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Mona Brand

Australian playwright Mona Brand was born on October 22, 1915 and died on August 1, 2007. Educated in Rockhampton and Sydney, she joined the Communist Party in 1947, and completed her first play, *Here Under Heaven*, in 1948. A story of Aborigines and Chinese migrants in Australia, it was declined by J. C. Williamson but was performed in Melbourne before playing overseas in Germany, Hungary, Russia and Czechoslovakia. Having worked in Europe and Vietnam after the Second World War, Brand married fellow writer and activist Len Fox in 1955, and both were involved with the NSW Australian-Aboriginal Fellowship and its contribution to the campaign that led to the 1967 referendum against formal discrimination towards Aborigines.

Her plays addressed topics such as poverty, race, Indochina and juvenile delinquency, and included *Here Comes Kisch* (about Egon Kisch, the Czech-Jewish journalist who jumped from his ocean liner in Port Melbourne on being told the conservative government would prohibit him from entering the country to speak at the All-Australian Congress Against War and Fascism in 1934), *Flood Tide*, *No Strings Attached*, and *Strangers in the Land*, the story of a young white woman in British-controlled Malaya shocked by her hosts' treatment of the local population. The play was banned in England for fear of causing a breach of the peace.

Brand was often regarded as a playwright ahead of her time. Speaking to Lynn Gailey in 1995, she said that this wasn't the case – as a member of the Communist Party she was “amongst a whole group of people who were ahead of their time, I was just one of them. But because I was writing and because a lot of my stuff was being seen on stage it might have looked as though I was ahead of my time. But I couldn't have written *Here Under Heaven* which was my first play in 1948 if I hadn't written some of the people I had who were discussing these kinds of issues because I didn't have a clue. I got it from them.”

Of the Communist Party's early activities, she noted in the same interview that “a lot of this humanism has spread quite widely and is now taken for granted. Like when we were talking about political correctness, a lot of things that are being done and some of the things that are being accused of political correctness are in these various areas, forestry, childcare, work among Aboriginal people.”

Well-known for her political views, she commented in a *Sydney Morning Herald* interview ahead of her 90th birthday in 2005 that she “didn't want to push ideas down people's throats but of course I suppose it worked that way. But the most pleasant feeling was to be sitting in the audience [watching her own plays] hearing laughter from time to time.” Her other audience, it seemed, was ASIO, who assembled a 379-page file on her life which she was able to read in 2002.

A life member of Sydney PEN, the Australian Writers' Guild and the New Theatre in Newtown, she published her memoir, *Enough Blue Sky: The Autobiography of an Unknown Well-known Playwright* in 1995, thanks mainly to the urging of “women graduates coming to interview me for their theses [who asked] why didn't I write my autobiography”. Yet at 90, she was amused by the idea of herself as some kind of “political attack dog”: “I must admit that I do most of my thinking sitting down and either knitting or darning socks,” she told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002. “Although darning socks has gone out of style, hasn't it?”

Survived by several nieces and nephews, her funeral was held in Sydney on August 9.

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