For although animals may have featured, their perspectives and experiences were not necessarily presented nor were they central to the drama.

However, animals have 'independent existences and real lives as rich and valuable as our own' (Chaudhuri 'Stage Lives' 4), and the ways in which theatre makers choose to represent animals on stage, along with our relationships with them, can challenge anthropocentric views and reinforce our human responsibilities. By representing animals as animals on stage, rather than as 'symbols of human behaviour and allegories of human preoccupations' (Chaudhuri 'Stage Lives' 3), we give voice to those who are marginalised. This implies the enablement of others to listen. Listening is a relational act, which if done well understands the perspectives and power of those in the relationship through empathy and attentiveness, increasing inclusivity over time (Staddon et al. 345-347). Empathy motivates attitudinal and behavioural change (McCormack et al. 1197); without it, people are unlikely to feel any responsibility to act (Corsa 221). To feel empathy for another requires a level of identification with that person or animal (McCormack et al. 1197) and to 'feel another's feelings' (Goldstein 7). Although humans cannot know for certain the emotions of other animals, a 'thoughtful depiction of anthropocentric emotionalism can draw attention to actual animals and their lives' (Tait 'Animals in Drama' 234) when displayed in theatrical performance. As a growing number of 'studies confirm a comparable emotional range in other animal species, including grief' (Tait 'Animals in Drama' 230) with that of humans, what was once negatively perceived as anthropomorphism can now be understood as a way to help humans empathise. Georgette Leah Burns agrees that anthropomorphism can bring benefits, 'if such identification translates to a desire to learn about, and act ethically towards [animals]' (8). J. Keri Cronin goes further to argue that it is not so much about whether anthropomorphism is 'good or bad' but whether, when drawing upon it through the application of creative techniques, it can foster 'empathetic connections across species' (123).

Humans striving to give voice to animals via literary means has occurred since the 1800s, with the animal biography being employed to generate empathy and advocacy for animals. The best-selling novel *Black Beauty* (1877) provides a clear example of the power of giving voice to horses to raise awareness of their ill-treatment and to their right to a healthy and happy life. However, other classic fiction since that time has seen humans speaking *through* animals rather than *for* animals (for example, *Watership Down*, 1972), imposing human culture

and conventions upon them (Cronin 123). Investigating what the animals are saying and whose voices are really being heard aids in understanding the impact of the creative work upon its audience and consequently upon the animals represented in the fiction.

Fire is based on a real event relating the story of a bushfire in the Warrumbungle National Park (WNP) in January 2013. Before the fire, WNP was 23,311 hectares of eucalypt forest home to a diverse range of flora and fauna species. It is also Australia's, and the southern hemisphere's, first Dark Sky Park, renowned for stargazing and housing an astronomy research facility at Siding Spring Observatory (National Parks NSW). The WNP is situated almost 500 kilometres north-west of Sydney. The fire in the WNP was named New South Wales's 'most destructive bush fire in a decade with more than 55,000ha burnt, including 95 percent of the Warrumbungle National Park and 53 homes' (Rural Fire Service 8). Alderdice's parents lived on a farm adjacent to WNP and had to evacuate to avoid possible injury or death should the fire consume their property. Upon news of the bushfire and of his parent's evacuation, Alderdice travelled south from his home 600 kilometres away to assist (Alderdice, Personal Interview).

In an informal interview, Alderdice explained that he was horrified to hear of hundreds of koalas piled up on top of each other burnt to death on the fence surrounding the WNP, about three kilometres from his parents' farm (Personal Interview). The koalas were attempting to scale the fence by climbing up over each other when the fire swept through and killed them on the spot. Later, while he was out looking for animals too injured to survive, a young kangaroo bounded from the forest straight toward him. The joey jumped up and kicked Alderdice in the stomach, then fell back on the ground exhausted. Alderdice interpreted this action as an expression of anger and despair from the joey, hitting out at a human who was understood to be the enemy. At this moment Alderdice promised the joey that he would do something to make other humans aware of the brutal devastation of the WNP and of the animals that had called it home. He would make people aware of the errors made by those meant to protect the WNP and who appeared to prioritise the saving of the Siding Spring Observatory over the animals living in the forest (Alderdice, Personal Interview). In other words, Alderdice exhibited his 'moral obligation of attentiveness' (Jenni 393). Kathie Jenni explains that attention is necessary to meet our 'responsibilities to prevent harm' and to demonstrate 'courage and compassion'

