

The Heretic: Melbourne Theatre Company goes over to the dark side

Clive Hamilton

Who would have thought the Melbourne Theatre Company would get into bed with Andrew Bolt?

The MTC's new play [The Heretic](#), which premieres on 17 May, tells the story of climate scientist Dr Diane Cassell at a north of England university, whose research in the Maldives shows that sea-levels are not rising. On that basis, it soon becomes clear, she believes she has nullified the entire corpus of climate change science.

Diane Cassell is presented by playwright Richard Bean as the lone figure of integrity who has the courage to stand up to the climate science establishment, scientists who are cravenly manipulating their research to stay on the gravy train.

Bean recycles every discredited trope of the climate denial machine. But instead of coming from the mouths of the usual rat-bags, like Lord Monckton, Alan Jones, Janet Albrechtsen and the spokesmen from Exxon-funded think-tanks, they are spoken by the only character in the play we are invited to admire.

None of it is ironic; [Richard Bean has swallowed](#), without chewing, all of the climate denier talking points favoured by the Tea Party. He must have spent a long time clicking from one denier website to the next, without ever bothering to look at any real science — you know, the science endorsed by every scientific academy in the world.

So every one of the absurdities echoed daily by the conspiracy theorists, fossil-fuel industry hatchet men, and cyber-bullies can now be heard on stage at the MTC Theatre. Our heroine parrots the claim that the [“hockey stick” graph](#) showing recent warming has been discredited. Bean forgets to tell us that the hockey stick data have been subjected to the closest possible scrutiny and found to be sound.

Instead, Bean has Cassell's boss Kevin, also a climate scientist, confess that “we are all sceptical of the hockey stick”. That calumny against climate scientists is trumped by the play's reversal of the [facts about death threats](#). In *The Heretic* it is Diane, she who has proof that global warming is a hoax, who receives the death threats, this time from green fanatics.

In the play we hear nothing of the real climate scientists who have had to upgrade their home security and change their children's bus routes, or the [young woman](#) who after speaking about carbon footprints at her local library emerged to find her car smeared with excrement spelling out “climate turd”.

Instead it is the climate “sceptic” who is the victim of [a hate campaign](#), a distortion of history that can only embolden the shit-spreaders.

In the play all of the incredible claims culled from denialist websites are uttered by the play's only credible character. “The IPCC is a political body and should be ignored.” “Climate

scientists used to claim we would now be in an ice age.” “There is no evidence that CO2 is the cause of 20th century warming.” The peer review process is corrupt. On it goes.

Diane is convinced those who believe climate science are “disaster junkies”. Armageddon has been prophesied a thousand times “and has always turned out to be wrong”. Environmentalism is “the perfect religion for the narcissistic age”. No wonder Andrew Bolt [admits](#) to “gloating” about *The Heretic*.

For our heroine the scientific consensus – itself often [the subject of attack](#) – proves nothing because there used to be an “overwhelming consensus” that the Earth was the centre of the universe. And in an unwitting exposé of the essential denialist fallacy, when Kevin says “the vast majority of climate scientists have no doubt ...”, Diane cuts him off with “the vast majority of people on earth believe in God, and they’re all wrong”.

For deniers there is no difference between a scientific truth and a personal belief.

The typical MTC audience member doesn’t read the Murdoch tabloids or listen to right-wing shock jocks. If they stumble on them then their bullshit antennae are on full alert. Yet when the same fantastic claims are retailed in a play by the MTC the antennae are down. That is why, between the clever lines, *The Heretic* is so insidious.

Those who decide to see *The Heretic* ought to be aware that as they take their seats they are in for an evening of climate denier propaganda wrapped in a “funny, provocative and heart-warming family drama”. Bean doesn’t balk at writing the grubbier accusations into the lines of his heroine. Al Gore is a “carbon trading billionaire” — a revelation that prompts Diane’s greenie daughter, Phoebe, to declaim “What a cunt!”. Greenpeace wants to price the poor off the roads, which will be “a good day for totalitarianism.”

There is even a replay of the Climategate computer hacking scandal. This time the heroine’s student — whom she has turned from an unthinking green loony into a sceptical seeker of the truth — hacks into the computer of a rival scientist at another university. Of course they find that he has been fiddling his data.

Echoing the three most famous words picked out of the Climategate emails, “[hide the decline](#)” (words seized on by Sarah Palin and right-wing shock jocks across the United States), the nefarious rival is caught sending an email to a colleague saying he has manipulated his data in order to “bury the downturn”.

In another distortion of history, Bean excludes the dénouement of the Climategate story — that every accusation of misconduct and malpractice was subject to the [most rigorous investigation](#), by nine official inquiries on both sides of the Atlantic, all of which exonerated the scientists involved and concluded that nothing had dented the authority of climate science. But, hey, this is art.

The MTC is patting itself on the back for staging *The Heretic*. It thinks it is being heretical itself, daring to unsettle many who make up its usual audiences. But the MTC is not being bold; by capitulating to the comforting feelings that flow over those who reject the scientific warnings, it is being cowardly. Brave theatre companies don’t run from unpleasant truths, they rub our faces in them.

Perhaps Richard Bean's next project will be *The Heretic 2*, another "funny, provocative and heart-warming family drama" in which the maverick academic David Irving, [lone defender of the truth](#), uncovers definitive evidence that the Holocaust never happened. Sent to Coventry by his fellow historians — a spineless lot who have for years been manipulating the evidence to protect their funding and their reputations — David is in the end vindicated; the Holocaust was a Zionist plot after all.

Staging that would be courageous.

Cutting-edge playwrights have always set out to debunk orthodoxies and shatter conventions (Bean himself has said he thrives on causing offence), but the orthodoxies they attack have been ones that are in some way oppressive, stultifying and against life; in short they use their craft to undermine the dominant powers.

In *The Heretic*, Bean crosses to the other side to make himself the ally of Exxon-Mobil and the Tea Party. That's a price Bean seems willing to pay to flatter himself as the writer who resists the tide. Rarely has an exercise in artistic wanking had so little regard for the social cost.

Yes, it's heretical to reject the overwhelming consensus among those qualified to judge, but only in the way it is heretical to deny that HIV causes AIDS or smoking causes lung cancer. It's not about being a liberal or a leftie or an environmentalist; it's about having a basic respect for the truth on a question of the utmost importance for the future of civilised society.

Now the MTC has joined the deniers' parade. The play has plenty of sharp lines, to be sure, but the humour only sweetens the spoonfuls of poison. Like a performance by [Lord Monckton](#), *The Heretic* is an evening of slippery falsehoods covered over with theatrical lines.

In its publicity the MTC writes that "the play questions what is important to us". Well, it certainly is about the most important issue around. But the play's "questioning" is not about why our politicians won't provide leadership, why much of the public is so apathetic, or why the fossil fuel lobby has been so successful. It doesn't ridicule the [conspiracy theories of Nick Minchin](#), parody the fantasies of Monckton or expose the threats to real climate scientists.

No, the question the MTC believes it must tackle is: why are scientists, including every science academy in the world, feeding us a pack of lies about global warming?

Apparently, that's what an avant-garde theatre company does these days. But by participating in this historical travesty everyone associated with it — the director, the programmers, the designers and the actors — will have to accept their little share of the blame for the world that's coming.

Clive Hamilton is currently an academic visitor in the philosophy department at the University of Oxford.