Character map

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Olive Leech
Central character, committed to lay-off lifestyle; naive and optimistic; devastated by the events of the seventeenth summer.

Barney Ibbot
Canecutter, single since Nancy married; losing his attractiveness to women; Roo’s friend.

Pearl Cunningham
Olive’s friend; sceptical of lay-off lifestyle but prepared to try it; considers relationship with Barney.

Nancy Allaway
Once Barney’s girlfriend, now married; absent from the play but often discussed.

Emma Leech
Olive’s mother; cynical but gently supportive.

Roo Webber
Canecutter; losing physical strength with age; loyal and reliable; broke, and takes a job for the summer.

Bubba Ryan
Young neighbour of Emma and Olive; wants to follow in Olive’s footsteps in terms of relationships; is attracted to Johnnie.

Johnnie Dowd
Young canecutter; laughs at Roo’s physical failure but later apologises; treats Bubba as an adult and is attracted to her.

Consider becoming a couple
A couple in the past
Friends
Former friends
Mother/daughter partners
Friends
Neighbours
Rivals in the cane fields
Partners
Romantically linked
OVERVIEW

About the author

Ray Lawler is an Australian playwright who has contributed to the development of Australian theatre not just with his written work, but also as an actor and director, and through his ongoing association with the Melbourne Theatre Company. Born in Melbourne in 1921, Lawler has been based in Australia for much of his life, although he has also lived overseas for extended periods. His plays often explore Australian characters, settings and concerns.

He is married to actress Jacqueline Kelleher, whom he met when she was playing Bubba in an early production of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. They married while on tour in 1956, and they have three children.

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1957, first performed in 1955 with Lawler himself as Barney) is Lawler's tenth and most successful play. In the late 1970s he wrote two other plays about the same group of characters – *Kid Stakes* (1978) and *Other Times* (1978) – which, with a revised version of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, form *The Doll Trilogy* (1978, first performed in 1977). *Kid Stakes* is the first in the trilogy, introducing the characters, and set in 1937 during the summer of the first doll. *Other Times* is set in 1945 during World War II, and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* concludes the trilogy.

Synopsis

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (often known familiarly and affectionately as *The Doll*) is set in Melbourne during the summer of 1953–54. The action of the play takes place in Carlton in an old two-storey house which is the home of the elderly Emma and her daughter Olive. The play spans approximately a month, beginning in early December and concluding a week into the new year.
At the opening of the play, Olive’s young next-door neighbour and friend, Bubba Ryan, is visiting Olive’s house – something she has done regularly all her life. She is chatting with Olive’s friend Pearl about the impending arrival of Roo and Barney, two canecutters who have spent the last sixteen ‘lay-off’ seasons (December to April, when there is no cutting work) in Olive’s house. Pearl, a widow who works as a barmaid in the same hotel as Olive, has been invited by Olive to join her in her home for the lay-off season this year, with the suggestion that she and Barney might make a good romantic match.

In the months preceding the play’s timeframe, Nancy (paired with Barney in previous lay-off seasons) has married bookseller Harry Allaway, and has removed herself from the friendship group and from the carefree lifestyle that she enjoyed with Olive, Roo and Barney for sixteen years. In many ways, Pearl steps into Nancy’s shoes, but their personalities differ significantly.

The men arrive, and Olive is thrilled to see them, but it is clear already that this year will be different. Nancy’s departure has changed the patterns of the past sixteen summers, and we soon discover that there have been changes for the men too. Most notably, Roo has had a ‘bloody awful season’ (p.23) and has arrived broke. This doesn’t bode well for the summer and when, at the end of the first scene, he presents Olive with the traditional gift of a ‘doll’ (a kewpie doll dressed carnival-style and mounted on a black cane walking stick), her joyful appreciation belies the destruction of tradition that is to come.

As the play progresses, we follow the development of the relationships between the characters, particularly those between Olive and Roo, Roo and Barney, and Barney and Pearl. In each case, the ultimate result is the disintegration or destruction of a friendship or relationship. We see the characters attempting to re-enact and recapture the joyous times of past lay-offs – they play cards; they repeat (offstage and between scenes) various excursions and sojourns from past summers; they attempt a jovial sing-along on New Year’s Eve; they try to plan an outing to reunite Roo
with Johnnie Dowd, with whom he fought during the cutting season. Roo even proposes to Olive in an attempt to hold on to their love and past happiness. But the characters are irritable with each other, the excursions are thwarted by poor weather and unfulfilled expectations, New Year’s Eve ends in tears, the truce between Roo and Johnnie is terse and temporary, and Olive ardently rejects Roo’s proposal.

Character summaries

**Pearl Cunningham**
A widow; probably in her late thirties (though her age is not specified in the text); mother of Vera (eighteen years old, lives with relations); works as a barmaid in a hotel with Olive; has been invited to stay with Olive for the lay-off season. She and Barney are introduced to each other as a possible match. Pearl is cynical and often suspicious of Olive’s life, which she perceives as less than respectable.