(393). She goes on to explain, 'We should attend (at least) to apparent violations of our moral values in which we are personally implicated, which we have some power to affect, and to which we have been directed by clues that something is amiss' (393). One of the ways Alderdice attended to the issue was to write the play *Fire* and on the title page of the playscript, the dedication reads, 'To the little roo I met on the day after the fires…' (Alderdice, *Fire* 1). In the printed theatre program, Alderdice states:

> In the late afternoon of Sunday 13 January 2013, authorities managed to evacuate everybody living adjacent to the park. No human lives were lost. But for the animals, there was no escape. I wrote *Fire* in an attempt to give voice to those original dwellers of the forest […] As custodians of this country we owe it to the first peoples, to the animals and creatures of the air, water and land, and to future generations to understand and own our great responsibility to care for the land on which we live. *Fire* is my attempt to let the animals share with us that story. (USQ Artsworx 3).

The plot of *Fire* firstly establishes the key characters living in, or adjacent to, the WNP prior to the bushfire. Within the forest, we are introduced to a flock of cockatoos, a mob of kangaroos, a colony of koalas, a nesting pair of emus, and a couple of frill-necked lizards. Beyond the forest, human characters are introduced: an elderly couple, a young couple with two small children, and two national park rangers. From Act Three, the bushfire takes hold, and the audience witnesses the experiences of the characters during the fire, including the deaths of the majority of the animals introduced earlier. During this second half of the play, the audience learns of the approaches taken to extinguish the fire by the national park authority and rural fire service. A coronial inquest is held where the poor communication and ineffective action by the authorities, along with the decision to prioritise the protection of the Siding Spring Observatory over all else, are revealed concurrently with the stressful experiences of the animals seeking to escape the fire. By the conclusion of the play, no human lives are lost, and all have returned safely home. However, all of the animals are dead (save a small number of cockatoos) and their homes destroyed.

The story of *Fire* is told through narration as well as some dialogue between characters. The performers of the play are *enactors* rather than *actors* (Alderdice, Personal Interview), who

relay the story directly to the audience and then step in at times to be the voice for the animals rather than attempting to *be* them or to portray animal personas. The storytelling is physical with gestures, movements, and vocalisations providing an impression of the animals rather than seeking to specifically imitate animals. Key to the performance is the enactors' 'respect for the animals, elementals and history of the forest, and to revel in the chance to play them' (Alderdice, *Fire* 1). There are minimal props and sets (or none at all) required in order to evoke place and time, rather than to realistically depict them. Costumes are non-representative of the animals in the drama; no ears or tails in sight. Instead, it is the storytelling prowess of the playwright and of the enactors that fills the audience's imaginations and stimulates their senses to actively engage with the narrative. The audience is prompted by the narrative style of performance to draw upon their own experiential background to see the characters in their minds in order to bring the animals to life. In this way, the characters become real for each individual audience member, but each 'reality' will differ from one person to the next. This personalises the experience and empowers the audience to understand and relate to the characters in a meaningful way, potentially generating empathy. Forty-five percent of *Fire* features the animals' dialogue and narration, with another 15% of the text reflecting the voices of nature (for example, wind and fire). Accordingly, almost two-thirds of *Fire* is told by non-humans, privileging their voices over the humans characterised in the play. This delineation in language use foregrounds the experiences of the animals, and so the audience is asked to understand the world of the WNP and of the bushfire that destroys it chiefly through the animals' perspectives. The weighting of 2:1 (animal/nature: human) in the play accords the animals power to communicate their thoughts, feelings, relationships, and actions for consideration by a listening human audience. By listening to the narration and the dialogue of the animals in the play, the audience gains insight into each animal, their relationships with other animals, and with the natural world around them. The audience observes how they interact and learn from one another, gaining a glimpse into their unique cultures.

Anthropomorphism is at play here as the animals speak English, they communicate with informal idioms commonly used by English-speaking humans, and their character-types and roles within their community are similar to those found in human societies. Yet, the

anthropomorphism is not overt because the actions of the animals as described by the dialogue and narration reflect observations of real animal behaviours. These observations guided the playwright's interpretation of what the animals might be thinking and saying when living their lives together in the forest. The following snippet is an example of these observations and forms part of an amusing scene where four sulphur-crested cockatoos are shooed away from a farm adjacent to WNP, where they have been eating apricots from the netted trees. In addition to the English spoken by the characters, 'Scraaaarrrk' is used as an exclamatory, as well as a sound of the collective, and points directly to the strident vocalisation humans associate with cockatoos.

> Cocky 4: 'This web thing has got me by the wing?!'
>
> Cocky 1: 'Broom!'
>
> Cocky 4: 'SCRRRARRRRRCK! Not panicking! Not panicking! Scrarrraarrck!'
>
> Cocky 1: 'BROOM! It's a broom!'
>
> Old Lady: 'You buggers get away from those apricots!'
>
> Cocky 1: 'Bale! Bale!'
>
> ALL: 'SCRAAARRRRRCK SCRAAARRRRCK SCRRRRAAARRRCK SCRRRRAAARRRRRCK!'
>
> Old Lady: 'Oh now look what you've done – and you've torn the bloody net – pulled all the green ones onto the ground.'
>
> Cocky 3: 'She's waving that broom at us.'
>
> Cocky 4: 'She's sayin', "You blokes have a fine day!"'
>
> Cocky 1: 'She's sayin', "You come back again!"'
>
> Cocky 2: 'Yeh dudes, I don't think she is.'
>
> Cocky 4: 'Hey check this – I call it – "fold up your wings and flip over on your back and guess when to open 'em again before you go ground stack!"'
>
> Cocky 3: 'Banga man! That is sick!'

Cocky 2: 'I'm gonna give it a try.'

Cocky 1: 'I did it yesterday – with my eyes closed.'

Cocky 4: 'Yeh, and I'm an albatross!'

Cocky 3: 'Mate, you are a complete parrot!'

Cocky 1: 'What's an albatross?'

ALL: SCRAARRRRK! SCRAARRRRCK! SCRAARRRRCK!

(Alderdice, *Fire* 15-16)

Humour is used in this scene and in many others in the play, along with words associated with the Australian vernacular, to reinforce the Australianness of the animals. The animals exchange banter, use sarcasm and self-deprecation, and express anti-authoritarian sentiments in their communication with each other; all examples of typical characteristics of modern Australian humour. This cements the sense that the animals are similar to the Australian audience the play has been written for. The humour invites the audience to laugh with the animals, to relax and 'let their guard down' (McCormack et al. 1197). This ensures the audience feels positive toward the animal characters and receptive to the information they share and the experiences they have within the narrative.

In all of the animal scenes, conversations and contemplations provide insight into a non-human understanding of the world and show animals' quests to further understand that world. For example, the father kangaroo (Roo) and his son (Manky) exhibit mindfulness as they narrate what they hear when listening to the forest at night. The narration consists of a series of adjectives, assisting the audience to imagine more readily what the kangaroos can hear. The descriptions are non-judgemental, illustrating the respect Roo and Manky have for those they share the forest with. Their deep listening enables them to not only hear the beetle but to hear what the beetle hears. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the many animals in the national park, as well as showing the kangaroos' acute awareness of their world. Part of the scene is indicated below:

> Roo: 'Listen to just one of them,'
>
> Manky: and Manky listened to the sound of a fat glistening black beetle, clambering up a mountain of gnarled bark, buffeted by a swirling tugging wind – and Manky felt the beetle reach out with one long jagged tendril, its talons clasping for and scratching deep into the bark, Manky could almost feel the beetle's strain and gasp –
>
> Roo: 'Now', came his father's distant rumble, 'listen to what he can hear.'
>
> Manky: And for a moment, Manky heard nothing – just the hollow whine and whistle of the wind – and then – he heard – a praying mantis poised in mid-leap in a sway of leaves above him, and from the mantis, his spirit swooped out into the night and was caught by a tawny frog mouth gliding effortlessly through the ghost white branches… (47)

The environment the animals live within also forms their sense of identity. This means the destruction of the forest threatens the animals physically and metaphysically. Once it is gone, they are gone. The scene below illustrates how the koala identifies with the tree: not simply understanding the tree as a home and as a food source, but as being intimately entwined with the koala's sense of self. Koala 1 posits the belief that the memories and histories of the trees belong to the koala. By being the 'keeper of the rings of the forest' (44), Koala 1 expresses a sense of responsibility and care for this environment:

> Koala 1: Inside this leaf – is the entire memory of the tree.
>
> Koala 3: How do you know that?
>
> Koala 1: Well because all of the tree flows up into it […]
>
> […] Koala 1: So – all of the rings of the tree – all of her memory –
>
> Koala 2: Is in that leaf.
>
> Koala 1: And now it's in me. […]

> […] Koala 1: The gift of the tree, is everything she is. And so, the koala, is really, another part of the tree. […] And because the tree is the leaf, and the leaf is the koala – then that makes me – ergo – the keeper of the rings of the forest. (43-44)

Through the narration in the play, the animals liken natural phenomena experienced in their environment (such as fire) to other animals and their prior encounters with those animals. As a theatrical device, this further engages the audience's imagination by prompting the visualisation of natural elements such as wind and fire as having animal qualities. Some examples of the encroaching fire as described by predatory animal metaphors include:

> 'I am fire!' It would whisper in a gasp like scales of snake. 'I am fire! And I will climb that high! I will turn the sky to flame!' And then it dropped again beneath the grass and began to feed upon the branch. (36)

> The trees, the wattle, every bush! had all become dogs – had all become fangs! (69)

> But the night sky was the colour of a goanna's mouth, and the goanna's breath threw him about like a scrap of torn flesh – raked with venom and slashing teeth and death – 'Fire!'