**Kathie ‘Bubba’ Ryan**
Supporting character; twenty-two years old, but Olive and the men still tend to think of her as the child she was when they first met her. She has lived next door to Olive and Emma all her life, and looks up to Olive and to her life with the men.

**Olive Leech**
Olive is thirty-nine years old but has a youthful optimism that tends towards naivety. She is the daughter of Emma, with whom she lives. She works with Pearl as a hotel barmaid. Olive loves Roo and lives for the lay-off season each year, when she can spend five months with Roo and Barney.

**Arthur ‘Barney’ Ibbot**
‘Barney’ is forty years old, a canecutter and Roo’s best mate. He has a ‘weakness for women’ (p.17) and has grown accustomed to winning them over easily and regularly with confidence and charm. Although he
is described as a small man, this is mostly in comparison to Roo. He fought in World War II and was paired with Nancy before she married. He has two adult sons and a younger daughter – all by different mothers – for whom he has willingly paid ‘maintenance’.

Emma Leech
Supporting character; Olive’s mother; in her late sixties; shrewd (particularly when it comes to money and judgement of character); protective of her daughter but in a way that often comes across as sharp and brusque instead of affectionate. While she is fiercely proud of her piano playing and happily participates in the ‘community singin’, she nevertheless goes through life ‘expecting the worst’ of the world (p.17).

Reuben ‘Roo’ Webber
Roo is forty-one years old, a canecutter who is well respected as a ganger (foreperson of a labouring gang) and good at his job, but who is now slowing with age. He is Barney’s best mate – a ‘man’s man’ (p.18); physically large though usually gentle; proud and defensive of his own masculinity; paired with Olive.

Johnnie Dowd
A supporting character, Johnnie is twenty-five years old; he is a strong, fast canecutter taken on by Roo as part of his gang. He takes over as ganger when Roo leaves. When Dowd comes to find Roo and Barney in Carlton he treats Bubba as an adult, thus winning her affection.

Nancy Allaway
Although Nancy, a supporting character, is absent from the play’s action (having recently married Harry Allaway, a bookseller), she is an important player in the history of the main characters. Nancy is often referred to, and represents the carefree tone of the sixteen previous lay-offs. She worked at the hotel with her friend Olive and was romantically paired with Barney.
The Doll Trilogy

It is interesting that *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is the final work in the trilogy, yet the first and second works were written retrospectively — like many contemporary cinematic ‘prequels’ — and more than twenty years later. The first two plays in the trilogy have never enjoyed the success of *The Doll*, and while they offer us a new perspective on the lives and experiences of Emma, Olive, Nancy, Barney, Roo, Bubba and Pearl, the characters and the narrative of *The Doll* still stand alone. Moreover, the place that the play holds in the Australian cultural and theatrical psyche has not been particularly enhanced or defined by the two additional plays.

While the characters’ retrospectively constructed backgrounds can illuminate the events in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, they should not be allowed to colour an interpretation of the play. Director John Sumner relates some engaging anecdotes about the first production of *Other Times*. He notes, for example, that the actors (who were rehearsing a new production of *The Doll* in the daytime while performing *Other Times* in an evening season) had a tendency to ‘inject the near tragic overtones from ... the former ... into their performances of the latter at night’ (Lawler 1978, p.xiii). While this is a fascinating story about the challenges of such a task for the actors, it also suggests the way that information from one source can inform or, if interpreted in a problematic way, contaminate another. If you have already seen or read, or decide to see or read, the rest of the trilogy, you should be careful not to let knowledge about characters and events from *Kid Stakes* or *Other Times* seep into your understanding and analysis of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.

(For more discussion of the events of *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times*, either read *The Doll Trilogy* in its entirety, or see Katharine Brisbane’s essay in the Currency edition of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.)
Australian theatre in the 1950s

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is often acknowledged as the first real Australian play: it was one of the earliest Australian narratives to find commercial success in Australia and, soon after, in London too. Until then, most of the plays performed on the Australian commercial stage were either fully imported productions, or Australian productions of non-Australian scripts. Australians were not yet accustomed to seeing their own stories and their own ways of speaking represented on the stage. There was a distinct reluctance to accept the value in Australian work, or even of Australian performers. As Alrene Sykes has noted, even actor training was seen as something the young Commonwealth country was not yet equipped for, and a recommendation to the government at the time suggested that funding for ‘training Australian actors in England’ and touring British companies to ‘raise the standards of appreciation and expectation in Australian audiences’ would be money well spent (Love 1984, p.204).

When *The Doll* was produced in 1955 by the brand new Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, it was one of the first opportunities for Australian audiences to see their own narratives mirrored back at them from the commercial stage. It is difficult to imagine how it might have felt, for audiences accustomed primarily to American and British drama, to suddenly hear the Australian accent (particularly because Lawler wrote so boldly in the vernacular of the time and place) telling Australian stories. It should be noted, though, that the Australia presented by *The Doll* was an Australia of the working class who were not exactly the demographic of the theatre-going public, since audiences were more likely to be comfortably middle-class. As Sykes observes, it was several more decades before the Australian theatre was also prepared to tell middle-class stories (Love 1984, pp.208–9).