> (79)

The animals in the play ask questions, pose solutions, plan and make decisions, help one another, enjoy each other's company, experience fear, show courage and self-sacrifice. In other words, they are observed throughout as social learners and as sentient beings (Coleman et al. 3). The dialogue within the groups illustrates the loving relationships they hold and the care and comfort they take from one another. These familial representations resonate with human bonds and the emotions we share. An example from *Fire* sees the koalas working together to try and escape the bushfire and to find a way to climb the wire fence surrounding the WNP:

Koala 6: Old Grandma – her chest rasping with strangled breath sat back against the roots of a tree – 'You go,' she gasped. 'I'll be along – just need to…breathe…'

Koala 5: 'We can carry you, like a Joey,' –

Koala 2: – but then a snarling explosion of searing heat and ash scattered them like leaves –

Koala 3: and they were running again –

Koala 4: scrabbling madly across the slopes –

Koala 1: crashing through reeds and bracken –

Koala 5: and then suddenly –

ALL: - it was down hill –

Koala 5: 'What's that? What's that I smell? Is it more trouble?'

Koala 1: 'I'm pretty sure my girl, that is water. This way!'

Koala 6: And then they hit the fence.

Koala 3: 'What is this? Shiny twigs.'

Koala 1: 'We should be able to just tear through 'em.'

ALL: 'Koala!'

Koala 5: But only their claws were torn.

Koala 1: 'Go up that way! Maybe it ends!'

Koala 3: 'It just keeps going on!'

Koala 2: 'Down this way too!' […]

[…] Koala 1: 'Climb! Climb!' Trunk howled.

Koala 2: 'I keep slipping down!'

Koala 3: 'The silver twigs are too slippery.'

> Koala 1: 'Yeh?! Well they aren't too slippery for me!' And Trunk clasped his claws into hooks and launched himself against the fence – 'Now someone else – climb on me, and then someone climb on them – '
>
> Koala 5: 'We gonna make a tree.' (71-72)

The animals in *Fire* make reference to humans at times as part of their conversations with one another. The comments are not complimentary and signal their wariness of humans. For example, upon hearing the noise of a car approaching, the kangaroos alert each other to hop away from the 'man tree' with one of the joeys feeling 'the flicker of his father's anger pass through him like a bunched muscle' (18), while the koalas in their trees refer to 'the furless' who 'have got no common decency' and 'are definitely not related to us' (19). A dramatic encounter towards the end of the play marks the only time an animal speaks to a human. The grief-stricken Manky, whose parents have died in the blaze, emerges from the forest as a 'half burned blistered joey' (78) and comes across the two national park rangers, Dave and Gav, who are evacuating the WNP. One of the men tries to save the joey, saying, 'Joey. Here, Joey. Buddy, come with me' (78). However, Manky is not willing to go with them and instead kicks out and shouts:

> Manky: A tiny bone shifted in Manky's ankle – he gave three whip crack fast little leaps and then launched himself into the air – cleared the entire road – and smashed into Dave's chest! 'You - ! You do not belong!!'
>
> Gav: 'Dave! Come on!'
>
> Dave: 'You are – you are a wild animal!…' (78)

The two men leave the joey for dead, with one making reference to Manky's wildness as if it is a negative attribute and judging his untamed behaviour as aggressive and ungrateful. Yet the reference also reminds the audience that Australian native animals *are* wild with minds and wills of their own living their lives apart from humans in natural habitats, such as the WNP. This one moment of the play, where an animal addresses a human directly, arguably sums up the

playwright's overall perspective on human and wild animal relations. Here, Alderdice honours his promise to 'the little roo I met on the day after the fires…' (1) and gives him a voice to bellow at all human beings: 'You! You do not belong!!'.

In the beginning, the dialogue and narration in the play presents the animals living happily in the forest prior to the bushfire. From Act Three, the language use provides insight into the actions and the anguish of the animals as they attempt to flee the fire. By Act Five, the narration and dialogue of the animals tells us of their deaths. Each story told of the moment the deadly fire strikes is heartbreaking. Each of the tales show the animals as heroic in the face of death, striving to live or protecting the lives of others. This combination of dignity and courage, expressed through the descriptive language told by those we have come to know, generates grief. The play calls upon the audience to bear witness to the animals' plights as they attempt escape and then are ravaged by death. Gillespie explains that 'to engage in witnessing that grieves with and for other animals is to feel their losses keenly and to acknowledge the ways in which we might be implicated in perpetuating their suffering' (585). By using this device, the play encourages self-reflection in the audience and empathy for other animals. Some examples of language use at time of death feature below:

> Lizard: The lizard opened his mouth in a hiss of dare, stretched up on his tail, and opened his frond – 'I am dragon!' and he was gone. (76)
>
> The Emu: The emu stood to his full height – his legs straddling the eggs – looking around him as the forest melted and shimmered into tongues and fangs of impossible heat—and in one unbearable shriek the canopy of trees shredded into whirling twisting spatters and lashes of flame – and the emu stood – as though the stars had come to him – and as the tendrils of his feathers curled and sparked – he gently sat down again – stretched out his long neck, and imagined he was flying high above – an emu in the night sky. (77-78)
>
> Cocky 4: And he could feel his feathers curling up with the ferocity of what must be a giant goanna poised to strike above him. His breath being stolen from

> his beak. His thoughts, his memory, melting into nothingness. 'Fire!' he croaked, and the old cockatoo burst into flame. (79)

At the conclusion of the play, the now-deceased Manky is reunited with the others who are also dead. This dialogue exchange provides the last words expressed in the play. The voice of nature and of the animals is again privileged over that of humans, giving them power over death. Manky's final words are filled with love and admiration for nature and for his fellow animals. Although beaten by the fire, there is a sense of pride in Manky's words. To have a deceased victim exclaim 'we are wonderful' lifts the audience from the sadness and helplessness of the situation to positive recollection of the animals encountered through the play. The final statement, 'We are Gondwana', reminds us of Manky's earlier assertion to the human characters that we do not belong. After all, there were no humans in Gondwana:

> Others: And suddenly, out of the stillness, out of the rocks and ravines, the shadowed trees and the grey listless sky – the earth moved—and out of it became … all of them. All of them who had ever walked or flown or crawled or swam. And colour came flooding into that place like water gurgling through a creek and all the trees and scrub and reeds, all the sand and stones and cliffs, all the walking crawling leaping flying blossoming became Manky's breath – and he became … them …!
>
> Manky: 'I would like…I would like to say something.'
>
> Others: 'What would you like to say?'
>
> Manky: 'I think we -… are wonderful!'
>
> Others: 'We are Gondwana.' (84)

Fire provides a model for other playwrights attempting to give voice to animals in times of natural disaster. An examination of the narration and dialogue of the animal characters in the play reveals a respectful representation of native Australian animals who are shown to be sentient and social beings, intimately entwined with the environment in which they live. This respect carries through in the way the animals' stories are told with enactors neither striving for

realism (which as humans we cannot achieve in this context) nor exaggerated mime while wearing 'cute' animal costumes. The predominance of animal voices in the play highlights other-than-human interests for consideration in the lead up to, and during, extreme weather events. The playwright has imagined how animals may think and feel based on observations of their behaviours in the wild. Their imagined communication with one another resonates with the audience, as the animals are shown to be similar to humans within their friendship and family groups. Although the animals perish in the bushfire, the discourse of the play has shifted the power to them through its portrayal of their interconnectedness, mindfulness, curiosity, collaboration, courage, and presence. Enabling the deceased animals to have the last word at the very end of the play reinforces their power and demands that we remember that they 'are wonderful' (84).

The language use by the animals throughout *Fire* elicits recognition and empathy and subsequently feelings of grief and of guilt. By bearing witness to animals' plights, the play shows humans to be implicated in their demise, and Manky's direct address 'You! You do not belong!' (78) suggests the anger of surviving animals toward us. *Fire* reminds us that the impact of bushfire is more strongly felt by multitudes of animals than by humans. Animals on a grand scale are victims of climate change and of natural disaster. With no voice within human cultures, their plight can be silenced and forgotten once an extreme weather event is over. Instead, the play inspires humans to take responsibility in this time of climate crisis by considering animals' perspectives and interests, understanding their significance in the world, and performing our role to protect the natural environment. The creative arts, with their focus on storytelling to raise awareness and to keep important issues front of mind, is an effective tool to engage the public empathetically to seriously consider animals when preparing and recovering from natural disaster, even after the media coverage has ceased.

Notes

[1] Non-human animals are referred to as animals for the remainder of this paper.

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